



PART 1

WHAT IS HISTORY?

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-96998-7 — Teaching Secondary History
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Excerpt
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CHAPTER 1

History

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Learning objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- understand the key features of history as an academic discipline
- outline the role of popular history in shaping understandings of the past
- outline the ways in which public memory reflects and shapes understandings of the past and how public memory can be used in secondary history classes to address key areas of the Australian Curriculum
- appreciate some of the ongoing debates about the place of history in the school curriculum.

Introduction

This chapter aims to provide a broad overview of history as both an academic discipline and a diverse set of cultural practices. It begins with a brief overview of the emergence of this discipline from the ancient world and explores some of the ways in which the discipline has evolved in more recent years. The chapter then examines both popular history and public memory as unique ways of engaging with the past, with a focus on the Australian context. Crucially, the chapter links these developments to the teaching of history in secondary schools in Australia. In essence, it is an attempt to show how secondary school history reflects broader developments in the ways people think about and engage with the past.

What is history?

It is often said that the past and history are not the same. In this view, the past encompasses all that has taken place before the present moment. History, on the other hand, consists of all the various attempts to make sense of the past. Even though there are arguments against this simple distinction, it is a helpful way to begin thinking about how

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to respond to one of the most fundamental questions a historian, or history student, can ask: what is history?

In a basic sense, history might be seen as any attempt, through one set of processes or another, to grapple with and draw meaning from the people, events and societies that have gone before the present. To put this another way, we construct history as an engagement or confrontation with the past.

By recognising that all histories are constructed to make sense of the past, we can begin to cast a wide net over a range of practices that might loosely be grouped together as ‘history’. From the cave paintings of prehistoric civilisations, to the epic poetry of ancient societies, to the large, scholarly works of the twenty-first century, and to Hollywood films and popular music, humans have tried to engage with the past in many different ways. In this sense, ‘history making’ incorporates a broad set of cultural practices that have been a common feature of human societies around the world.

If teaching history in secondary school settings is to reflect anything about how history is practised in the ‘real world’, it must help students acknowledge, explore and become comfortable with this notion that history is, and will always be, constructed and contestable. All histories are shaped by time, culture, ethics and aesthetics and they can therefore be challenged. Students need to develop the expectation that learning history involves uncertainty, debate, revision, creativity and effort. Perhaps as importantly, students should appreciate that this effort is worthwhile, both personally and collectively.

Short-answer questions 1.1

1. Explain the distinction between ‘the past’ and ‘history’.
 2. In the text above, a range of different approaches to constructing history are mentioned (e.g. cave paintings). Make a list of these approaches and then expand the list with your own examples of how people engage with the past. What implications might these have for teaching secondary history?
 3. To what extent do you think it is reasonable to expect that secondary school students can grasp the notion that history is always constructed and contestable? Why might it be important to foreground the contested nature of history in secondary school teaching?
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History as an academic discipline

Although all human societies have their own cultural practices that help them make sense of the past, in the twenty-first century, and particularly in modern post-industrial societies, one response to the question ‘what is history?’ is that it is primarily an academic discipline. This status has, however, only developed in the last 250 to 300 years.

The history of history?

Most accounts of how history was transformed into a modern academic discipline start in the ancient world. More specifically, they often view the Greek writers Herodotus (484–420 BCE) and Thucydides (460–400 BCE) as foundational. Increasingly, however, those writing the ‘history of history’ have argued that this tends to be a Eurocentric view. They have pointed out that many civilisations and societies in various parts of the world developed rich historical traditions and some of these have continued to be influential down to the present day. In his book *A Global History of History*, for example, Daniel Woolf explores how histories emerged in early civilisations as diverse as the Near East, China and India. His aim is to ‘provide a sharp corrective to any notion that the various types of Western historicity were the only possible perspective that the present could take on the past’ (Woolf, 2011, p. 23).

Herodotus and Thucydides

Still, for the purposes of considering how the modern discipline of history evolved, Herodotus and Thucydides remain difficult to ignore. This is not because they were the first humans to engage with the past; they were not even the first to write about the past. Between them they did, however, synthesise a range of cultural practices that shaped the way many people have since engaged with the past, including a tendency to disagree vehemently over conclusions and methods.

Herodotus produced a wide-ranging account focused on the Persian Wars in his *Histories* (published 426–415 BCE). He gathered stories both realistic and, to the modern reader, fanciful. He claimed to write in order to ‘prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time, and to preserve the fame of the important and remarkable achievements produced by both Greeks and non-Greeks’ (Herodotus, 2008, p. 3). More importantly, Herodotus’ narrative, which at times reads as a collection of randomly assembled events rather than a disciplined plot- or argument-driven text, explored questions about



Figure 1.1 A marble bust of Herodotus and Thucydides at the Museo Nazionale Archeologico in Naples, Italy

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fundamental historical issues, such as causation and change and continuity. In other words, he was not just interested in *what* happened but *why* it happened, and this kind of analytical inquiry has guided many approaches to the past ever since.

Thucydides, in contrast, focused his history on the Peloponnesian War (431–405 BCE) that was fought between two major Greek city states, Athens and Sparta. He was less concerned than Herodotus with wider social and cultural stories than with trying to establish factual information by first checking his sources and then developing explanations for the events in question (although he also openly made up some speeches included in his narrative based on what he thought was likely to have been said). Like Herodotus, Thucydides was interested in explaining the causes, developments and outcomes of events but, unlike Herodotus, claimed to have little time for the supernatural or stories that he could not verify. He stated that: ‘Finding out the facts involved great effort, because eye-witnesses did not report the same specific events in the same way, but according to individual partisanship or ability to remember’ (Thucydides, 1998, pp. 13–14).

Between these two men, many of the themes and practices of later historians were already foregrounded. Their works also captured fundamental questions about history that have remained prominent: what events, people and societies of the past should we take time to remember and investigate? On what sources of information should we base our understanding of the past? What is the purpose of studying the past? What form(s) are best suited to communicate about the past?

History beyond ancient Greece

These towering figures may have synthesised many important questions and debates about history, but they did not invent them. Nor did Herodotus and Thucydides constrain the ways others approached history or the questions they asked. New scholarly traditions emerged in Rome, as did others in China, India and elsewhere, sometimes with little or no knowledge of ancient Greece and its historians.

Over time, other cultural traditions developed, with their own complex ways of engaging with the past. In medieval Britain the Venerable Bede (672–735 CE), a Christian monk, recorded the deeds of the monarchs clearly filtered through his religious worldview. The Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) produced an ambitious world history called the *Muqqadimah* (1377). All these writers were ‘doing’ history in ways that made sense to them and served their purposes. They had not, however, created a distinct academic discipline that bound together large numbers of scholars over broad spaces (although many local traditions and ‘schools’ did develop).

History only became a more formalised academic discipline in the nineteenth century after greater emphasis was placed on scientific rationalism and empiricism following the Renaissance (1300–1600) and the Enlightenment (1685–1815) – two long and complex periods of European history. The greater prominence of secular, scientific thinking that emerged from these periods led to new communities of scholars focusing

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ever more specifically on particular intellectual fields: astronomy, biology, physics, theology, law and so on. Many of these fields developed into fully fledged academic disciplines with broadly shared understandings of method and scope. Historical studies were carried along a similar trajectory.

Leopold von Ranke and the professionalisation of history

No individual has received as much attention as the ‘father’ of modern, academic and professional history as the German philologist and historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886). Von Ranke produced several incredibly complex works of history that demonstrated a thoroughly expert grasp of language, archaeology, textual analysis and critical inquiry. He was a serious and erudite scholar who believed that history needed to be written to capture the essence of its subject ‘as it essentially was’ rather than fictionalised or overly theorised. Von Ranke was firmly committed to at least three crucial processes that have become defining features of the history discipline:

1. rigorous research – especially finding new sources and ensuring their authenticity
2. testing source material to distill reliable evidence
3. interpreting the established ‘facts’ or evidence to develop narratives and explanations about the past that communicate the history in an intelligible and objective manner but remain open to challenge and debate.

These were ideas that many before Von Ranke had both practised and championed, but he synthesised them into a powerful set of examples in the works that he produced. He was also fortunate to have lived and worked at a time when academic disciplines were beginning to flourish and scholarly expertise in specified fields was becoming more widely respected through a growing university system in many parts of the world.

Perhaps an even more important contribution to the growth of history as an academic discipline was von Ranke’s emphasis on professionalism. He believed that to do history well, one needed specialised training, and that modern universities provided



Figure 1.2 Leopold von Ranke

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opportunities for this through seminar workshops and intensive research. He proposed that young scholars should be introduced to the technical skills of the trade in rigorous programs where their methods and ideas would be scrupulously tested. Those who survived earned their right to go on and train others. Over time, a network of professional historians could ensure that higher-quality accounts of the past emerged.

Ultimately, many of von Ranke’s ideas took root and, beginning in Germany and then spreading more widely across Europe, led to the creation of a large number of institutions in an increasingly global network of scholars who came to be known as historians. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this network was further strengthened by increasing globalisation underpinned by relatively cheap and efficient transport and more effective means of communication.

Despite the obvious differences in method and focus between historians, the majority of academic historians now work within broad parameters that form a shared understanding of the discipline (see Figure 1.3). Within that broad unity there is great diversity.

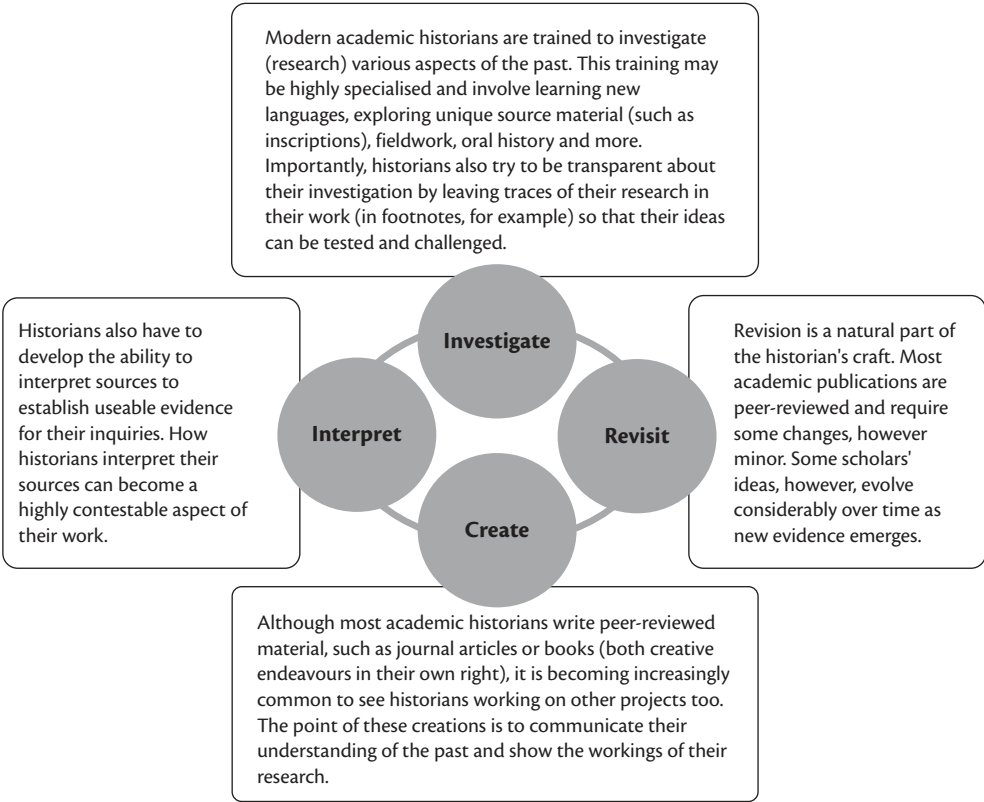


Figure 1.3 Common features of academic history

The house of (academic) history has many rooms

The discipline of history, as we now know it, is a product of multiple cultural influences that developed over a long period. It has become widely influential on the way people in many parts of the world have come to think about what it means to be a historian or, at least, to ‘do history’. The argument is not that professional academic history displaced others forms of engaging with the past, but that it became a dominant form of history.

It is also important to recognise that within the broad field of academic history there are (and have always been) many different types of history and historians; or, as David Blackbourn famously put it: ‘the house of history has many rooms’ (Blackbourn, cited in Tamm & Burke, 2019, p. 206). During the twentieth century, academic historians developed many new approaches that have been more or less popular since they emerged. Table 1.1 briefly sets out these various approaches.

Table 1.1 Academic history evolves throughout the twentieth century

Different approaches to history	Key features
Marxist	Marxist historians tended to emphasise the role of economic forces in shaping human societies and their changes over time. This led many to focus more on social classes and their interactions (such as labour movements and trade unions) in their work. The works of the British historians Raphael Samuel, E. P. Thompson and Christopher Hill are often referenced as important within twentieth-century Marxist history.
Annales	This approach to history is generally linked to the French journal <i>Annales</i> , first published in 1929. The founders criticised more traditional von Rankean-style history as a history of ‘documents’ and also an overemphasis on political and military affairs as the most important forces of history. The Annales ‘school’, although diverse itself, generally advocates for a broader conception of history (over wider time scales, more diverse topics and a broader source-base). At the time, this seemed quite progressive and has been extremely influential in shaping the way many historians work.
Social history	Following the Second World War, historians increasingly became interested in exploring the past lives of the voiceless and the marginalised; they began to look more closely at

Table 1.1 (cont.)

Different approaches to history	Key features
	history ‘from below’ rather than ‘from above’. Following the influence of Marxist historians, they began to focus on the working classes, women, indigenous people and people of colour, but many did not share the Marxist outlook of historians such as Samuel and Hill.
Cultural history	Developing out of social history and postmodernist theories later in the twentieth century, many historians began exploring the beliefs, values and language of people in the past, especially after the linguistic turn. These ‘cultural histories’ showed that the traditions of everyday people have been crucial forces for historical change, perhaps even more than the ‘great men’ or large impersonal structures like economic and political systems.
Feminist	As women became more publicly active in Western societies in the second half of the twentieth century, many noted that the history academy was primarily made up of white men (or ‘old white men with beards’ as is often said). Feminist historians began challenging both the content of history (what was studied and who enjoyed the focus of most histories) and the academy itself for its essentially masculine composition and the culture that this tended to perpetuate. These historians began to write histories by, of and for women (‘herstory’), broadening the discipline in crucial ways.
Universal and micro-history	As historians began to find ever-more particular topics to explore, some turned to decidedly marginal and obscure ‘case studies’ (microhistories). These were partly a political tool to restore the lost voices of marginal people and communities, but also an historiographical tool that tried to show history could still be meaningful despite the challenges of postmodernism. Others took the opposite approach and returned to explore history at even larger ‘scales’. This began with world, global and transnational histories but eventually found expression in new forms of ‘universal history’. There is probably no