



## Introduction

[T]he animal lives unhistorically ... Man, on the other hand, braces himself against the great and ever greater pressure of what is past: it pushes him down or bends him sideways, it encumbers his steps as a dark, invisible burden which he would like to disown, so as to excite their envy.<sup>1</sup>

'History' exists 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. We will never know the identity of the first human who, curious about his – or her – past, decided to inquire into the origins of his or her tribe, village or family, or what motivated that person to do so. This does not matter very much. The human inclination to unearth knowledge of one's past may well be natural rather than acquired (though no 'history gene' has yet been mapped). One modern scholar has even suggested that 'History is a human universal. Knowledge of the past is expressed by all human beings according to their different cultural and social systems. History is a generic form of consciousness in which the past experience of oneself or of others in an environment outside oneself is transformed into symbols that are exchanged.'<sup>2</sup>

However, the capacity to remember is not sufficient on its own to create the conditions for history to be made. Humans are the only species capable of *both* forming long-term memory (beyond the simple recollection of how to perform tasks or how to find a particular familiar location) *and* of communications. It is

this latter function that permits the transmission of those memories, and other knowledge, to other members of the species. 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 five 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 eventually learned to use speech, specifically in the form of poetry and song, to commemorate the deeds of the gods and heroes in their past. The oral beginnings of what we now call historical thinking and historical knowledge are long acknowledged; it will be repeated at points throughout this book that writing per se is not, as used to be thought, essential to their development, even in the modern era.

## Distinguishing History from 'History'

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What is now called 'history' in English goes by many different names in European languages alone: *histoire* in French, *Geschichte* in German, *storia* in Italian, *dzieje* in Polish, *история* in Russian. It has often been thought 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.

My choice of word usage 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 including the following meanings, depending upon the context of the discussion:

- (a) a variety of forms (not all of which are written) in which the past is recovered, thought of, spoken of and written down, but *not* the evidence from the past used by the historian, speaker or thinker in constructing their text, speech, story, painting or monument;
- (b) a particular *type* of historical writing, composed in continuous prose, as distinct from annals or chronicles arranged into discontinuous annual chunks (though we will see that this distinction is not always helpful, especially in pre-modern times, or in non-European contexts such as China);
- (c) the 'discipline' of history as it has developed in the two centuries just passed.

All of these refer back in some way to accounts of the past or their manufacture rather than to the past itself. But 'history' has in the last quarter millennium acquired a fourth, and very different meaning, namely the 'accumulated events of

the past' or even, when given qualities of personhood, intent, agency and moral preference, 'the manifest direction of the accumulated events of the past'. This is the sense in which the word has been used by certain philosophers of history and world historians from the time of G. W. F. Hegel in the early nineteenth century to that of Francis Fukuyama at the end of the twentieth and, with greater harm, by politicians, generals and ideologues of various persuasions who were convinced that 'History' was on their side – a crushing and merciless tsunami atop which they surfed as it obliterated those who stood in its way. This sense is a modern one, dating from the late eighteenth century, though there are certainly historians or historical thinkers, some of them discussed in this book, who well before Hegel treated the past as a collective and decodable pattern, worth speculating about. Because our subjects sometimes refer to 'History' in this sense, we must on occasion also do so when discussing their work. To make clear that I am referring to that usage (which E. H. Carr rejected along with providence, world spirit and manifest destiny)<sup>3</sup> and not any of those listed above as (a), (b) and (c), I have routinely capitalized the word 'History' when it is deployed in this way. Lower-case 'history', then, will denote variously the set of literary (and non-literary) forms that *contain* thought or statements about the past, *a mode of thinking about the past* as a set of events that occurred in real time and, in modern times, a professional *discipline*.

These small-h meanings, however, are also not entirely the same, nor do they relate to each other in identical ways across all cultures: it is possible to separate out the content, historical thinking, from the container and, conversely, to find various 'modes' of thinking, historical, poetic and mythical, within a single genre or a variety of genres, all of which are specific to time and place. '[H]istory can be, and is, composed in many genres', comment the three authors of a recent book on South Asian historical thought. 'The choice belongs with the historian, who aims at a particular audience and conforms to the preferences and exigencies of a given moment. A single story can also pass from one genre to another as it moves from one social milieu to another...' We would do well to remember the following: history is an act of communication (generally now verbal and graphic but, as we will see, sometimes through other means) between an author/speaker and a reader/audience; and the truth value of any statement about the past is determined not only by *what* is contained in a text or recitation but in *how* the historian believes an audience will react to it, and how, in fact, that audience actually does so. South Asian audiences knew perfectly well, because of their sense of 'texture', when a work was being factual and when it was sliding into fiction, without it necessarily being signposted by the author.<sup>4</sup> This is not so very different from the kind of double-belief that Paul Veyne has ascribed to the ancient Greeks,<sup>5</sup> or which applied among the retellers of popular tales about the past in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. 'Truthful' and 'factual' are not identical and interchangeable

terms, something which writers on poetics from Aristotle through Sidney, even working without a modern conception of the 'fact', recognized in asserting the truth value of poetry.

## What Is Historiography?

Another word which will appear often is 'historiography'. Although this word has been used at various times to describe the writing of history, in the present book it will denote both 'history-writing' (its literal sense) and secondarily what we might call the 'meta' level of historical thinking, that is, the study of how history itself has been written, spoken or thought about over several millennia and in a wide variety of cultures. 'Historiography', like 'history', requires a bit more definition because, like 'history', it is fraught with different meanings. While it clearly (and *unlike* 'history/History') can never mean *the past*, and while in a strict sense it is almost by definition a written record of the past (the syllable 'graph' refers to written symbols), no two 'historiography' courses on a university curriculum will necessarily intend the same thing in using the word. In some modern history departments it would be possible, for instance, for a student to take a number of different courses called 'historiography', dealing with any of the following:

- (a) a study of historical methods – essentially a 'how to do history' course; a variant of this is the study of historical errors and fallacies, or how *not* to do history;
- (b) the review and study of the state of knowledge and key debates in one national area, sub-discipline or historical event, for instance 'recent trends in Sino-Japanese historiography' or (more clearly) 'the historiography of the Russian Revolution', where what is being referred to is past and current scholarship *about* the Russian Revolution, and not the writings of Pokrovskii, Pankratova and other historians active before and after 1917;
- (c) the history of historical writing, as in 'Japanese historiography from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries', typically a review of the great historians and their texts, but sometimes expanding outward to consider non-canonical works, and even the wider social and cultural contexts within which such works were produced.

Among these three usages of the word 'historiography' we will not be using (a) very much if at all, even though we will have occasion to discuss the history of historical methods, and of what are sometimes called 'ancillary disciplines' to history, such as epigraphy (the study of inscriptions) and palaeography (the deciphering of old or unfamiliar handwriting); some celebrated historical errors and

mis-steps will also be mentioned incidentally, in particular a number of infamous ‘fakes’. Nor will usage (b) often appear. Where the word is used it will generally be as defined above by (c). In that sense, again, this entire book is an exercise in historiography, albeit of a more global range than the more traditional survey running from Herodotus through the nineteenth-century German Leopold von Ranke to today and invariably excluding anything outside the borders of Europe or North America. But two further qualifications must be added even here. First, the word ‘historiography’ in some past cultures has come to acquire a fourth possible meaning (d), now archaic in Western parlance, as something very close to or synonymous with ‘history’, that is, an account of the past. When authors of the Renaissance and seventeenth century, for instance, wished to refer to the authors of historical works (including often their own), they often indiscriminately blended the two. Thus the early sixteenth-century Florentine writer Francesco Guicciardini might be described as a ‘historian’ by one contemporary commentator and as a ‘historiographer’ by another. As late as the mid-eighteenth century, Voltaire used both terms, though in his case to draw an important distinction (see Chapter 6 below) between the *historiographe*, an officially sponsored compiler, and the *historien*, an independent writer of superior stylistic ability, answering only to his conscience and his public. This conflation of the two terms becomes even more complicated when dealing with the select group of authors who wrote not only about the past but about writing about the past. This is a smallish number, but it spans the world and goes back many hundred years to antiquity, including along the way notables from the Chinese critic Liu Zhiji in the eighth century to the French scholars Jean Bodin and Henri de la Popelinière in the late sixteenth century, to a modern-day writer such as the late classicist Arnaldo Momigliano. Most of these individuals thus wrote both history and historiography, the latter being understood as ‘history of history’ or ‘consideration of the past and present practices and beliefs of historians’.

And that raises the second qualification. This book is an exercise in a particular type of historiography, the history of historical thought and writing. Its subjects are the many people, a majority but not all of them men until the twentieth century, who have recovered and/or represented the past either out of personal interest or with some wider social or political purpose in mind. And the book itself is also a *history* because it tells a story, in narrative form, of a particular subject over time, that subject being the genre or practice of which the book is a specimen. Yet the book is not, narrowly speaking, a history of *historiography* in senses (c) or (d), whether European or more global, if by that we limit ourselves to the modern conception of all history being written or printed and contained on paper or some similar material. Certainly, that will be a major topic. However, I have deliberately called this volume *A Global History of History* (and not *A Global History*

*of Historiography, or A Global History of Historical Writing*) because I wish to include within its purview some other roads to the past which are often very different from written history. These would include, to provide two examples, the oral traditions from remote times or the direct testimony of eyewitnesses that, despite an overwhelming inclination towards the written word, historians and others have periodically used as an alternative access point into past events. They would also include non-scribal forms by which the past can be represented, some of which are simply writings in a different medium than paper or parchment (for instance ancient Mesopotamian stone chronicles, or Shang-era Chinese oracle bones), but others of which are strictly aural or visual rather than graphic. A good example of the latter is the quipu used, in conjunction with oral performance, by the pre-Columbian Andean peoples of Peru, who had no written language, to record their past.

Having said this, the book will not be concerned with *all* forms of representation of the past at *all* times and in *every* part of the world; much less is it intended as a comprehensive record of historiographical activity and its practitioners. To put it another way, this is a history of history *in* and *throughout* the world, but not a history of *all* the world's histories. Some countries feature quite often, others are drawn on for occasional illustration, and many will not be mentioned at all, a silence which should emphatically not be taken as implying that these are countries without historiography or, to borrow Eric R. Wolf's famous phrase, 'people without history'.<sup>6</sup> This is not a dictionary or encyclopedia (though several of these now do exist) of historians and historiography, and the curious reader should not look to this book for a concise account of Lithuanian or Sri Lankan historical writing, or for that matter British, American or Chinese historical writing, much less treat it as a reference source for biographical details on the 'great' historians of all countries.<sup>7</sup> So far as types of historical representation are concerned, several exclusions have been made, including historical fiction and history plays and, in more recent times, historical films and popular festivals. These retain an incidental place in the narrative, not least because many past eras did not make a firm distinction between a 'history' as contained in a play or poem and one contained in prose, nor even between a prose chronicle such as that published by the Elizabethan Englishman Raphael Holinshed and a history play as created by Shakespeare out of the materials contained in that chronicle. We cannot exclude an author such as Shakespeare entirely, any more than we should exclude Homer from a consideration of ancient Greek thought about the past, since the boundaries of the literally true and the imaginatively embellished have always been ambiguous. (We did not need a raft of late twentieth-century books on theory to tell us this, though perhaps the reminder was in order after

a century or more of conceiving history as ‘the true story of the past’.) Nor will we address, except in passing during the final chapter of the book, public manifestations of history such as monuments – the *lieux de mémoire* that Pierre Nora and others have drawn our attention to in recent years – or public celebrations (the 1989 bicentennial of the French Revolution for instance) or, the evolution of history curricula in school textbooks. All of these are worthy, important topics, but others are better qualified than I to write about them, and to include them all here would result in an unmanageably long, and hopelessly disparate, book that would not serve any constituency well.

## Different Global Versions of History

Let us take up again the names by which history has been known. It is important to understand that translations are not always exact, and that many cultures do not have a single word that exactly corresponds to our ‘history’, for the very reason that they do not conceive of knowledge of the past in the same way, or classify its literary representations according to the same categories. The Chinese character 史, for example, which transliterates as ‘shi’, is often taken to mean either history or historian, but it originally meant ‘scribe’ or ‘one who writes’ (there is no usage of ‘history’ in Chinese that equates with ‘the past’, in contrast to the West). The meaning of *shi* changed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries whence it truly began to denote history rather than a scribe. Variants such as *guoshi* (national histories) and *tongshi* (general histories) eventually emerged.<sup>8</sup> Pre-Columbian American peoples had ways of preserving and recalling the past that did not in some cases involve writing at all – the above-mentioned quipus and Mesoamerican painted histories, for example. Many African peoples relied, until relatively recent times, on oral traditions, though in some places writing had developed either indigenously (as in Ethiopia) or through contact with Christianity and especially Islam.

This last point is essential to the conception of the current book. Because history comes in various forms and shapes, we must not confuse the vessel with its content – even though the vessel itself very clearly *shapes* the content, because the available forms of transmission and communication predetermine what can be known and how it is selected for preservation. A multitude of different civilizations that have inhabited this planet have conceived of the past in different ways, formulated different notions of its relationship to the present, and evolved different terms to denote its representation. These must be taken on their own merits and judged by their own standards, not by the fairly narrow standards of modern

professional historians. On the other hand, they should not be studied entirely in isolation. Just as the history of the world is a story of encounters and conflicts between 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. With the advantage of hindsight, it looks now as if all the various streams of historical thinking that the world has seen have now flowed into the rather large lake of professional history built on European and especially nineteenth-century German academic practice. But this result was by no means inevitable, nor was it necessarily analogous to a conquest, since in many cases Western practices were willingly adopted, even zealously pursued by, social reformers in other countries seeking an alternative to long-standing and, to them, restrictive indigenous practices. Perhaps of even greater importance, the influences were not always in one direction. While Western history has certainly come to be the dominant model, it has in turn been profoundly 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, obliged Europeans to make some decisions about what *they* deemed 'within-scope' for true history, and thereby prepared the ground for a hardening of European attitudes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This in turn set the table for the nineteenth-century achievement of Western hegemony over history – what I have termed in one chapter 'Clio's empire'. I have used the figure of Clio, the Greek muse supposed to have been daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne (memory), frequently in this book as both a symbol and an image of the West's historical culture, and eventually the planet's. The book's cover features Clio in a striking iconographic representation of the link between history and empire. Its early nineteenth-century artist, who wanted to draw attention to Napoleon's 'historic' achievements, did so by having the classically garbed figure of the muse, a Roman-style bust of the emperor to her right (viewer's left), display a slate listing (in French) Napoleonic achievements to a number of figures representing the peoples of the world. The bust itself connects Napoleon with ancient Rome rather unobtrusively via both the laurel and the inscription, 'Veni, Vidi, Vici' – the phrase 'I came, I saw, I conquered' ascribed by Plutarch and Suetonius to Julius Caesar. Clio gestures towards the bust with her left hand and holds the slate in her right (it is French, the modern language, not Latin, that is at the centre of the painting). Several of Clio's assembled audience raise their right hands in acknowledgment of,



and apparent acquiescence to, France's hegemony. While some stand comfortably in the front row, others crowd in behind, and still others at the rear struggle to squeeze into the modest classical temple, including a few from regions where the Napoleonic armies would never march: in the full-size painting, the oriental figure of a Mongol or Chinese here visible at the right can be observed gripping a column with his left hand to balance himself as he leans in to hear, the implication being that even the unconquered ought to wish inclusion within this New World Order. Out of view here, a wiggled figure, presumably Britain, crosses his right hand over his chest, also in deference. But within the view, immediately below the oriental observer, we can see another figure of ambiguous complexion and ethnicity, clasping his hands as he raises his eyes to the heavens – an invocation of thanks? Or, one wonders, a quiet prayer for deliverance?

The artist, Alexandre Veron-Bellecourt, was not making any kind of statement about the activity of studying or writing about the past; this was part of a series of paintings on various aspects of the Napoleonic successes to date. Veron-Bellecourt was, to use our parlance, focused on History, not history. Yet the painting is unintentionally prophetic of the developments of the next two centuries, during the course of which it would be Clio's empire, not Napoleon's, that would ultimately thrive. In a book aspiring to be global, why, one asks, do we allow a minor classical deity to stand for all the world's historiography? Does this not privilege a particular kind of history, a specific way of looking at the past? It does indeed, but not because I wish to suggest that the West is a synecdoche for the globe. My point is precisely the opposite: that the structures and practices of history in the Western world which we conventionally trace back to the classical era have *become* global over the course of the past several centuries, and with mixed consequences. The book attempts to explain how and why this occurred, while also exploring the ways in which the European approach to the study of the past, forged into the late nineteenth–early twentieth-century discipline, was syncretically adapted or altered better to mesh with radically different cultures.

This raises a further issue. As 'world history' and latterly 'global' history have gradually won both academic and curricular acceptance over the past few decades, it has become clear that the noblest plans for inclusiveness often run aground on the shoals of Eurocentrism. If on the one hand we simply 'add Asia (or Africa, or Latin America, or Polynesia) and stir', we wind up with a homogenized agglomerate vision of a single world historiography whose waters have magically converged in that large modern lake, itself seen only from its Western beaches. All the past traditions of historical writing, thinking, singing, painting and inscribing can be triumphantly sublimated into a victorious European project that looks something like the 'Borg' of *Star Trek* fame or,

less ominously, one of the seventeenth-century philosopher Leibniz's monads, in which each small part reflects the whole. As Edward Said famously 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 to Enlightenment thought.<sup>9</sup>

There are ways around this towards an inclusive historiography that borrows one principle attributed to Ranke and nineteenth-century historicism (a term defined at length in Chapter 7 below), and 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', pointillist though it may be, *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 the red threads that may stretch, in a meandering fashion, from beginning to end. Here explicit comparison can help, together with attention to the ways in which historical cultures have been aware of one another for a very much longer time than they have interacted. R. G. Collingwood, as Eurocentric a historiographer as has ever lived, did not like comparison, and thought that it added nothing to our understanding of a particular event.<sup>10</sup> His mistake was lumping all comparative work with the drive towards general laws, not something any modern comparativist aspires to do. But Collingwood also wrote from the position not of an external observer but rather as an insider, dwelling at the heart of the dominant *régime d'historicité* (a useful phrase coined by the French classicist François Hartog).<sup>11</sup> This is a regime that has ruled over the study of the past since the nineteenth century, and has only rather recently been shaken by postmodern and postcolonial criticism.

Given the dominance of Western models, it would simply be stupid to claim that 'all forms of historicity have been equal and all can live in harmony' because that demonstrably hasn't happened. Micol Seigel suggests that the underlying contradiction in any narrative of world history is the project of narrative itself, 'an inescapable aspect of historical thinking' or, as the influential postmodern historiographer and literary theorist Hayden White has put it in one of his most important essays, that which bestows the illusion of reality on the past.<sup>12</sup> We can extend this further, to the meta-problem of narrating the past of the narration of the past. The challenge of the present book is thus to tell a coherent worldwide narrative of the history of history without creating either a kaleidoscope of different coloured histories, beautiful and dizzying, but ultimately momentary, transitory and meaningless, or its opposite, a Long March, a triumphalist