

HISTORIOGRAPHY: SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

It is normal for academic historians to sink themselves in their subject and to avoid personal comments, at least in print. There are writers who prefer to offer such comments, but they are not the majority, and, even in autobiographies, historians omit much and tend to represent the profession's norms and collectivity.¹ Moreover, by maintaining an impersonal style in their scholarship, authors are assumed to demonstrate impartiality, and also to gain added credence for their arguments. Possibly historiography requires this treatment even more than most subjects as it represents an attempt to move beyond the perspective of the individual in order to chart the development of a subject. Yet, there is also much to be said for offering the personal account, not because it has any special authority, or even interest, but thanks to the particular insight the individual can provide. It is also slightly strange for an historian to write about historiography advancing general reflections but failing to offer an explicit engagement with the issues arising from his or her own experience.

School and Libraries

To divide such reflections between research and teaching is artificial, but, nevertheless, captures a functional distinction that is important to historiographical discussion. The research I was first aware of was, of course, that of others, and that is a strand that has to be addressed whenever an author writes of their engagement with research. The conventional pattern of a school education in history in the 1960s and early 1970s was extended by the availability of two good libraries: Edgware Public Library and the school library. Thus, a key element of historiography for me was the filtering provided by the acquisition policies of these bodies, an element that could be readily grasped by looking at what was on the shelves, although access to a wider world of print was provided by inexpensive inter-library loans.

An element in this filtering was clearly provided by perceptions of readability which helps explain why the titles were in English, while cost was also an issue; but there was also the sense of providing a general education. This was notably the case for the Public Library, but was also significant for the school library, although course requirements were important for the latter. In the Public Library, most of the books were narratives and many were biographies, there was a heavy focus on British history, and on the twentieth century, and wars were a frequent theme. This situation helps explain the problems created by the recent, accelerating crisis in public libraries, a crisis due to changing public interests, the rise of visual and electronic material, and, in particular, grave difficulties in local governmental finances. Traditionally, the public library offered, through its selection of books, the opportunity of an informed general narrative to anyone who walked through its doors. There is no effective comparable filter of quality in what is provided for those who access material on line.

The teaching provided at school did not offer a Plato to NATO narrative, but, instead, provided periods of narrative as well as history that was different in type and tone. Beginning with the Egyptians, and running on chronologically in a 'Western civilisation' pattern, was my fate three times from the age of seven, but narrative was abruptly dismissed at the ages of 13-16. Instead, there was somewhat of a hotchpotch, but one, nevertheless, that was extremely stimulating. I can recall the study of political thought, including having to write an essay discussing Rousseau's statement in the opening chapter of *The Social Contract* (1762) that 'Man is Born Free and Everywhere is in Chains', a term re-enacting the Congress of Vienna of 1815², followed by a less successful re-enactment of the Versailles peace conference of 1919, a detailed study of the New Deal, and study of twentieth-century British politics as well as of interwar Germany.

The net effect was to give a clear and detailed narrative of the last century, but certainly not of British nor world history in the longer term. In terms of identity politics, which did not seem to have been an issue at the time, this approach can rank as a failure or, possibly, as an attempt to ground identity in terms of modern British politics, with this a world of Conservatives and Labour; rather than Tories and Whigs, let alone Cavaliers and Roundheads. In so far as the developments of the twentieth century had a longer-term grounding, this approach was unsuccessful as it did not provide explanations in such terms. Most of the pupils would have stopped school history at this point, leaving them with a far-from-complete account of national or international history.

The A-level (now in Britain AS and A level) years, the last two years at high school, involved three courses, two of them outline, and one a source-based special subject. In my case, I did options on early-modern British and European history, the latter understood as excluding Britain, and a special subject on the reign of Henry VIII. Later chronological options and special subjects were also available, but nothing covering earlier periods. Again, this choice can be seen in positive terms, as providing a good account of a significant period combined with a detailed opportunity to study a particular subject including the use of sources. Less positively, large gaps in historical coverage were readily apparent. For me, bar a study day on mid-nineteenth century Britain, both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were unknown lands at school.

At the same time of the focus on narrative, the coverage was much wider in the Public Library. There were recent authoritative scholarly works, such as those volumes of *The New Cambridge Modern History* already published, and there was a degree of openness to conceptual and methodological innovation. For example, while at school, I had read Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, although, characteristically, this was offered in the English translation and not the (earlier) French original.

Braudel's work provided an insight into research as a process of critical intelligence. It also accorded with my own interest in geography, which has remained a lasting concern, seen most obviously in my work on maps and geopolitics. As a reminder, however, that scholars, like other readers, are not guided

in some determined way by the works they read, I was greatly excited by Braudel's feel for place, a feel that at times was quasi (and maybe self)-hypnotic; but rejected what I saw as the quasi-determinisms of much of his conceptualisation, argument and phrases. Despite the emphasis on the totality and unitary nature of Braudel's vision³, the structural, more geographical, dimension of his great work, with its stress on long-term factors, does not readily cohere with the chronological political section dealing with the late sixteenth century, the *Age of Philip II*. In the preface to the first French edition, published in 1949, he described the history of events as the 'crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong back', while his preface to the second edition, written in 1963, asked 'Is it possible somehow to convey simultaneously both that conspicuous history which holds our attention by its continual and dramatic changes – and that other, submerged, history, almost silent and always discreet, virtually unsuspected either by its observers or its participants, which is little touched by the obstinate erosion of time?'.⁴

This problem, that of the relationship between structure and agency, is a fundamental one for scholarship although structural factors are not of course 'little touched' by time. The difficulties inherent in Braudel's model may help explain why those writing in his shadow have not always been successful. For example, *Braudel Revisited. The Mediterranean World 1600-1800* (2010), a volume based on a series of conferences held in Los Angeles in 2002-3, is interesting, but the intellectual ability of Braudel to link the general to the particular is not really achieved, while the excitement of the original is also missing. More specifically, Braudel's engagement with geography is not really employed successfully in this volume. Yet, as a sign of a significant historiographical trend, whereas Braudel was much stronger on the Christian Mediterranean than on its Muslim rival, there is a finer balance here. Moreover, the presentation for Egypt of a factionalism that emerged in response to deep-rooted social and demographic currents, such that political culture is seen as running deeper than *histoire événementielle*, offers a fruitful advance on Braudel.⁵

University

At university, Cambridge, it was again exposure to the research of others that was important. The most significant influences were reading doctoral theses in the university library in my third year, for the three courses I covered that year; and, secondly, being taught the 'Norman Conquest' Further Subject by Marjorie Chibnall, a great historian of medieval England. She let me use for that course the proofs of the volumes of Orderic Vitalis' *Historia Ecclesiastica* she was then editing.

This understanding of research and writing as a protean, multi-stage, activity was particularly valuable in contributing to a view of history as an interim report on the past; a necessarily interim report but one nevertheless that was of considerable value. Compared, moreover, to the excitement, as an undergraduate, of reading doctoral theses in the university library, such as the excellent ones on Spanish history produced under the supervision of J.H. Elliott, there seemed something stale about formal works on historiography. At school, the prime player was E.H. Carr's *What is History?*, and at university Geoffrey

Elton's *Practice of History*. I notice that these and similar modern works appear uninteresting to current undergraduates, but, so even more, does most of the theory currently on offer, notably the discussion of postmodernism.

Coverage at Cambridge was patchy, in many respects being reminiscent of school. There were outline papers, but they did not add up to an outline in world history. I took five: medieval Europe, medieval British, political and constitutional, and early-modern British, social and economic, in the first year; early-modern British, political and constitutional in the second year; and early-modern European in the third. The other papers were political thought down to 1650 in the second year and, in the third year, the Norman Conquest, and a special subject on British Foreign Policy, 1783-93. General papers were taken in parts one and two (in the second and third years); but the teaching for them was perfunctory in the extreme.

This course had positive points, with much of the teaching very good and I benefited in particular from my exposure to medieval history, which was new to me, but the course was also somewhat bitty. History after 1793 was a blank for me, as was that of the non-Western world. Both areas were on offer, but to have done either would have meant missing out large chunks of earlier history. In essence, this experience demonstrated the problem of seeking to cover such a large subject. Even the individual outlines involved much selection, with big gaps in between. Thus, the medieval British course meant moving at speed from constitutional crisis to constitutional crisis, for example the reign of John, to Simon de Montfort, to the reign of Edward II, to that of Richard II. This approach provided opportunities for the precise analysis of documents such as Magna Carta, the ordinances designed to limit the power of Edward II, and the Provisions of Oxford, and insights on ideas of good kingship and on the rise of Parliament; but also essentially omitted consideration of success. In political thought, I jumped from Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Augustine, to Marsilius of Padua and Dante, which again left a significant gap, as well, of course, of no reference to China or anywhere non-Western.

Given the resources available to Cambridge, it was surprising that some at least of the lecturers were not instructed to provide a broad-brush coverage of world history, but none was available. On the other hand, given the 'culture' of the subject, there should have been no surprise.

Academic Engagement

The selection of research topic is generally critical in the trajectory of an academic's career, both in terms of deciding the field in which he or she will specialise and in affecting the chance of being hired; chance rather than prospect being the key word. In my case, as in many others, an interest fired in undergraduate years led to a research focus. The special subject on British Foreign Policy, 1783-93 proved particularly stimulating because I was interested in how far policy was affected by domestic politics in the form of creating what was to be called strategic culture. I decided to work on the background to the collapse of the attempt to ease Anglo-French relations, only to be told that I could not pursue the subject, as a doctoral student at London was already working on foreign policy in those years. Ironically, he never completed.

Having to find a new topic, I turned back to a previous period of collapse, namely from 1730, when an Anglo-French alliance was strong, to 1740 when the two powers were close to war. In practice, the introductory chapter, on 1727-31 took over, and those became the dates of the thesis. Chance again played a career role, as working on the pre-1750 period made it possible to apply for the early-modern European post that came up at Durham in 1980, and that lectureship gave me the opportunity to develop both teaching and research.

Moving to postgraduate work had entailed, in the circumstances of doctoral study at the time, a narrowing of focus compared to undergraduate work, and a concern with sources and method, rather than general works on the nature of history. Moreover, moving to the research frontier ensured that the relevance of previous work became more conditional. To an extent, that situation has remained the case during my subsequent career as an academic, but with an important caveat. Like most scholars, I have long remained focused on my original subject of research, in my case eighteenth-century British foreign policy, and there has been relatively little in other fields of scholarship that has contributed to my own work on the subject, or that of others on the subject. Instead, I was still going to the archives to read eighteenth-century diplomatic correspondence over thirty-five years since I started to do so and, in December 2010, to my surprise, ‘discovered’ a new series of relevant documents on which I had not hitherto worked.

Over a career, therefore, the balance of research engagement with historiography has diminished. Yet, broadening out research interests to cover new fields requires an engagement with other historiographies. The value of the latter for orientation is readily apparent, not least because historiography both underlines general intellectual trends and provides insights on particular areas of study.

For individual scholars, engagement with theory varies, but there is a common need to engage with existing research work, particularly as academic history is an accretional subject with scholarship involved in a debate both with original sources and with existing work. As a separate issue, the extent of the interaction with current political concerns varies considerably.⁶ The situation is somewhat different with much popular history, not least because the combination of convenience and the generally misleading claim to novelty seen with popular history can lead to a discounting of both original sources and existing work; although a similar point can be made about some academic studies.⁷

Teaching over a range should also require an engagement with other historiographies. However, there is instead a general practice in British universities to focus teaching on specialities, and often in a highly-detailed fashion. I certainly found myself increasingly unusual at Exeter in offering courses, such as Europe 1600-1815, a course that extended to Europe’s impact on the world, for example the slave trade, as well as to the comparison of European developments with those in China and India; or War 1450-2010, and War 1775-2050, courses that deliberately extended to considering future developments. Looked at differently, the tolerance extended to such broad-brush courses, which differed from the overall more specialised provision offered by my (first-rate) colleagues, in part reflected the variety that was on offer. At

the same time, there was a reluctance to accept the development of broader outline courses. Indeed, in the academic years 2008-10, I encountered a cautious response from the excellent head of department, Alex Walsham, when I repeatedly suggested (understandably without success in light of the syllabus then in place) that I be allowed to offer a 24 lecture course on the history of the world from 1500. This course was designed to provide an outline, including an appropriate coverage of non-Western history, with, for example, two lectures on China, and so on. I argued that it was unimpressive that students could graduate with a history degree from Exeter without having ever heard of Thomas Jefferson or the Enlightenment, or any reference to China.

Reading scholarship in the round rather than any individual branch of the subject, let alone particular work, makes clear what is readily apparent from the outset, that there is no one way to present the past. Instead, there are key differences in context and approach, conceptualisation and methodology. The sounds vary, ranging, for example, in the coverage of North America in the nineteenth century, from the funeral laments for its indigenous cultures to the brash triumphant clarion calls of a supposed destiny for the American republic as it came to span the continent.

History as the accounts (not simply account) of the past is more than the silent spectator to individual tales, for part of its value is to make overt what are often implicit choices of approach and analysis. Indeed, in making the implicit overt, it is important to turn to the writer and readers who clothe them with meaning. The readers are the key, for it is they/you/we who decide what to take from books, but, by the nature of any individual book, they are unknown at the moment of creation. Their nationality, prior knowledge, relevant assumptions, and values are unclear, as is the impact of all these on their assessment of both subject and authorial treatment. Historiography could profitably devote more attention to these issues than it currently does.

The writer is less important, but clearer in focus. Frequently, it is helpful reviewers who clarify this focus by drawing attention to the assumptions that can be seen in the work. In the anglophone tradition, authors themselves downplay such assumptions because of the intellectual, pedagogic and cultural preference in academic life for concealing the work of the author and, in particular, for apparently letting the material dictate the treatment.

This practice is unfortunate, for conceptual and methodological issues therefore tend to be downplayed. For example, I have written numerous works on global military history, such as *War in the World: 1450-1600* and *Beyond the Military Revolution*. Expanding the scale geographically underlines the problems of balance and significance that faces all historians, but also enhances the problem posed by simultaneity. Is there any significance that events in different parts of the world occurred in the same year, a situation given force by books devoted to such years, for example 1000, 1492 and 1688?⁸ Clearly such simultaneity is significant once we have interacting large-scale global financial and economic models, as at present, while the role of climate, notably for agricultural production and demographic trends, also makes

such simultaneity significant. Yet, is the same true of military events and/or developments in different parts of the world in the early-modern period? In the jargon, are events being forced together in a misleadingly unified whole in the service of a meta-narrative.⁹ Academics can come to different conclusions.

It is interesting to look back and consider what can be made of the changes in emphasis on my own published work: we do not write our obituaries in the minds of others. My first single-author book appeared in 1985, and I still have an interest in eighteenth-century British foreign policy, the topic of this book and of my earlier doctorate. The context is different, not because of developments in the subject of history as a whole, but rather due to changes in the other historians working in the field. Thus, in the 1980s, the dominant figure was Ragnhild Hatton and her approach, that of studying foreign policy in terms of diplomacy and the international system, rather than of domestic circumstances, was also adopted by her pupils, such as Hamish Scott. The contrasting approach, which was one I found more pertinent, was adopted by Graham Gibbs, following the lead of his supervisor Mark Thomson, but it had less of an impact. I was conscious that my work on the 1980s and 1990s in this field was written against the Hatton approach, which work in the archives increasingly led me to conclude was inaccurate as well as being methodologically and conceptually flawed.

By the 2000s, however, the field was different, with, first, very few working in the field and, then, in the late 2010s, a series of major publications by younger scholars, notably Tony Claydon, Nicholas Harding, Brendan Simms, and Andrew Thompson. Their work was more diverse than the Hatton school and more alive to the role of domestic political circumstances.¹⁰ Thus, as far as historiography was concerned, the key element was the work of other scholars, rather than theoretical studies in the field of international relations.

Yet, there is an important overlap with the general situation in historiography, as much recent work on the eighteenth century focuses on the idea of a climate of opinion. However, in turn, this general approach poses major problems, notably the selection and analysis of texts in accordance with what is in effect a pre-determined thesis, and also the very notion of a *zeitgeist* (spirit of the age). Historians may stress the power of particular sets of ideas, but, to go beyond this, to suggest that one vision became a dominant discourse, runs considerable risks. It may become self-validating; it has severe limitations in describing what was generally in fact a diverse situation; and it may neglect the extent to which supposedly hegemonic worldviews were actually divisive and polemical. Indeed, the contested nature of the concept of national interest makes it easier to understand Tory criticism of the methods and objectives of British foreign policy in 1714-57; and the role of contingency in these objectives contributed to this contested nature as well as reshaping the debate.

More generally, in the view of this empiricist, an awareness of particular interests and specific conjunctures should take precedence over the fascination with discourse. Indeed, the reality was more complex and fractured than those who search for a *zeitgeist* might suggest. This of course is a fundamental

challenge to the standard approach in so much eighteenth-century scholarship, with its tendency to employ discourse as a 'hegemonic' concept and to argue by assertion, producing what Richard Hamilton aptly terms 'Truth by Declaration'.¹¹ For example, to ascribe policy to a climate of opinion is not terribly helpful unless the subjective nature of the definition is accepted, and the problematic character of moving from 'climate' to policy is allowed for.

For all scholars, however, problems are posed by limited space, not least the difficulty of explaining the context, process and contingencies of each choice of policy, and then of analysing it in accordance with the chronological specificities of the debate at any particular juncture. Arguments take on meaning in that context, but this approach poses problems of analysis, exposition and space. As a result, factors of convenience encourage a frequently-misleading tendency to emphasise the continuity of arguments.

As far as other fields are concerned, I drew for my studies of the 1980s and 1990s on the causes of war on conceptual work in international relations, notably by Jack Levy, Bill Thompson and John Vasquez.¹² For historical cartography, in contrast, this process was more one of a reaction against, as I found the theoretical accounts, in particular those of Brian Harley and Denis Cosgrove, overly instrumental, and I continue to do so.¹³ In contrast, my works on the Grand Tour, the British press, eighteenth-century English culture, and the history of diplomacy¹⁴, can all be seen as 'under-theorised', but there is a deliberate attempt in my books to focus on the 'nuts and bolts' of what happened. At the same time, I have tried to advance and apply theoretical perspectives in military history.¹⁵

Authors of course may not be as aware of the context of their work and its impact as they think; and they certainly lack a full knowledge. Yet, the perspective of the individual acts as a valuable qualification to the tendency to emphasise general influences. Moreover, if the last are to be stressed, it is unclear why financial or institutional issues, such as the pressures to conform to particular models of academic behaviour, should be accorded less attention than the more conceptual matters generally discussed in terms of historiography. Giving due weight to these issues is an important challenge to much historiographical literature.

In some respects, teaching takes the process of approaching new subjects further than research, as it entails trying to understand work across a wide range of sub-specialisms in order to provide students with an informed account of the interplay between established conceptual issues and cutting-edge scholarship. In teaching as in research, I have found that the historiographical discussions that are most useful for conveying knowledge are those integral to scholarly work, rather than stand-alone texts on historiography; which echoes the discussions in the early years in the 1900s of what became the International Congresses of Historical Sciences.¹⁶ The coverage of historiography, whether understood in terms of conceptualisation, methodology or previous work, is often better-informed in specific historical works, rather than in stand-alone texts on historiography. Explanatory context is a key element, for historiography, as both subject and

method, does not stand outside historical scholarship or indeed the process of time passing. Instead, historiography is a topic for historical enquiry. Far from being a branch of applied philosophy, historiography is a subject and method that takes on value through its engagement with the issues of the past understood in terms of the shifting prism of the present. The last helps give value not only to the perspectives of individual writers and teachers, but also to those of individual readers and students, that is us all my friends.

¹ J.D. Popkin, *History, Historians, and Autobiography* (Chicago, Illinois, 2005); P. Hollander, 'Acknowledgements: An Academic Ritual', *Academic Questions*, 5 (2001-2), pp. 63-76. For some interesting essays based on interviews, D. Snowman, *Historians* (Basingstoke, 2007).

² K. Dawson et al., 'Congress of Vienna', in J.L. Taylor and R. Walford (eds), *Simulation in the Classroom* (Harmondsworth, 1972).

³ P. Daix, *Braudel* (Paris, 1995); C.A. Aguirre Rojas, *Fernand Braudel et les sciences humaines* (Paris, 2004).

⁴ F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean...* (2 vols, London, 1972), I, 16, 21.

⁵ G. Piterberg, T. Ruiz and G. Smycox (eds), *Braudel Revisited. The Mediterranean World 1600-1800* (Toronto, 2010); J. Marino (ed.), *Early Modern History and the Social Sciences: Testing the Limits of Braudel's Mediterranean* (Kirksville, Missouri, 2002).

⁶ For a reflective instance by distinguished scholars, K. Robbins, 'Britain and Munich Reconsidered: A Personal Historical Journey', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 140 (2007), pp. 231-44; R. Hutton, *Debates in Stuart History* (Basingstoke, 2004).

⁷ For the tension between claims to novelty and existing work, see my review of S. Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New Haven, Connecticut, 2009) in *American Historical Review* (2010).

⁸ Eg. J.E. Wills, *1688. A Global History* (London, 2001); F. Fernández-Armesto, *1492. The Year Our World Began* (London, 2009).

⁹ R.E. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995).

¹⁰ J. Black, 'Debating Britain and Europe, 1688-1815' and 'Foreign Policy and the Debate over British Political Culture', *British Scholar*, 1 (2009), pp. 37-52, and 2 (2010), pp. 254-72.

¹¹ R.F. Hamilton, *President McKinley, War and Empire. I. President McKinley and the Coming of War, 1898* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 2006), p. 252.

¹² J. Black, *Why Wars Happen* (London, 1998).

¹³ J. Black, *Maps and Politics* (London, 1997). See also J. Black, *Geopolitics* (London, 2009).

¹⁴ For example, J. Black, *The English Press, 1621-1861* (Stroud, 2001), *Italy and the Grand Tour* (New Haven, Connecticut, 2003), *A Subject for Taste. Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 2005) and *A History of Diplomacy* (London, 2010).

¹⁵ J. Black, *Rethinking Military History* (London, 2004).

¹⁶ K.D. Erdmann, *Toward a Global Community of Historians. The International Historical Congresses and the International Committee of Historical Sciences, 1898-2000*, edited by W.J. Mommsen and J. Kocka (Oxford, 2005).