

Introduction

The historian, before he begins to write history, is the product of history.

E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (p. 34)

‘History’ is written and read today because humans have the biological and neurological capacity to remember things and to frame relationships of a causal or symbolic nature around those things that have been remembered. It exists also because we are social creatures whose survival has been more or less dependent upon connections with other members of our species. Knowledge of the past in some form is common to all humans, though specifically *historical* knowledge (which reaches beyond personal yesterdays and current memory) may not be. In a widely read book entitled *The Writing of History*, the late French psychologist and philosopher Michel de Certeau (1925–86) observed that societies supply themselves with a present time through historical writing, progressively separating past from present and providing modernity with knowledge of a temporal and sometimes geographical ‘other’. And it allows that other, discarded in earlier periods as an irrelevant or ‘repressed’ fragment, to return anew – sometimes without being invited.

However, the capacity to remember, and the curiosity to inquire into a reality no longer extant except in human-made or natural artefacts, are not sufficient on their own to create the conditions for history to be made. Humans are the only species capable of *both* forming long-term memories (beyond the simple recollection of how to perform tasks or how to find a particular familiar location) *and* of communicating. It is this latter function that permits the transmission of those memories, and other knowledge, to humans both contemporary and future. Written communication has been a significant technological enhancement to the preservation and communication of information over long distances or across long spans of time, but it is a relatively recent development, dating back at most a few millennia to the earliest

cuneiform tablets in Mesopotamia, to hieroglyphics in Egypt and to bone inscriptions in China. Before then, humans relied on spoken language to communicate, and we know that very ancient cultures used poetry and song to commemorate the deeds of the gods and heroes in their past. Today, history is undeniably and inescapably present in a vast number of forms, written, oral, visual and electronic. This is in part because the past itself is equally ubiquitous, looming over our daily lives even when we aren't thinking much about it – as the American novelist William Faulkner once wrote, 'the Past isn't dead; it isn't even past'. It is also because many centuries of human development have made an interest in that past, and a will to appropriate it into daily life (often unconsciously), a fixture of modernity. This is paradoxically true even in a culture such as that of the current moment, which seems on a daily basis to be ever more focused on a vision of the future oscillating between hope and dread.

'Historical culture' of course includes much more than written history, of which the governing, academic, 'professional' history of the last two centuries is a very recent development. As Peter Lambert and Björn Weiler have noted in their introduction to a recent essay collection, there are (and have been for centuries) many forms of engagement with the past that fall outside a narrow definition of historical writing, and modernity (much less Western modernity) did not invent these. What we now term 'history' (the written genre) must be understood within the broader historical culture – that wider set of forms of engagement with the past – that produced it.

The English word 'history' (in the more restricted sense of the written narration of the past) goes by many different names in European languages alone: *histoire* in French, *Geschichte* in German, *storia* in Italian, *dzieje* in Polish. Many Asian cultures developed their own forms of recording and commemorating the past which have their own terms: *tamnan* and *phongsawadan* in Siam (now Thailand), *pang-savatar* and *thamaing* in Burma, *babad* in Java, *hikayat* in Sumatra, *itihasa-purana* in ancient India. History has often been conceived of in ways that we would now deem strange, even 'unhistorical'. Because this book is being written in English, I will use terms such as 'history', 'historical thought' and 'historical knowledge' frequently, but in doing so I embrace under these familiar phrases the world's collective names for ways of organizing and representing the past.

My choice of word usage in the present book requires a bit more elaboration. For the sake of clarity I have adopted the following practice. The word ‘history’, when used in English and not otherwise explained or clarified, should be taken as meaning, variously, the forms in which the past is recovered, thought of, spoken of and written down (but not the evidence used in its construction), among them a particular *type* of historical writing, composed in continuous prose (as distinct from other forms such as the annals or chronicles that were widely used in the European Middle Ages); or, especially in the last two chapters, the study or ‘discipline’ of history as it has developed since the mid-nineteenth century. There is a further commonplace usage, bequeathed us from the European Enlightenment (see below, Chapter 4), in which history is not the record or recitation of the past, but the actual events themselves, understood as a cumulative river of events, causes and effects leading to the present day. There will be occasion to refer to history in this sense too; in such cases, ‘History’ (the cumulative pattern of events to those who have believed that there has been such a pattern and that it is fathomable) will be capitalized to distinguish it from the more conventional uses, above. Virtually coterminous with this development there also matured another phenomenon, previously less common: thinking about both ‘History’ and ‘history’ as respectively an object of philosophical speculation and a mode of knowledge. This in turn occasioned other debates, from the late eighteenth century onward, as to the nature of the relationship between knowledge of the past and knowledge of God or of Nature.

Another word which will appear often, and which is known frequently to frighten students and discomfit some faculty, is ‘historiography’. While this, too, has multiple senses, in the present book it will primarily denote what we might call the ‘meta’ level of historical practice: that is, the history of how history itself has been written, spoken or thought about over several millennia and in a wide variety of cultures. There have been different approaches taken to historiography-as-history-of-history, too, and different concepts of when exactly ‘real’ historical writing began – as Jonathan Gorman has argued, it’s possible to compare histories of historiography and thereby go one level deeper still, in effect creating a historiography of historiography. The present book is thus concerned with historiography in the sense of ‘the history of history’ and *not* with particular debates such as ‘the historiography of the French Revolution’ or of ‘American slavery’. Nor

does it claim to outline, much less argue on behalf of, a set of ‘historical methods’ – except insofar as these are a recurring, and highly contested, element in discussions about how the past should be recovered and described. (An aside: I am not what the philosopher of historiography Aviezer Tucker would deem a ‘historiographic esotericist’ who believes one cannot teach proper methods and practices and that they must simply be acquired through experience. However, I will confess to finding works that self-describe as teaching historical methods – and in particular methods that exclude all other approaches – however comforting they may be to new students, naively mechanical. They also tend to be extraordinarily dry, rather like instruction books for fixing a particular car, or descriptions of a mining-smelting-refining operation.) The word ‘historiography’ has also been used, in some past cultures, as synonymous with history itself (the written genre). And we will have occasion to discuss not only historians (those who wrote works of history deemed significant because of the quality of their writing, the acuity of their perception, or sometimes simply their mastery of style and composition) but also historiographers, literary critics and, indeed, some philosophers of history, a few of whom wrote little or no actual history but had a deep impact on thinking either about the meaning of the past itself, or about the ways and means of representing it. This will be the case whether the writer or thinker in question originated in Europe, the Americas, Africa or Asia.

The previous sentence must be clearly understood at the outset. The ‘West’ neither invented nor enjoyed a monopoly on history. Nor has history been the closely guarded possession of history’s high priesthood, academics working mainly in institutions of higher education. In fact, a multitude of different civilizations that have inhabited this planet have conceived of the past in different ways, formulated variable notions of its relationship to the present, and evolved distinctive terms – not always directly corresponding to those we use in English – to denote its representation. Past historical cultures must be taken on their own merits and judged by their own standards, not by the fairly narrow assumptions of modern professional historians. In short, we too should be wary of both a geographical and chronological parochialism. While many forms of history sprang up in isolation, they did not remain that way. Just as the history of the world is (in part) a story of encounters, conflicts and conquests among different peoples, so the history of history itself demonstrates that the different modes of knowing the

past have often come into contact with and demonstrably influenced one another. These encounters were relatively limited until the early modern period (discussed in Chapter 3) and their full implications were not realized before the nineteenth century, at which point, with the advantage of hindsight, it can seem as if all the various streams of historical thinking that the world has seen were either dammed up or diverted into the rather large lake of professional history built on European and especially Germanic academic practice which has ruled the past ever since. But this result was by no means inevitable, nor was it necessarily an intellectual ‘conquest’, since Western practices were often quite willingly adopted, even zealously pursued, by social reformers in other countries seeking an alternative to long-standing and, to them, restrictive and progress-retarding indigenous conventions of describing their own pasts.

While there can be no question that Western history has come to be the hegemonic model (at this time), it has in turn been influenced by its encounters with other forms of historical knowledge, even if only sharpening definitions of what history should and should not be by comparing it with an exotic but ‘lesser’ ‘other’. Spanish historical writing of the sixteenth century certainly had a huge impact on how the past of the newly discovered Americas was written, but the early modern missionaries who wrote those histories had to adapt their writings to the sources available in native oral and pictographic practices. I will argue further on that these contacts, and this growing awareness of alternative modes of ‘historicity’ (which in this sense means the capacity and will to preserve or recover and represent aspects of the past), obliged Europeans to make some decisions about what *they* deemed ‘within-scope’ for true history, and to prioritize the written record of the past over the oral or pictographic. This prepared the ground for a hardening of European attitudes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the division of the world into those with history from those (apparently) without it. This in turn set the table for the achievement of Western dominance over history outlined below in Chapters 4 and 5. The book, in short, sketches the main world traditions of historical writing, and then the process whereby the European approach, which has generated its own self-policing ‘discipline’, achieved its hegemony, sometimes being adapted or altered better to mesh with very different cultures or competing ideologies (which themselves may be understood as differing beliefs about the

moral, economic and political status of the present with respect to either a wistfully remembered past or a dreamed-of future).

That hegemony has not come without cost as some modern critics of the discipline have observed, a point we will revisit in later chapters. In particular, the enshrinement of historiographic authority within the academic community, while providing rigour and an almost factory-like system (our earlier mining-smelting-refining metaphor, now applied to people) for reproducing its scholarly progeny, can also be viewed as a constraint on creativity. It also introduces a buffer between author and reader unknown before the mid-nineteenth century. In *The Writing of History*, Certeau commented astutely on the chasm that has opened between historical authors and wider audiences, whereby the value of work is bestowed not by the reader at large (as it was in Europe's eighteenth century and much of the nineteenth) but by a peer-approval system whose criteria are often quite different from those of the lay person. The mere existence of this system (of which the present author is a product) both constrains historians from straying too far from the 'accrediting' rules of the discipline and inflicts *literal* discipline in the form of bad reviews, tenure denials and public embarrassment. At the same time, as professional historians and their students seek new angles, new approaches and something original to say about usually well-trodden ground (though almost always carefully within the academy's approved practices), the system guides them into a narrower and narrower field of view, often about subjects so minute, or too-often revisited, as to be of little interest beyond a minor subset of the profession.

This raises a further issue. As 'world history' and latterly 'global' history have gradually won both academic and curricular acceptance in recent times, it has become clear that the noblest plans for inclusiveness often run aground on the shoals of Eurocentrism. As the Palestinian cultural critic Edward Said once observed, the alleged universalism of various disciplinary fields, among which he includes historiography, is 'Eurocentric in the extreme, as if other literatures and societies had either an inferior or a transcended value', a loaded view which Said traced (not entirely accurately) to Enlightenment thought. One can avoid this trap by taking an attitude that treats each historical culture as unique and of value. But, on the other hand, if we simply recount a number of parallel histories of history, West and East, we risk losing perspective; we will miss both the 'big picture', *and* a sense of the

relative scale, significance and magnitude of different types of history. We will also jeopardize any hope of making meaningful generalizations and of finding similarities and connections. Here explicit comparison can help, together with attention to the ways in which historical cultures have been at least aware of one another for a very much longer time than they have interacted.

It is also worth remembering that although for the past two centuries historical traditions have been associated with particular nation-states, this was not always the case. In terms of political organization, the nation-state – which played a key part in the formation of ‘modern’ Western historical methods during the nineteenth century – is little more than a blip in the history of human society. Cities and empires (sometimes at the same time) were the dominant form of polity through most of human history; the latter were typically multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, leading to a degree of ‘internal’ interaction between cultures – the Mongol appropriation of both Chinese and Islamic forms of historical writing in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is but one example. Moreover, though founded on the basis of perceptions of shared pasts (and sometimes ‘invented traditions’), nation-states themselves are scarcely more homogeneous than the empires from which they emerged, as a violent record of ethnic and racial persecution over the past hundred years illustrates. Given this, phrases such as ‘French’ historical writing (or English, Turkish, Chinese, etc) should not be understood in this book as always denoting the modern countries of these names, at least before the nineteenth century, and even then cannot be taken as monolithic essences.

The British historian J. H. Plumb (1911–2001) was certainly correct that ancient Chinese historicity was not that of the modern West (or, as we will see, even of post-nineteenth-century China), just as he was right to point to differences between the moral and didactic imperatives driving much ‘Western’ (a term used to denote Europe and its direct colonial offshoots) historiography from antiquity to 1800, and the less explicitly moralizing academic history that succeeded it. But does that mean that only modernity – and that in its European form – has produced ‘real’ history? This is among the issues which this book explores. Western historiography has repeatedly, and often defensively, fashioned itself, masking its internal insecurities and intellectual doubts, in response to other types of history that it encountered in the course of war, trade and other forms of contact. The great irony is that

this occidental form of knowledge, having built itself into something unlike its ‘oriental’ and supposedly ‘ahistorical’ counterparts, was by the nineteenth century sufficiently refined, confident in its methods and clear in its goals (themselves closely associated with Western economic and technological superiority) that it could march with comparative ease – and sometimes by invitation – into those parts of the world that previously entertained different notions of what the past was and how and why it should be remembered. And there is a second irony: even with the assistance of the most willing local admirers, European historical practices could not be grafted wholesale on to foreign societies any more than American-style democracy can be imposed today on countries with no democratic tradition. In some instances (for example the transference of Marxism, a system built on Western perceptions of the process of historical change, to China, with its very different relation to its own past), European forms required considerable modification or domestication in order to achieve broad acceptance. The rough fit and the compromises have been elided from the story of history as the twentieth century wrote it, along with most of the indigenous historical practices that they supplanted.

In an influential book, Dipesh Chakrabarty has called for the ‘provincializing of Europe’, noting that Europe has traditionally provided the scale against which the rest of the world is measured. That being said, it is difficult to make European historiography simply one among several approaches. As most postcolonial scholars would concede, and as later chapters of this book will contend, the European-descended Western form of historiography, complete with its academic and professional institutions, *has* achieved dominance over other forms of writing or thinking about the past. It has by and large pushed out of consideration more traditional, oral forms of history that were commonplace in earlier ages, and in the West since about 1600 history has been associated overwhelmingly with writing rather than speech, a by-product of increased lay literacy over the previous two centuries and of perceptions of the fundamental unreliability of the record where a system of writing did not exist. The fact of the elimination of alternative forms of perceiving and representing the past, seen by Said and other postcolonial scholars as an imposition of a Western system of knowledge and language on the colonized, holds true, ironically, even in circumstances where Western historical methods have been seized and turned as a weapon on the very political or social structures that

disseminated them (see below, Chapter 6). For the reader of this book, the more interesting questions are likely to be first, how ‘modern’ historiography achieved its apparent hegemony, and second, whether this occurred without the ‘victor’ being affected in some ways by contact with the ‘vanquished’ (or in some cases, the ‘vanished’). The ways in which historiographical transferences have occurred are not merely intellectual – the result of author-to-author ‘influences’. As Dominic Sachsenmaier has perceptively observed, the spread of academic historiography cannot be explained by a simple ‘diffusion’ model whereby ideas simply ‘catch on’ outside their country of origin; it must be understood as a consequence of a variety of social and political factors at work in Europe and throughout the world.

The landscape traversed in this book thus embraces a variety of different historiographic traditions, running along parallel tracks for much of the time, and on occasion (especially from the sixteenth century on) criss-crossing and intersecting. These traditions were embodied in different genres; they were transmitted in alternative forms of commemoration and communication (oral and pictorial as well as literate), and they emerged and evolved in widely varying social and political contexts. The balance of this book aims to describe these processes, and where, at present, they now stand.

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