

Clio's Scroll

A Little Book About History

Dr Philip SA Cummins






CIRCLE - The Centre for Innovation, Research, Creativity and Leadership in Education Pty Ltd

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For Mum and Dad

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and Leadership in Education Pty Ltd

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Introduction – Inquiry

History is the essential and personal
imagining of what might have been.

I love history. I always have. Some of my earliest childhood memories are of a huge, wonderful book that was in my father's library. With its hard cover, glossy pages and shiny black dust jacket with red writing, *Milestones of History* seemed just splendid and could occupy me for hours and hours as I stared at the photographs, graphics and, gradually learned to read the text.

Of course, reading was not my absolute goal, as the book served mostly to start me off on my own internal journey through time. Little Philip became transformed into a mighty hero who could travel through time and win battles, slay enemies, transform nations and win glory. Until, of course, my brother or perhaps my mother interrupted me and dragged me back to the less glorious realities of life as a somewhat lonely little boy with a passion for learning who lived with a good family in a nice part of suburban Sydney.

I still have that book, although it doesn't seem nearly as big and exciting to me now. After years of education and teaching, I arrogantly assume that I can recognise the frailty of its inherent claims to a definitive narrative sweep of the history of human civilization. I can question the value judgments which lie behind its authors' choices as to which events became milestones and which were left as either subsidiary causes or just interesting trivia. I can deconstruct the power structures which it serves to reinforce and, even, demur against some of its stylistic features.

Yet, this intellectual posturing is all a bit ugly and in the end I'm not sure that all of my learning has added much to my reading of the book. I think it was better when I didn't know so much.

John Keats expressed it well in "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer":

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific — and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise —
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

I look at *Milestones of History* every now and then with fondness, acknowledging its role as the book which started me on my voyage, like Odysseus, through the world of the past and, secretly, hoping my own children will take to it in the same way. Of course they don't – they have their own worlds to explore. They like History, but not like I do – they do it in their own way.

Why start with a seemingly indulgent story such as this?

Because the process of unveiling history is so intensely intimate. No matter how well we write, the gap between where we are right now and the people of the past can only ever be travelled in our minds. The real milestones for us are those events and people who help us to answer the questions that we pose and, perhaps, provide clues as to our own nature.

The name of the first book of history written in the Western literary tradition reflects this: Herodotus's title *Histories* comes from the Greek word for "inquiries", asking questions. This is and probably always has been based on the seductive notion that we can understand ourselves better by exploring the worlds of the past. Others can and do inform us, guide us, lead us on this quest. Yet the things we find are those which we want to find. This does not mean we make it up, but rather that we choose what we see and develop answers based on these choices.

The scope of the past is too broad for any mortal to propose a complete answer. We carve off slices and serve them up with the unmistakable flavour of our own unique backgrounds. This does not mean that we are automatons, mindlessly reproducing what our context tells us to write. Instead, we react both in accordance with and also against our experience in determining what we produce.

So, no matter what we do to become more detached in our work, history remains very personal to us. So if I am going to talk about history and the way we write it, I need to position myself in relation to what I say.

I read and write history because I need it in my life. I seek truth. I see my own life as part of a continuum and seek to reproduce this as best I can in what I put down on the page. What I do is informed by what I value, what I imagine, what I am interested in and what I think is essential and right.

I think that many of us need history in the same way. We ask and answer questions about history because we feel that they are important.

1. **The past and its record:** what do we understand by the term “history”? Is history a record of the past or is it a justification for power structures in society? Is history written by the victors? Is history really just stories about men? Is Western history a triumphant justification of conquest underpinned by racism? Does history repeat itself? Are historical events unique or is it possible to construct a theory or system of history?
2. **Context:** why do historians views change over time? How does the historian’s identity and social context influence the historical work? Can historians escape their context?
3. **Telling stories:** what is the purpose of history? What is history’s social function? Are historians just myth-makers? What form should history take? How well do different forms of history achieve their historical purpose? Should history be narrative or analytical and evaluative in form? How important is story-telling in history? How important is audience?
4. **History as science:** should history be empirical in its methodology? Is history more properly a story of great individuals or an evaluation of the underlying social and economic structures? How should history be constructed? What methods should historians use when they write history? How should historians interact with their sources? How should historians respond to evidence and the lack of evidence in history?
5. **Truth in history:** Is truth in history possible? Can historians be objective about the past? Should historians strive for objectivity, even if it is not possible? Should history have a moral or political purpose?

In contemplating these questions, we have built up a storehouse of rules about how to do this. Much has been written about these rules; we call this historiography. We debate the grounding for these rules, proposing different ideas, procedures and systems for putting together our accounts of the past.

From our own historiographical positions, we articulate answers to our inquiries into the past. From these, we can then ask a further set of questions of ourselves:

- Can we escape our contexts?
- Can we capture the past accurately?
- Can we express an individual truth or interpretation?
- Can we find ourselves in the past?
- Can we exist free of our past and present?
- Can we express our own views?
- Can we impose an individual mark on history?
- Can we discover our heroes in the past?
- Can our heroes help us to be heroes?
- Can we be heroes ourselves?

We have, therefore, a compelling need to tell great stories, things worthy of telling. We would like to think that we can immerse ourselves in our sources to achieve some genuine insights into the past through the evidence provided by our senses, or by exercising our creativity in tracing the thinking of people or perhaps through a combination of the two. We have arrived, therefore, at two great concepts that circumscribe these different ideas about how to write history:

- History is an honest attempt to recapture the past.
- History is the servant of an idea.

Within these concepts, there are two further modes which operate:

Ideology – the desire to create, record and make manifest a truth which makes a permanent and authorized version of the stories of our heroes.

Iconoclasm – the need to tear down an ivory tower where revisionism replaces the authorized, orthodox version with a corrected version, the real truth

And, in the end, we can put forward some of what we can claim as our own thoughts about what we have learned from our study.

Therefore, in this little book, I should like to propose that history arises from six essential and interwoven ideas:

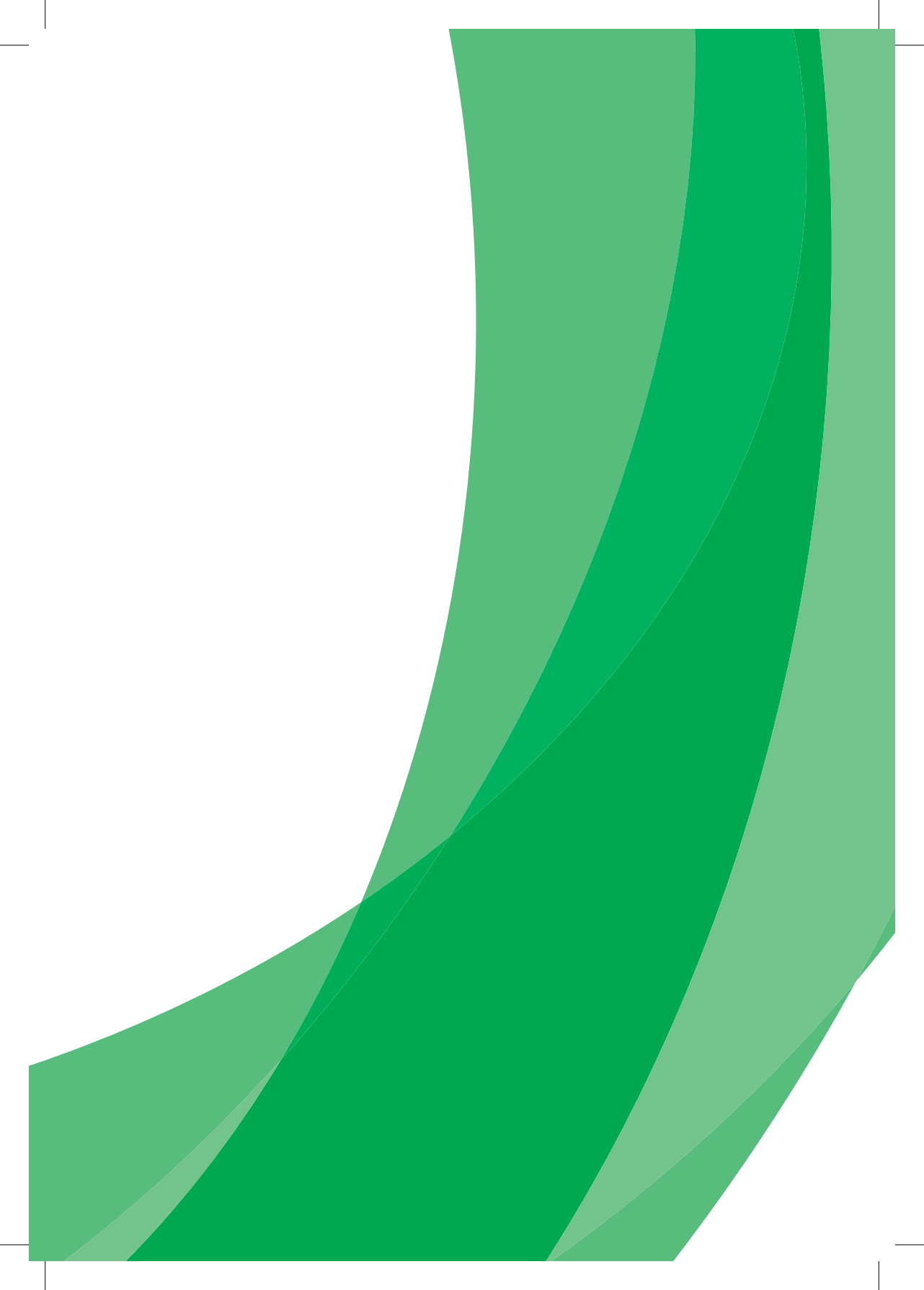
- **Inquiry** – History is the essential and personal imagining of what might have been.
- **Quest** – History is our quest to understand who we might have been, who we are now and who we might become.
- **Relationships** – History is our public memory.
- **Artefacts** – History is how we reconcile our yearning for scientific certainty with our inescapable need to express our own will through our treatment of the surviving relics of the past.
- **Structure** – History is the gift of order.
- **Ambiguity** – History is how we negotiate complexity in making sense of our past.

The overlapping nature of these ideas makes a tidy analysis very difficult. The stories that they tell are not really linear; their processes of intersection can be both complementary and contradictory. We are left with a view of history which seeks to make sense of this narrative with some of the tools of science and logic – and yet history is neither science or logic.

In the same way, personal judgment and imagination have a very important role to play in the way that we think and write about history. At the same time, it is clear that we cannot just make things up. There are some rules about what we do as historians that cannot be ignored, lest we fall into the trap of creating

rather than recording narrative. The dividing line between these two is at times challenging, especially when we are confronted by truths that we would rather not know or have happened and instead seek to impose our preferred myths onto what happened back then.

So, at the end of this phase of my journey into the past, I have discovered that the ideas that govern me now are not so far removed from those which so intrigued me many years ago when I sat on the floor of my father's library, losing myself in the most wonderful book in the world and trying very hard to answer the most important question of all: what was it like then?



I – Quest

History is our quest to understand who we might have been, who we are now and who we might become.

The Greeks in their mythology attributed artistic endeavour to a group of divine, female creatures called Muses. Their role was to inspire humans to create beautiful things to illuminate their lives. While the origins of this myth are not entirely clear and the lineage of these beings is in some dispute, we know that there was a smaller group to which others were added in time until the Muses numbered nine in all.

The word “Muse” comes from the same root as the concept of singing, and so the Muses inspired men through their songs, alluring and intriguing verses that helped people to transcend normal experience to create extraordinary things which adorned more prosaic and practical artefacts. In this way, the Greeks expressed their views that life was meant to be something more than just functional. Art played a critical role in making things work better because it brought beauty, a quality which delighted and enabled one to live a good life.

One of the later additions to the Muses was Clio, the Muse of History. Represented by a scroll, the myth of Clio arose with the invention of the practice of history by the Greeks. Her name means to recount or to make famous. And in that, her name shows that from its very outset, the role of history in society was to bridge that gap between the mundane and the heroic.

For what is history but our best attempt to link the past, present and future, to create enduring fame for ourselves and for others? Inherently, when we write something down, we reveal our judgment that what we write is inherently worth writing about.

Many centuries later, we still write about history, although perhaps not quite in the same way that Herodotus did so. And it is rare that modern works of history would receive the same public recitation that his books did, although perhaps the makers of historical documentary films and other media might beg to differ.

So, what is it that we mean when we use the term “history”? Typically, we might attempt to answer this question by taking a chronological journey through different schools of thought which have sought to answer this question. I prefer a more circuitous route.

One way of answering this question is to study what the most influential scholars have said in answer to this question. A typical starting point is what EH Carr said in the 1960s in his influential *What is History?* He defined history in two ways:

- Those things which happened in the past
- Our attempts to record these events

In doing so, he argued that because we are unable to achieve an objective methodology, that is, because we are unable to remove ourselves and our contexts from our accounts of what happened in the past, we can never be completely accurate in what it is that we do to recapture the events of the past. Thus, while we can labour earnestly as historians, we can never quite escape the need to study the historian just as much as, if not more than, the events of the past, if we are to understand history. In the end, Carr leaves us with the idea that all historical meaning is ultimately created relative to our own ideas, convictions and backgrounds.

The relativist approach to history asks us to scrutinize the author and ourselves:

- Who is the author?
- What is the motive of the author?
- How reliable is the text?
- How do we relate to the text?
- How can we manage our understanding of the author's and our own biases to create a use for the text?

Relativism has had a powerful impact on thinking and perception in the past century. It taps into a strong undercurrent of suspicion of institutions and governments, it empowers the ordinary person to claim sovereignty over meaning and it aligns itself with the demise of religion as the central organizing feature of the quest for knowledge and truth. Thus, in a world where the existence of God is increasingly challenged and where the outcomes of the forces of nationalism and imperialism have tainted the value

of hierarchy, history has been positioned as a tool of the people to make sense of their world for themselves, rather than a tool of an educated elite giving instruction on “the” truth.

The ideas of relativism feed directly into those of the post-modern thinkers who from the late 1960s onwards have argued that the influence of context, combined with the imprecision of language, prevents the derivation of any real, authoritative and corporate meaning in history. We cannot, the argument goes, reach out to anyone effectively because we all bring to the party too much that is different in our construction of language and our interpretations of words and signs. As such, many of the contemporary questions of history have sought to explore more deeply and more critically the problem of authorship:

- For whose benefit was a text produced?
- How does this help us to understand the relationship of the historical text to the power structures which created and authorized it?
- To what extent are we bound to accept the perspective of the author?
- Is there a better way of looking at the past?

This stands in direct contrast to the empirical tradition born in ancient times and later to find its most striking adherents in the empiricists of the Enlightenment, through to Von Ranke and the German school in the nineteenth century, to the British scholars Acton and Bury and beyond. This school of thought cherishes the efforts of historians to dispense with their own emotions and prejudices, relieving themselves of the sin of anachronism to construct meaningful and accurate accounts of the past, informed by a combination of careful scrutiny of the available sources and the exercise of good judgment on analysing the motives of those who constructed the sources.

For this approach to history, the real questions of history are those relating to the search for accuracy, perhaps even definition, in recounting the past:

- What happened?
- When did it happen?

- Who did it?
- How was it done?
- When was it done?
- Why was it done?

The logical conclusion of this approach was to cast history as another one of the social sciences and, therefore, to place its operations within the scientific methodology that sought to use the deductive reasoning implicit in a theoretical model. In other words, we conduct preliminary investigations, propose a model or explanation, test this model with evidence and then report our findings, having first placed them in the context of other literature in the field. History, according to the empirical view, should be recorded free from the “sin of anachronism” by shedding one’s own ideas and predilections. In other words, report it how it was, not how you want it to be seen from your present or future perspective.

By contrast, early Christian scholars saw all of the events of history as directed towards the end of time, when the meaning and value of human events will be fulfilled. They proposed a version of history that saw the reconstruction of past events as a way of describing the voyage of the soul. Human existence was tainted by sin while Heaven was attainable for those who rejected mortal ways and sought a relationship with God. The purpose of life on earth was the preparation for the eternal afterlife and the proper subject-matter of history were those events, such as the lives of the saints and martyrs, which helped people to prepare for this.

History through this Christian worldview was, therefore, both:

- **Ontological** – focused on higher meaning, being, identity and the relationships of different beings, especially the hierarchies created by these
- **Teleological** – a linear, future-directed and goal-driven process in which we can see causation and agency in operation because of a design, structure and purpose to make progress from our present state into a future state

The focus of history in this tradition was to use the past to inform the present and be guided by the future goal. Accuracy was not nearly as important as the moral or educative purpose. The development of independent thought and analysis was eschewed for a reliance on authorized history serving religious dogma.

In recent centuries, some historians who have limited or rejected the presence of God in earthly matters have still maintained a teleological perspective. Western culture is still largely future-directed; liberals, Marxists, empiricists and relativists all have sought to see concepts of progress or evolution or dialectic at work in human experiences and the history that seeks to record them.

In particular, the liberal or Whig view of history enshrined from the early nineteenth century onwards that powerful myth that history justified its own outcomes; that great people could and did influence the course of events because they were able to seize hold of the moment. They were justified in this because they were stronger, better, more powerful, morally or pragmatically entitled to success. Man had been given the earth by God to use and enjoy; those who were better able to do this were shown by history to be great, justified as they were by powerful myths such as conquest, progress and frontier, and later by the seductive power of Social Darwinism, which excused all manner of ills in the name of the Progress that was the real story of history.

On the other hand, Marxists and their antecedents have argued that history does not end with the triumph of the wealthy and privileged. Instead, they have responded to the development of the past by superimposing a narrative of their own: the progress of the people through the reorganization of economic and political power structures, the dialectic of materialism whereby forces came into conflict with each other, changed the nature of society and inevitably brought the workers of the world closer and closer to the desired goal of social justice.

These ideals have informed the thinking of both relativist and postmodernist historians, as well as other twentieth century schools such as the French historians of the Annales movement, who rejected the notion of individual

agency and practised “total history” by seeking to study the shifts of civilizations over long, long periods of time. They also influenced the Social History movement which has taught us to direct our focus on the lives of ordinary people instead of the preoccupation with famous and privileged people that has dominated much of our historical record. The methodology of this movement has been particularly powerful, with its quantitative survey and analysis of data gleaned from primary sources to determine the real trends in society.

By contrast, RG Collingwood in the 1930s and 1940s proposed a philosophical argument that all history is the history of an idea. In saying this, he directed us to see history as the product of a person’s thinking, thinking which was shaped, even dictated, by the circumstances of that person’s life. History, therefore, is more properly a voyage of the mind rather than a neat analysis of the sequence of human actions. History defies clear and simple process because human beings do not think in that way. They hold onto ideas even when they are irrational and the events of society are shaped by these great, powerful and chaotic forces no matter how much order we seek to impose on them. They defy the deductive reasoning of science and do not readily accept the attempts of scholars to fit them into categories retrospectively.

There is a further and even older way of looking at the past. History most probably began in the earliest times as oral story telling – people telling stories to each about what happened in the past. We cannot know for certain why they did this, but we have inferred that they were most likely motivated by the need to create a legacy, a sense of permanence or at least connection from the past to the present and into the future. This legacy could be related to power, economics and authority, as in the list-making of the earlier palace civilizations. Or perhaps an aesthetic and religious quality was added when the old stories were turned into poetry and drama, to be performed for an audience, binding them together with a narrative that gave common identity and a sense of moral purpose.

Eventually, history evolved into a profession. From the time of Herodotus and Thucydides onwards, the earliest historians sought to tell great stories and

to teach those who read their works important lessons about how to be better people. They chose as their topics the lives of great men (rarely women) and what they saw as the vital events that shaped their states – usually the dramatic engagements of warfare that in their eyes determined the rise and fall of empires. They remained unaware of, or perhaps more correctly, uninterested in the slower and less dramatic social and economic forces that modern historians often see as being of far greater consequence.

They adopted a method for sifting through evidence and sources that we can recognise as prototypically historical. They asked questions and relied strongly on their own judgment as to the reliability of what they saw and heard. They adopted narrative structures that drew on the conventions of other literary forms to create tales that make sense to us. They worked out that such tales need a beginning, middle and end, often with a lesson or point to the tale. They identified the three driving analytical concepts of history:

- **Agency** – how things happen and who does them
- **Causation** – why things happen and to what effect
- **Relative merit** – how important things are in determining agency and causation

Frequently, these historians saw the hands of their gods intervening directly in mortal affairs and while they preferred the more plausible accounts of their sources, some were also not averse on occasion to including parallel explanations that were more entertaining, even if they lacked the force of veracity.

The inheritors of this tradition revealed that their forebears were the poets and priests who had established the cultural norm that our stories about ourselves were meant to serve a moral purpose. Good and bad, hero and villain, the gods and men were all part of this blend of ritual, religion, education and entertainment.

In a later generation, as religion and the state became more closely aligned, history became allied to religious dogma and alternative versions were cast

aside in favour of the authorized account which sought to reveal the truth, not just competing accounts of what might be true.

Even those historians who have followed in the footsteps of the other tradition which eschewed the role of the gods in the world were unable to escape the influence of those powerful imperatives that stories bring. Their work, although more rational and often drier in tone still reveals the structures and themes of the myth-makers who preceded them.

Throughout, I believe that the moral purpose of history has remained constant. Regardless of what historians have sought to do, history has served not just to tell us about our past, but how to live in the present and prepare ourselves for the future. We use it to teach ourselves how to be human.

Whether historians seek to retell the same stories or find new ways to tell of the past, they have never lost the capacity to create and sustain the important myths that bind people to each other. What might we call the didactic lives of the saints, the alluring theory of progress, the righteous anger of dialectical materialism, the frontier legend, the revisionist urge to empower the "other", the hagiographic convention of biography, the multitude of orthodox and authorized narratives but different versions of the same driving force to write stories which help human beings become better?

Almost all will claim that they are telling it like it was, employing appropriate methods of research and use of evidence that are, more or less, *sui generis*. In this we see the same objective goal of verisimilitude which strives to receive the imprimatur of acceptance from colleagues that their work is up to the right standard and acceptable to the rigorous demands of society more generally.

This urge to achieve methodological purity exists regardless of whether or not it is accompanied by the dry, reserved and prosaic style which is too often mistaken for sound process. One can be dry without being accurate; at the same time, one can be accurate and exciting.

For the fundamental principal of all good history (however we define this) is that it must not lie. We must be able to see ourselves as who we were, even if this can at times conflict painfully with who we would like to have been.



II – Relationships

History is our public memory.

History is the progeny of a complex relationship between our ancestors and us. This relationship is influenced by our environments, our influences and our imaginations, with all of the attendant frailties and imperfections that these bring. Our past exists because we wish it so; if this were not the case, there would be no way for us to reach out to what was and make this an essential part of what is.

In this way, history is also how we reconcile our private sense of personal and collective identities, which intersect with our public manifestation of how we have reached these points. If this is the case, then we cannot deny the influence of our choices on how we represent our past. If we had no interest in what we have recorded, then why would we bother to record it?

So, then, history allows us to connect our private concept of self with the communal sense of humanity by our conscious and unconscious acts of authorship.

In making these connections, we practise detachment as best we can in an honest attempt to maintain the comfortable discipline of historical method so that we can assure ourselves and our readers that we have “recorded” and not “created”. For our ethos maintains that our words must tell the story of those who actually lived in the past and also of the worlds that they made with accuracy and rigour. It demands that we do our very best to ensure that what we write resembles as closely as possible the way it actually was.

Of course, we cannot actually see what happened unless we were actually there; even if we had been there, our view would have been incomplete, bounded by our perceptions and the availability of evidence on which to draw conclusions. With hindsight, we piece together what we can through scholarship, patience and a healthy but often unacknowledged amount of craft. We fill the gaps with our best guesses as to what was most likely under the circumstances.

The result is a personal and unique image of events. It is not replicable but it is transferable to readers who can then process these ideas and develop their own perspectives. As such, history is not a science, although we would like

our methodologies to be consistent and to receive the affirmation of others as being historically valid.

In pursuing this course, we can view our scholarly enterprise with bleakness or with hope. We can construct any number of abstract rationales for choosing one side over the other, but in reality our choice is shaped most probably by the practicalities of our own temperaments.

How do we view our world? Are we pessimists who see an account of our existence as a series of failures interspersed with events born of deliberate malice? If this is the case, why do we write – to warn of impending disaster? To share one's own sense of the limitations of human endeavour? Or perhaps to indulge in a more incoherent but nonetheless just as powerful sense of orneriness? If we don't like people, then why write of them except to complain? And if we do complain, do we do so out of some need to cleanse ourselves of our fears by divesting them onto others? Are we trying to win over converts to a cult of bitterness?

Iconoclasm has long had its adherents and can be very attractive as we seek to assert a power that as individuals we might not feel when faced with the powerful wave of the group and its culture. The lone scholar railing against what he or she sees as an all-pervading corruption is a tantalizing figure, almost heroic in the determination and perverseness of holding out.

But to what extent is this perspective really valid? The tradition of millenarian disaster, of prophesising destruction, predates our modern debates over signs, signifiers and meaning. Yet what really separates the soothsayers who saw the proximity of the end of the world from their Dark Ages monastic cells or desert caves from those who now argue that our world is inherently without collective or absolute meaning and that we walk the earth as perpetual flaneurs, unable to connect fully with anyone or anything because of the imprecision of language?

What we see, therefore, is that what we write comes inevitably from who we are: if we bear an all-pervading grudge which condemns our world for its shortcomings, our writing reflects this. And the vigour, passion and sometimes

vitriol with which this can be expressed can be very seductive, especially for a younger mind searching for its place in the world and captivated by a post-adolescent sense of alienation.

This could lead us to conclude, with no small measure of chic postmodern bleakness, that what we do is in vain, that we can never escape our biases and shortcomings. We might conclude that all we can really do is to acknowledge that our portrait of the past is so compromised by our context and so focus our attention instead on deconstructing the text to uncover the powerful narratives, myths and motives which led to its creation. We can divert our energy and intellectual endeavour away from what happened and dwell on a perspective that sees history as the tangible triumph of the victory of the powerful over the oppressed or the inevitable distortion of individual and corporate acts of myth-making. In other words, we can end up seeing history as simply the justification of the outcomes of the past, put together by historians who are mere lackeys of the dominant power structure, acting in concert to deceive and manipulate an unwitting public.

It is true that as authors we can shape the way our past is seen through what we choose to include, to emphasise and to leave out altogether. Yet, our historical method ensures that we cannot lie about the past without someone calling us for this misdeed eventually. We are accountable to our readers and, most importantly, our critics, especially those professional historians whose reputations are largely made on the strength of their ability to pick holes in accounts.

So we may only see through the glass darkly, but at least we can see something. And perhaps we do not see things as poorly as that after all. From time to time, we might even see through to the past with a clarity that allows us to place our own experience into a sharp perspective. For that achievement, the historian merits some praise.

Therefore, we might adopt a different point of view. We might see that what we can do is of greater substance and meaning than our fears that our imperfections will lead to the generation of implausible shadows. We might see professional historical collaboration and corroboration less as a conspiracy

to defraud and deflect constructed by the agents of the powerful, and more as the earnest and mostly successful appreciation that we can both individually and collectively capture enough of a sense of the past to answer the questions we have with some authority. As such, the content of our histories does actually matter, whatever we might make of it.

In this sense, we can arrive at a conventional definition of history as both the record of the past and the past itself – process and subject. These are commonly viewed as parallel or complementary understandings of what history is. The reality is that it is probably futile to try to separate the two – the past and how we view it are really one and the same outcome. Process and subject matter exist as inextricable components of the one entity. They are not discrete features capable of arbitrary distinction.

The governing perspectives which influence the concepts and judgments which shape the historical story we present are permanent. We cannot just distill from an account its facts; it comes as an organic whole. Who we are as historians is always present in our work.

So too, the deficit in our understanding of the past is never recoverable, unless we change the ground rules and introduce further evidence. Thus, our evidence also defines what we are able to write about.

Yet, there is no simple mathematical formula that we can use to describe history. It will not be reduced in such a fashion; it resists all attempts to be definitive, no matter how confidently the marketing information on the dust jacket proclaims it to be so. There is always more work to be done, more scholarship to do, more debates to be had.

What emerges, the image that appears through the dark glass, is for all intensive and pragmatic purposes, the past. It inspires us, informs us, disturbs us, provokes us. It helps us to form our identity. It links the individual and the group, the past and the present.

History is, therefore, a delightful and intriguing conversation between who we were and who we are, as much enhanced as it is distorted by our powers to recall and to describe what happened, our ability to discern our own interests,

insecurities and muses, our capacity to add character to the subject matter to build the understanding and add to the nature of our audience.

Therefore, we should also contemplate the influence that the processes of translation and perception that go on in the minds of the readers have on our historical by-product. We can say what we like as authors, but lasting meaning is generated less by what we say and more by what our readers think and feel. What we attempt to impose is important, but only as a starting point in another of those relationships which we are starting to see as the true hallmarks of what history might be.

As with all relationships, they exist just as much because of our strengths as they do because of our weaknesses. In writing history, we assert our will that it should have life because we want it to be so. We feed and nurture the connections we make between past and present, personal and public. We want to bring life to them, to make them real and then to sustain them. We believe in the intrinsic and extrinsic value of the past and the stories we put together to record it.

And the essential ingredient of this is the energy we give to both our processes and our conclusions. In this way history becomes an essential expression of our humanity, with all of the complexities and challenges that this brings. We write to ensure that what we understand to be our essential nature should live on.

History is, therefore, an act of love.

This love expresses itself in many ways. We can delve into something specific, uncovering whatever we can about a subject in detail so that we might perpetuate our knowledge of it, enlightening our own sensibilities and those of others. We can also act more broadly out of a love of history more generally – a fascination for the past which we will explore later. We can feel that we write for the sake of history itself, engaging in a venerable dialogue with the past and enriching the discipline (if we possess the skill to do so).

It is not so great a leap from this point for us to write history to demonstrate our respect for people and their past. For if we do not love people, then why

bother to embark on their journey with them? The task itself demands much of the individual, usually for little in the way of material gain. The hours of patient and often tedious labour must, therefore, bring us less tangible rewards.

We can dress these up with the language of noblesse oblige, convincing ourselves that there is a greater purpose to our work. This brings in all of our personal moralities, be they inspired by the secular or the divine. Whether we strive to serve our God, our state, our community, our own sense of what is good and right, or a *mélange* of all of these, it becomes clear that the connection between the writing of history and an educative purpose is very strong. If we look to the derivation of the word "education" from the Latin concept to "lead out", we can see history as a relationship in which the historian, either with pompous or humble intent, leads the audience out of a lower state of ignorance or illusion into a higher state where things from the past are clearer and make more sense at the very least.

At this point, the mythological function of history becomes more apparent. Historians have always done more than simply uncover and present bald facts; they have always played a critical role in a relationship designed to make meaning of our existence. There may have been some dispute as to how strong a role the historian should play in asserting conclusions and concepts and how much should be left up to the readers to make up their own minds. Is the historian the bard weaving a powerful tale that captures the hearts of an enraptured audience? Or rather, is the historian a silent editor, carefully reducing the author's visibility (but never presence) and skillfully putting the evidence to the fore?

I think the answer to this comes down to the choice of the individual historian and is a matter of personal style. Whether this style is overt or covert, elegant or prosaic, gentle or forceful, the historian's choices are always there in the work, driving the stories forward from the past into the present and thence to the future.

These tensions that arise between this passion for truth and our inherent subjectivity are difficult. At the same time as wanting to write a history of us, we also need to write a history that is by us and for us. These prepositions

matter. Our aspirations and emotions cannot be denied; we cannot escape the impulse to inject our sense of who we are into our account.

It is as if our souls are welded onto our words. And whether we like it or not, this polemical struggle always exists, rather like the epic and ordinary contests between good and evil that we seek to describe in our own work. And the more that we seek to be visibly dispassionate, the more likely it is that we will give away our real feelings through less obvious means. Our choice of topics, evidence, structures, emphasis, style, tone, voice and fundamental purpose make what we do with public memory intensely personal. When we put our names to our work, we express the complementary nature of ourselves: thought and passion, intellect and feeling, reality and fantasy. We cannot cut away one from the other as though it were a cancer.

We can choose to accept this paradox or else we can deceive ourselves. We have already noted that scientifically clinical history is not possible. Nor is it desirable: sterile words cannot speak to our humanity in the same way as tales of adventure and mystery replete with rich characters. In the same way, we should not also be fooled into believing that our myths carry the seal of accuracy. The folly of this second option should be most apparent; we can't surrender the past to a state of what might have been if only ...

Yet at the same time, it is also too easy to despair of the possibility that we can write good history when it is inevitably coloured by our nature and lives. The moderation of our peers and our audiences can and does serve as a powerful force to limit our excesses of temperament and the flaws in our technique. At the same time, it also enables us to be affirmed in what it is that we do. When our readers recognise themselves in what we write, we know that we are on the right track.

This act of welcome also strengthens our understanding of the relationship between history and identity. That we can attempt to influence the nature of our collective sense of identity through our individual contributions as historians is a given, as is the impact of received identities upon the contexts which shape us. There is a pushmepullyou relationship between these two complementary forces that fascinates those who enjoy polarisation and who

would like to know which is dominant, which one will win through. Yet, can we ever place individuals in a vacuum and isolate them from their context and vice-versa? Surely, this is an academic game which bears little relation to how the world operates. We can dissect constituent parts in theory and ascribe importance to some rather than others, but in reality, it is the whole which works. Take away any of them, and the outcome must be different.

We are intrigued by agency. It plays on our sense of "what if": to what extent can individuals change or defy those powerful forces which flow like a river through the events, institutions and processes of humanity? Some would argue that "great men" can change the world, while others believe that events transpire oblivious to the naïve protestations and vainglorious attempts of people to give them direction. And so we are left with conflicting lessons about Caesar on the riverbank and Canute at the shoreline, making destinies happen or impotently allowing the tide of fate to wash over us. What a rich legacy this is for us, as readers, to form our own views!

So, too, unfolds the debate over the influence of individuals over their identities and their cultures. Is human nature eternal? Is anything distinctively new? Or are all things derivative? Can a dialectic of thesis and antithesis really result in a genuine synthesis? Or are we doomed to repeat the past in some laboratory-like loop of cycles of grandeur and decline where only the labels change? And even if can genuinely innovate, are we the agents of change, expressing our will and asserting our identities in the process? Or are there broader changes to demographics taking us for a ride?

Perhaps we are asking the wrong question. Perhaps it is part of our nature to set up conflict when we do not need to do this. Is it actually possible to measure the intangible interconnections of the relationship between the individual and society? What if these things cannot be defined neatly, no matter how much we would wish it so. The scientific urge within us to define, to analyse and to quantify is powerful within us, yet it just does not seem to be appropriate for answering all of our queries.

And what if the questions we ask would be more properly reframed in terms of the narrative rather than the analytical? In other words, it might be better

to describe the chaotic interplay between the individual and society as it seems and as it feels than to impose a false order on this shifting dynamic. There is something within us that likes a happy ending or at least some form of resolution. We would like to think that we are important, that we can make a difference. The next logical step would seem to be to ascribe a value to this agency. But if we cannot see the whole board, if we do not know the whole, complex set of variables that are influencing the game, if we don't know all of the rules and we cannot see all of the players, then how can we know which was more important?

So perhaps we can identify agency and sequence with some degree of confidence, but it would be a brave act to assert the relative merit or importance of a specific historical agent.

Nonetheless, how we love to do it! Intellectual courage is part of who we are, as evidenced by a long tradition of scholarship and debate. It might be more apt to allow the events and people of the past to unfold without the conceptual framework of our own judgment, but we just cannot help ourselves. It might be safer to leave these loose ends untied, for the impossible questions to remain unanswered, for the mysteries to remain elusive, but is it better for us to take this conservative pathway? Not only do we love heroes, we want to be heroic ourselves, putting our judgments out there despite the evidence to the contrary allows us to be Caesar rather than Canute.

Thus the act of writing history is in no way immune from the other processes we use to assert our individuality on the broader human existence. And in many ways, the tensions between the subjective and the objective, the romantic impulse and the scientific instinct, the individual and society all define what history and historiography are. That we attempt to make them certain, limited, conquered, is all part of who we are and thus must be reflected in our own writing. Let us therefore add a fourth unresolvable tension into this mixture: order and chaos. Then, let us take the next natural step by adding a moral dimension to our work: the battle between good and evil.

It all seems terribly complex. When we inevitably attempt to break it down into its constituent parts, we can view complexity as layer upon layer of simple

things. But perhaps it is more like a basket of crabs, all movement and colour and perception, defying order and logic, snapping back at us when we reach out to it.

Another way for us to approach this challenge is to look into the process of identity and to tell a story, to chart the way that our myths and concepts develop. There seems to be three stages to the journey: myth in genesis, myth in operation and myth in review. The myth in genesis can be seen as the primary articulation of the story, an act of will where the author asserts character and form to unveil identity. Whether or not this is original is less important than the belief of the author that it is so. Of course, there are derivations, attributed or not, but in the moment, the historian finds purpose in declaring the identity to be as it seems, as well as a sense of power and control.

The author must then release the myth to the audience for them to make of it what they will. They can accept, reject, appropriate or adapt. At best, it can serve as an inspiration or yardstick by which they can define and measure their own humanity. It can give them the comfort of a grounding and centring in their past, that revelation that not everything is new and uncertain, and that they can make sense of what they see in their present by comparison with what has been observed in former days. This second stage of myth in operation gives the imagined identity its greatest power, a power that obtains its strength in the reception given to it by its audience and the influence that it can have in shaping the lives and understandings of the communities in which it operates.

At the same time, the power of the author diminishes as control over how the myth is put to use is lost. This process of transition from private to public transfers the ownership of history from an individual imagination to a collective conscious and thence to a collective unconscious. In doing so, it can change how we see who we have been and thus who we are. The hoary chestnut that the study of history helps us to avoid replicating the mistakes of the past is a popular target for the historian, as if the naïve belief that simply identifying our folly will prevent us from repeating it.

But people love fairy tales. We like to believe that things will turn out well in the end and there are fantastic beings who can deliver this benevolence. So why not place history itself into this role? And even if we can expose multiple examples of where history fails to fulfill this remedial role, why do we keep believing in its capacity to do so?

The power of myth in operation defies logic because it exists on a level which accords more with our sense of faith and hope, a parallel set of beliefs which continues to influence our lives just as much as the realms of the rational. It is just as important to us and, thus, adds another dimension to our collection of those paradoxical tensions which we identified earlier: knowing and believing.

The third stage of myth in review enables society to revisit and refine its identity. Through this, it is able to apply its filters to what is happening. Review means we can adjust and edit our stories. We can also send them back for regeneration and renewal when appropriate. It is the historian, again, who features prominently in this remoulding of our sense of who we are. The myths themselves change because of yet another of our enduring human needs – the urge to scrutinise and to critique. In this, we see how our instinct to survive compels us to ensure that our comfortable assumptions about who we are undergo sharp and sometimes painful examination. We test ourselves by testing our past, applying to it the weight of seemingly new evidence or different ideas or different environments.

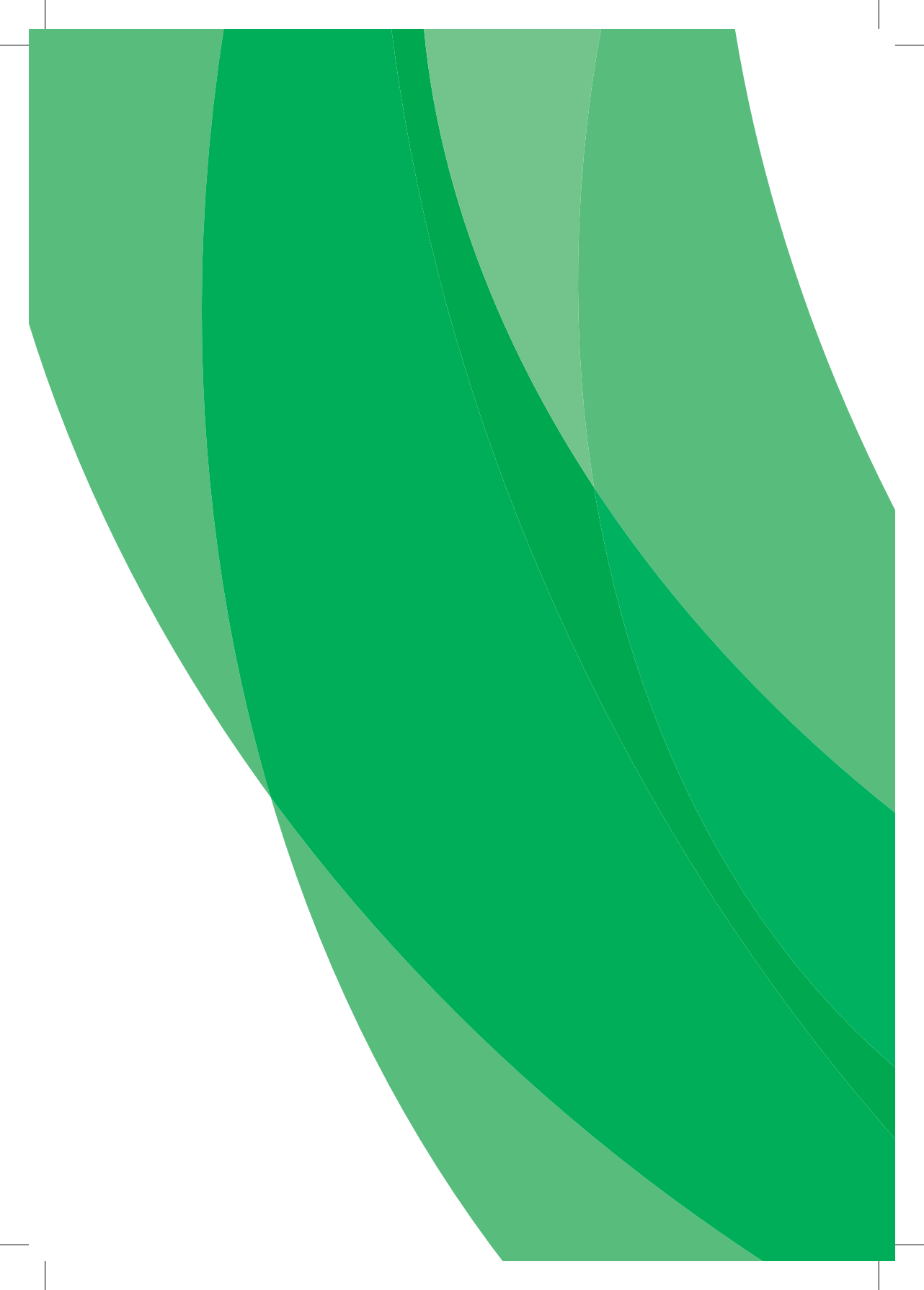
And so as our context changes, so too does our view of history, forcing us to weigh up how much is different and how much is not, how much to conserve and how much to destroy. This is yet another of those bipolarities that influences the way we think about history: continuity and change. As we live through these overlapping cycles of genesis, operation and review, we are informed further by our sense of purpose that, somewhere out there, there is a truth that we can obtain. It is fashionable from time to time for us to be overwhelmed by the imperative of the relative. We confuse our yearning for the absolute with the perception that what is around us and within us is connected to a feeling of permanence. At the same time, we are aware of the transience of our own experiences, which lead us to doubt that any individual

can wholly correlate these to a stable and lasting set of realities that we can call truth.

We want to touch the divine in this world, but we know that we cannot reach this goal. We look to history to give us this foundation and then become painfully aware that the processes of myth-making reflect the impermanence of our own perceptions. What we see today is not necessarily what we will appear to us tomorrow.

And so we come to an uneasy truce. We accept the limitations of our craft and, with a healthy dose of self-interest which we must acknowledge lest we become carried away by the loftiness of our ambitions to "go down in history", we construct a fiction of proximity. We do the best we can to come to terms with the reality that perception is relative, whereas truth is not, and in doing so, history becomes our own creation myth. We can become like Prometheus, perpetually in torture because we can see only the inadequacy of our attempts to close the impossible gaps between truth and perception, the permanent and the transient, continuity and change, absolute and relative, faith and reason, good and evil, order and chaos, the individual and the community, science and art, the objective and the subjective.

We can be cynical and lose ourselves in a pointless dissection of the impediments to our uncertainties. Or else we can embrace our humanity. We can believe that to describe these challenges, to assert answers to our questions and to allow our community to affirm them and grow as a result of them despite their imperfections, is what history is all about.



III – Artefacts

History is how we reconcile our yearning for scientific certainty with our inescapable need to express our own will through our treatment of the surviving relics of the past.

All historians are presented with sources, be they comprehensive or mere scraps, which we, by virtue of an important assumption, convert into evidence. Evidence is a term which resides comfortably in a court-room, a place where weighty matters are determined by parties competing for a verdict while a parallel struggle for the truth precedes an expectation that judgements will be made and (eventually) that justice will be done. Despite the oft-repeated cynicism that justice and the law are not necessarily compatible, litigants and officers of the court continue to seek judgment and rely on the legal process to deliver this for them.

So too do we expect historians to construct a true account of the past. The implicit assumption which is therefore fundamental to the role of the historian is that history will say something useful or important or illuminating because we have used a valid evidentiary process to reach a conclusion of some sort which we then submit to an audience. We might indulge in the sophistry that the sources speak for themselves, that their assembly into a text is a by-product of a natural process, best achieved through a combination of rigorous self-effacement and depersonalization so that the identity of the historian never appears.

Yet to maintain this particular fiction of a scientific history seems a noble fantasy. There is no step in the process which can escape the imprint of the individual who oversees it, no matter how detached the writing style or how much ostensible interpretation is removed by the author.

On the other hand, it would seem also to be an illusion that a history might preserve untouched the commanding presence of the historian once the work has been released into the domain of those who will read and interpret it. It is easy to talk, under these circumstances, about the death of the author. Yet that too would be illogical and inflammatory: in the genesis of history, the historian might be very much the creator and parent of the account, but as we move the text into that secondary phase of operation, the presence and authority of the historian diminishes. Meaning is given substance through the relationship of the consumer with the text itself, something over which the author loses significant control once the act of creation is complete.

How is it then that historians import purpose into their work? And how is this reflected in their own relationship with their sources? The past is what is seen, so what is it that historians see and how do they attempt to say something about what they see?

Let us start by asserting that narrow and ideological perspectives on the role of the historian can leave us with a very restricted view of what history might be. Given the increasingly personal outcome that is emerging from this examination of the different processes and relationships that govern the genesis, operation and review of history, we might naturally conclude that attempts to prescribe the functioning of history in a delimiting fashion should be regarded with caution.

Thus, a source is a source. Inherently, no source is better or worse than another, except in that we import meaning to it by virtue of our investigative purpose.

There is, however, a received wisdom that some sources are more equal than others. According to this view, primary sources have special importance because of their close proximity to the events which they illustrate, describe or comment on. The proper subject matter of history, according to this view, is the consequence of immersion in the primary sources. Yet, the patronising assumptions that underlie this – that there might be technical difficulty in stripping away from a secondary source the supposed taint of interpretation or that the passage of time leads to corruption of the evidential chain – are just as tenuous and mischievous as the contrapuntal assertion that primary sources are inaccessible for the epistemological reasons that there is no absolute meaning, just increasing alienation between object and subject, the individual and society, sign and signifier, meaning and ambiguity and so on.

These views can be seen for what they are: ambitious and passionate ambit claims designed to provoke. They serve to lay down historical rules which do not work in practice. Instead, they are best taken with a pinch of salt as they remind us of the importance of the influence of context on the sources we have.

Thus a primary source may give us a special insight into the events of the time which we are investigating, but not because it is primary. Who is to say that simply being there at the time carries with it a defining authority to describe feelings, actions and artefacts which a later account cannot capture with sincerity and rigour? People in the past made mistakes, both deliberate and unintentional, just as we do today.

In the same way, a secondary source may well demonstrate with the benefit of a hindsight that gives us the ability to perceive with depth and breadth. Yet things written after the fact are not of this accident of chronology inherently wiser.

So perhaps a simpler approach is needed, one which does not focus the historian on arbitrary and unconvincing assumptions about the primary or secondary nature of sources. The historian might, instead, concentrate more successfully on embracing sources of all types, primary and secondary, written and material, unfiltered and embellished by interpretation, and so on.

In doing so, the historian can strip away the misleading strictures imposed by well-meaning historiographical ideologues, and instead work on what the source has to say (its content), how it has come to say this (its context) and the reasons why the historian is interested in these things (its purpose). In these, we see another critical set of relationships which will demand our attention and care. And as with all relationships, attempts to define what does and does not work in theory just do not work.

Take, for example, the problem of bias. Our natural response to the presence of bias in a source is to reveal our aversion to it by shunning the source. *Prima facie*, bias reveals subjectivity, personality and agenda. We see these and either instinctively or more probably acting on the influence of our rational and long-imprinted education, we recoil. We prefer what is uncoloured, apparently clean, even pure.

But what source is ever unbiased? Some will claim, through thorough and scrupulous methodology, that their sources speak “the truth”. Yet in many cases, the dispassionate tone of such sources is too easily mistaken for the genuine attainment of objectivity, and what we call a “truth” in a source is

nothing more than an agreement to confer on a particular opinion a weight and significance that comes from the acceptance by the group that something was so, without the possibility of argument that it might not be so. Therefore, we are very cautious of some biases while at the same time accepting of others. In other words, there is "good" truth and "bad" bias, opinion which we trust and that which we do not.

Yet there is still bias; it is the inescapable motif of our humanity. We think, we feel, we hold opinions and all of these guide our actions. Orthodoxy does not make opinion any less unbiased. Rather, it simply makes it acceptable and desirable. Thus a truth becomes a truth not because it lacks bias, but because we are prepared to agree with the bias and make it a truth. It is an intentional act of collective social will.

Although we can question notions of objective truth, we should be wary of disputing scientific "facts", those observable, demonstrable and reliable phenomena which we dispute at our peril, no matter how much we might wish to dip our feet into the fashionable waters of relativism. A cliff is still a cliff; regardless of whether we are positivist, fundamentalist, poststructuralist or any other sort of "-ist", if we run off it, we shall be lucky to survive. The world of thoughts might allow us to imagine that this outcome might not be so; the stolid and tangible realities of our lives dictate to us that there are facts, nonetheless.

So then, it is perhaps salient to assert that the difference between fact and opinion, between comfortable truth and unsafe bias, is in fact pretty obvious and should be labored less than a discussion of how best to use them. Each can have a value in our quest to say something about the past. It just depends on what we are trying to say and how we are trying to say it.

It used to be thought by some that this authorial presence was a heresy. Study the primary sources enough, it was said, and the truth will emerge from the sources themselves. The key to this mystical transmogrification was to remove oneself from the process and allow the sources to speak for themselves.

What a delightful fiction! I have wonderful pictures in my head as I type of a long-suffering, dutiful and anonymous scholar ensconced in a cavernous library, surrounded by piles of books, patiently reading, making notes into the wee hours, brushing away dust from the volumes as though it was the dirt in which an archaeological relic was buried, all the time waiting for the sources to come alive, for the words to leap off the page and dance around the head of the historian until they form themselves into a coherent truth, all done without the artifice of authorial intent or craft.

There is another related tale, perhaps less romantic and more clinical, which tells of the concept of the hypothesis. Here is how it goes. The historian conducts preliminary research, free from any agenda or motive other than the purity of seeing what there is to be seen. Eventually, there is sufficient work done to form a plausible theory, the hypothesis. This putative and tentative position enables the formation of a central question, and then sub-questions, which form the basis for more focused and directed research, still free of agenda. This work is neatly compartmentalized into sections corresponding to the questions, which are themselves reviewed when the subsequent more detailed research reveals their pertinence or otherwise to the hypothesis, which may itself be modified. Thus, by empirical process, bolstered by a patience similar in nature to our earlier tale of the historian scholar, a verifiable truth appears, validated by the careful research that anoints the historian as a social scientist. This of itself is a curious term which probably reveals much about our innate desire to appear objective than it does, in all probability, attest to a genuine sterility or laboratory-like nature about the process.

Often this method is underpinned by an exhaustive (and exhausting) inclination to quantify evidence. Again, we can see the historian donning a white coat and protective eyewear, carefully weighing, measuring and producing charts of results. This urge to produce statistics make us feel comfortable, reassured that the final thesis, complemented by densely written and humourless prose, complete with tables, appendices, references and footnotes, gives us an authentic and defensible insight into the past.

And so we are left with two fantasies, one of which sees history as the elimination of the author and the consequence of the sources themselves,

while the other sees history as the sober reality delivered up by scientific method. Both share an insistence that the most direct route from the sources to the final historical work makes the outcome more genuine. Historians become heroic because of their perceived capacity to remove all personality and therefore (supposedly) bias from the process. The history stands for itself while the historian's task is to bring its truths to the fore with impeccable method, diligence and self-effacement under the guise of effortlessness. It's all about the sources, or so the stories go.

Clearly, there is more to the historian and, therefore, history than this. History is what historians makes of it, no matter how assiduously they attempt to remove the traces of their presence. They are the ones who select, who organize, who ascribe merit and importance. Sources and their content have no real value unless they are given some by historians. And ultimately it is historians who write, as potent an act of creation as any.

Let us not, therefore, pretend that writing good history demands the removal of the person from the written word. Let us not insist on dry and spiritless expression because we believe it makes our work more authoritative. Let us not commit ourselves to the paradox that the best way to uncover the humanity of our subject matter and our sources is to remove the humanity from its agent.

It is human to see facts in front of our faces. It is human to form and offer opinions. It is human to tell tales of the past. It is human for us to assert our presence and to make our mark. Yet at the same time, people have, in all sorts of disciplines and fields adopted the habits and practices of science, so why should the historian reject these out of hand as well?

The historian's special position is to sit in the middle of all of these complementary and contradictory forces, borrowing from all and yet a slave to none. "Know thyself" and "everything in moderation" were the ancient Delphic creeds; there remains much in them that is still of great use to the historian today.

We record and create. We induce and deduce. We observe the past carefully with one rational eye and one intuitive eye. None of these is the sole architect

of the historian's design. Who is to say which of them is even the most important in sorting out the facts, bringing together the opinions and putting forward something to say on the written page? Ultimately it is the historian's own judgment which is the determinant in proposing these ideas about human experience and human nature. That is the social function and the significance of the historian. Our sources do speak to us – the deep rumblings and quiet whispers from the past that seem to guide us on what we should say. But it is we who articulate them.

This does not mean that we might be so bold as to claim that what we see as truths are the sole truths, the definitive history. For our individual vision is, at best, circumscribed by our contexts and the choices we make in constructing our opus. We cannot see everything and, even if we could, how could we hope to make sense of it all and put it down on the page?

And even if we did achieve this, we could not ignore the reality that we could never locate a truth or the truth solely in the act of genesis. For when we let our work pass into the hands of our readers, we have done our part in the generation of meaning. It matters less what we believe to be a truth and more what our community will make of it. Its members will enter into the debate about the past, moving through those stages of operation and review again and again, with all sorts of historical ideas and truths contributing to this, until individuals make up their own minds about the past, change their minds and form opinions as often as they like.

So although there is an important role for historians, let's not get too carried away with worrying about how much power they might have. They cannot escape the sources or lack thereof which inform them, nor can they control what happens once a work is made public. So what power there is in the uses and abuses of the past if a well-intentioned method informed by science, art and personal choice leaves the historian capable of asserting a putative truth that awaits the verdict of others?

Ultimately, the greatest power of the historian lies in the capacity to help unlock the potential we as an audience have to use history to claim an identity for ourselves. Let us digress for a moment to see how this might work in

relation to a specific source, and how we might apply an historian's method to the process of analyzing it.

Rudyard Kipling's poem "If" holds a distinctive place in English literature. Often criticized as a relic of a flawed time or lampooned for the values it represents and its earnest tone, it has remained, nonetheless, highly regarded by succeeding generations of people who have continued to draw inspiration from its sentiments. Like many examples of a received wisdom from a former orthodoxy, it is a source which is rich in its potential for interpretation, reinterpretation, revision, debate and dissent within historical and cultural analysis.

If

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you
But make allowance for their doubting too,
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master,
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it all on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you;
If all men count with you, but none too much,
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

What questions might we ask of the nature of this source? In doing so, we build our analysis on the assumption that by placing a source within its contextual background we will gain an understanding of it that will bring it closer to our own sensibility.

So, what type of source is "If"? With respect to its primary or secondary nature, we have already discussed how we might approach this question. "If" is a poem, written in the familiar, slightly colloquial form that won Kipling the affection of many, but earned him more than a few sniffs of condescension from others – TS Eliot once said of this poem that it was verse which occasionally broke into poetry. We should not expect of a poem a literal or exact truth; but we do presume an attempt at insight into human nature.

What are the origins of "If"? We know that it was first published in 1909 in a collection of Kipling's short stories and verse called *Rewards and Fairies*. It was the middle of that period of 'Golden Summer' for Britain and its empire known as the Edwardian age. Britannia ruled the waves and the sentiments expressed in this poem were recognised very quickly as those which seemed to encapsulate how Britain wanted to see itself. Yet, at the same time, beneath the self-gratifying fairy-tale comfort of imperial splendor that was the British establishment of 1909 lay many of the agents of its own decline: an arms race in which we, with the advantage of distance, might easily interpolate an inevitable pathway to catastrophic war; domestic agitation for the rights of women; colonial policies of exploitation and racism that were already leading to organized dissent; pressures with respect to the constitutional position of the hereditary aristocracy in the House of Lords; increasing disquiet about the condition of the industrial and agricultural working classes. So lest we be distracted by the durbahs, parades and other visions of imperial cornucopia, we must acknowledge that the Empire was already well entrenched in the social, economic, political and military patterns which we now know led to its decline. How then might we view "If"? Putting aside our own ideologies and evaluating it from a purely pragmatic basis, can we now say that its values portray a lasting model worthy of guiding human nature? Or can we be more critical and suggest that even if its values represent those things which "made the Empire great" (whatever that means), it may also express both the reasons for the successful acquisition of empire as well as the reasons why the

ancient regime were incapable of retaining it in a time of rapid change and the challenges that these caused?

Who is the intended audience of the poem? The British reading public of 1909 in a broad sense? Or was there a narrower intent that Kipling had to appeal to an existing readership? That it was a published work leads us to assume that it was intended as a public source. Yet, what if this was, in fact, the authentic voice of Kipling the father addressing his own son? Or on the other hand, it might be an example (and it would not be the first) of Kipling speaking through the voice of one of his literary characters. How might this affect our thoughts about the targeted audience of the poem?

What is the content of the poem? We need not, for the present purposes, note in detail the poem's assertions – it short it proposes a set of binary behavioural traits and an exhortation that exercising moderation, balance, courage and independent judgment will enable the boy to become a man. Our tool for evaluating this content is that of corroboration and comparison: to what extent is the content of this source validated by what we know from other sources? It is the margins around this measurement which most interest us. That so many believe it to be the epitomé of late British imperial values (or for that matter universal human qualities) is less pertinent, perversely, than where the poem does not align itself neatly or precisely with other sources. To the aspiring academic, keen to make a name, this might be ripe for revisionist appraisal or to condemn its apparent faults or to tear down its sacred cow status. Yet divergence from the norm might also indicate to us something special or possibly even unique about the poem that gives it merit or value above other sources. Is the idiosyncrasy of a source, then, a weakness or a strength? Who is to say?

So far, we can that source analysis is more appropriately considered a craft or art than a science, no matter how hard we try to regulate our processes by categorizing our questions. There is no magic formula which can create a predictable result; indeed, we often end up at the end of our stages of inquisition with yet more questions to ask than we had hitherto answered. And so the further we go into our source, the more indecisive we might become, were it not for the seemingly mandatory need for us to exercise our

professional judgment as to the manner in which the type, origins, audience and content of the source influences the reliability and usefulness of the source for our own specific academic purpose.

In other words, do we trust the source? If so, how much do we trust it? And (most importantly) regardless of how much we trust the source, how best might we use the source in our work? What are its limitations? What are its strengths? How might we approach a reliable but irrelevant source? How do we deal with a compromised but highly pertinent source? These questions are fundamental to the process of source analysis as they define the object of our process.

And the question about the nature of a source which is both the most challenging and at the same time the most critical is that of authorial intent: what is the motive of the person who produced the source? Let us reflect on the implications of this for a moment. If we can grasp intent, then we are most able to comprehend those things that most influenced the design and shape of the outcome. We are sufficiently versed in the historical method specifically and a modern disposition towards understanding the human mind generally to assume a correlation between cause and effect, between intent and actions.

Yet ... There are so many "yets". Does it really help us to know that Kipling wrote in his posthumously published autobiography *Something of Myself* that he had in mind Dr Leander Starr Jameson (of note for his role in the notorious Jameson Raid of 1895 for students of South African history) when he wrote the poem? How influential was this on Kipling's writing in this instance? What other motives might he have had when he did this which he was aware of but did not disclose to us or about which he was unaware but which shaped his work? And what if he chose not to reveal all to us or if his subsequent statement about what he meant was genuine but tainted by the well-intentioned distortion of the retrospective view? Too often we make our past suit our present – the sin of anachronism. And what if Kipling was unintentionally, or even worse, deliberately mendacious in his description of what he meant? What if he was an honest broker but, as difficult as it might seem to some, he was inexperienced in his execution of his intention? Can we even know his intent? As many of the modern theorists would have it, the semiotic implications of the inexactitude

of those who make a mark in communicating precisely what they mean in their own minds to us their audience may well render impotent our urge to know what was in the mind of the author.

There are so many questions, so many doubts that it can be all too easy for us to abandon our search for knowing and instead focus on issues of process or politics. But this would seem to be an act of surrender when we are on the verge of achieving what we set out to do. Somehow, despite the gap between author and reader, we seem to be able to reach a mutual agreement of some sort, for better or worse, as to what is meant.

And it may well be that it is less important to know what Kipling meant and more important to know what we intend when we take in a source such as "If". Is meaning made more in the genesis, operation or review of a source and its attendant myths? In other words, when historians evaluate a source, they ascribe to it a weight, a quality which is most relevant to the purpose which they have in mind for the uses which they intend for it. Meaning is not fixed in a point in time; it is contextual and dependant on what we make of it.

Let us, therefore, look on our source analysis, the most basic and fundamental of our preliminary tasks as historians, as a chance to refute or to justify what it is we wish to say about the past. We have talked of truth and established that "the" truth is an ideal which is, essentially, mortally unattainable. Instead, we are inclined to seek "a" truth, "our" truth.

So, let us then replace the word "truth" with the word "argument" and embrace the concept of history as feeding an ongoing debate about our identities and humanity that need not have a tidy resolution or a definitive version, no matter how much we might want one.

Thus, as historians we study the sources, assess their reliability and value, then we use them to support an argument about the human experience. This argument is then put up against others for the sake of the audience, who may or may not accept the argument in trying to make sense of the stories of people and the past.

The historical discipline is informed by this evidentiary process and is bounded by the limits and the possibilities that the sources give us. It culminates in the genesis of an idea which then operates within a broader social context to act on the public imagination. Historians do what they can to excite this, exercising their art as best they can. Their accounts are shaped and structured according to their historical purposes and they remain tantalized by the allure of the scientific quest which, although unattainable and inappropriate as an absolute, keeps their feet on the ground and separates fact from fiction.

And above all, they seek to say something of worth: to tell a story, make a point, teach a lesson, win a debate or maybe a combination of all of these. Or perhaps also they seek to tell their story for its own sake, inspired as they are by the fruits of their patient research.



IV – Structure

History is a gift of order.

Good history is a product of design, structure and craft. Historians who achieve this do so by the practice of accurate and effective writing processes. What is integral to this is the alignment of intention to execution.

What this means, in practical terms, is the alignment of the essential historical concepts with all of the outcomes throughout the writing process. In other words, historians who understand how structure enhances both their work and our understanding of it are best equipped to record our past.

This means that when we want to tell a story, we prepare and write a descriptive narrative, from the orientation through episodes and complications to a resolution and coda, all with a pervading sense of chronology.

On the other hand, if we wish to address causation or agency, we prepare for and write with an analytical structure that seeks to explain how and why things happen: the introduction gives a thesis which is then explored through a series of contributing causes or agents, perhaps with a penultimate complication and then a conclusion that shows how all of these factors work together to produce a thesis.

If we wish to make a judgment, we construct an evaluation which first establishes a thesis and criteria by which we can test this thesis. We proceed to do this through a series of factors or themes which are introduced, relevant context is set, arguments for and against are proposed, a resolution reached which is justified by reference to the criteria and then linked back to the original thesis.

So our over-riding purpose or motive affects the way that we communicate. Our conventions dictate that we write them differently, that our language and structures have differing features. The whole process of writing and communication is made much easier when the guiding concept or narrative, explanation or evaluation is used to shape and structure the work, from note-taking to drafting to final product. When we mix concepts, we are likely to end up with a product that is misaligned and confused: are we telling a story? Explaining the factors contributing to an outcome? Making and justifying a judgment about factors contributing to an outcome?

So, let us attempt to codify what we mean by these modes of writing in the following table:

Purpose	Narrative	Explanation	Evaluation
	To tell a story	To identify and analyse patterns of historical causation and agency	To make a judgment about the relative character, merit or importance of factors of causation and agency
Conventions	The revelation of a tale of heroism with characters, episodes, expected and unexpected turns of plot, and the revelation of the final resolution at the very end complete with a moral lesson	The proposition and defence of a line of argument about how and why an historical outcome occurred, revealed at the outset and unfolded through the explanation of selected contributory factors	The casting of a judgment, based on pre-established criteria about the moral quality and significance of a causal factor or agent in creating an historical outcome and then unfolded analytically with consideration of competing arguments about the judgment
Structures	Orientation setting the scene for the central character and the problem or quest which much be solved	Introduction and outlining of argument about how or why an historical outcome was reached	Introduction of judgment, outlining of the factors through which the judgment will be explored and establishment of criteria
	Episodes and complications to the story of the central character	Causal factors and agents in sequence with evidence demonstrating or complicating the development of the argument about how and why the outcome occurred:	Causal factors and agents in sequence with evidence for and against the judgment and resolution of the debate about the judgment:
	Resolution revealing the outcome of how the hero prevailed and the moral lesson	Introduction of the factor leading to the outcome Evidence as to how and why the outcome developed Summary and justification of the argument about the outcome	Introduce Set context Arguments for the judgment Arguments against the judgment Resolution through testing against the criteria and justification of why the judgment is correct
	Coda explaining what happened after	Conclusion summarizing factors and reasserting argument about how and why the outcome occurred	Conclusion summarizing and reasserting judgment about the character, merit and significance of contributing factors

Yet the paradox is that the more we describe the differences between the genres, the more we can discern inextricable similarities between them. From the times of the original Greek historians onwards, no writers have been able to achieve a perfect separation between these genres – in explaining why the Greeks defeated the Persians, Herodotus told fabulous tales redolent of his ancestral tales of gods and heroes. Thucydides could not help but write of Athens' decline as though the city and its demos were protagonists in a tragedy.

As can be seen from the table above, the development of these forms of writing is sequential and they very much rely on each other – there is no easy dividing line between a story, an explanation and an evaluation. In reality, all contain elements of each other. All have a power over our imaginations in helping us to reach the past and make it relevant to understanding it and also understanding ourselves.

In other words, alignment with structure is central to an historian's success or otherwise because it aids comprehension, yet structure alone will not assure success nor is it perfectly attainable. It can enable us to assemble what we have in front of us, what we can see, in a logical fashion.

Human thinking, however, is never this disciplined or singular in focus. We might want to be focusing on explanation, but at the same time we will want to know how the story unfolds and to make judgments. So we might formulate distinctions between genres in an abstract sense, but we need to acknowledge that these are illustrative of our intent without being perfect in execution.

And what about what is not there? What about the things we cannot see? No historical record or archive, no matter how assiduously it is kept, can ever store for us all that was. Even if it could, then which of us is capable of taking it all in and then transferring it into a form that might comprehensively reveal what it was? All historians, therefore, are confronted by the problems that gaps, breadth and the necessity for selection impose on us. We are left to make choices that require us to exercise both diligence and creativity in reconstructing and presenting the past. No matter how careful we might be in our methodology, we cannot succeed in our task unless we can envision a story, which becomes our private story and then finally the public story which we pass on to the reader.

Our conscience is our compass, steering us away from the easy choice of deliberate falsification. We are trained to seek out the facts and to adopt those opinions which most judiciously assist us to present our interpretation. We strive as honestly as we can to ensure that the goal of verisimilitude remains paramount.

And yet, throughout the process, we must also be able to accept that we cannot avoid the imperative that historical imagination imposes on us. It pervades everything that we do and enables us to put forward a complete work.

How else could we function when the meagre availability of sources might dictate otherwise? What other choice is accessible to us when we are confronted by a series of post-holes, a few remnants of human materiel and some standing stones, but to recreate in our mind's eye the house that we imagine once stood there? And it is not so big a jump for us to execute when we begin to extrapolate the lifestyle of the residents, and then to draw conclusions about the nature of the civilization in which the people lived.

The popular histories of our own time, television documentaries, are full of such stuff, replete with sophisticated computer graphics that allow us to show all of this well-informed creativity in all of its multi-pixelated glory. So too do we employ actors and extras to play out the parts of historical figures in the imaginative reconstructions that are so well received by viewers.

It is natural for us to want to do this, both to use what we have available to us to "unlock the mysteries" and to make history all the more accessible to an audience who delight in gaining a better understanding of the past.

And this approach is not restricted just to the documentary-makers. It is a skill that has been long-practised by the best history teachers. How many of us remember with fondness the history teacher who made the subject come to life with stories, anecdotes, pictures, colour, life, compassion and a sense of humour? For that matter, how many of us still shudder when we recall the dry, dusty dates that dominated the modus operandi of that other type of practitioner, the stolid purveyor of the syllabus who never ventured beyond the reliable but uninspiring text-book?

So, too, it is with historical writing more generally. Sometimes it seems that there is a conspiracy among technical, academic writers to eliminate the humanity from history by consciously removing all traces of life from their work, as though the fear that colour and tone will reduce the accuracy of the finished product has caused them to forget that history exists because it is read, enjoyed and used by the public. This can and often does extend into a haughty disdain for those popular histories that focus especially on connecting intimately with readers or viewers.

Undergraduates world-wide, buried in stacks of densely-written and turgid prose know what this is all about. They scratch their heads as they try to make sense of many of the texts to which they have been directed, often wondering why such books have been selected to counter their enthusiasm with stony-faced pedantry.

Of course, I am being deliberately provocative. There are many, many fine academics who understand that the length of the bibliography, the fine detail of the footnotes, and the mania for precision are not the sole criteria for the determination of good history. They understand that history which has a lasting impact and which provokes its readers to connect their own search for identity with the history that they are studying must also be well written.

This means that it must engage with the imagination of the reader. It should excite, it should compel us to want to know more, to keep turning the pages or watching the program even when we know that other responsibilities are beckoning to us.

And, thus, a second aspect of the role of creativity in history becomes clear to us; we need to be honest about acknowledging the importance and role of not only our own imaginations, but those of our audiences as well. The relationship between these two exemplifies the relationship between the processes of genesis, operation and review.

This requires us to change the way many have thought about history for well over a century now, perhaps even for a couple of millennia since the time of the Greek philosophers who first articulated that there should be an impervious barrier between science (knowledge and understanding) and literature (feeling and emotion).

History has too often been placed in a box which prohibits the exercise of the creative imagination. The German thinkers of the nineteenth century celebrated the world of *Zivilisation* as practical, necessary, imperative and directly linked to what they thought made the real world work. They drew their methodology and rationale from science and distinguished them from *Kultur* (what they saw as the lovely but essentially frivolous world of the arts).

Under the influence of these schools of thought, we adopted a tone which we felt best created the illusion that what we were doing was serious and scientific and worthy. We dispensed with the elegancies and honed on in on the facts. And, along the way, we lost the interest and enthusiasm of many in our potential audience.

At the same time, we rejected that essential part of ourselves dedicated to the creative soul in favour of a preferred mode of detached analysis. Historians had begun as story-tellers and poets in communal gatherings; this vital function has been devalued to our detriment.

Nonetheless, despite our training, we all find ourselves slipping into moments of purple prose when we write. Why is this?

Perhaps it is so because we cannot really divide and conquer this essential part of our nature. We are meant to be creative and imaginative, no matter how much a prevailing culture attempts to convince us that imagination is unnecessary or wrong, that it is possible and desirable to suppress it and that we should ruthlessly expunge our colourful language.

Thus, we can no longer deny emotion and feeling. History must connect more than just our rational selves; it must also allow the passionate historian to engage with willing and enthusiastic readers.

It may even be that this relationship of subjectivity may be even more important in the historical process than we might have considered. For in the hands of a skillful and sensitive historian, we may even be able to connect ourselves to the very nature of people in the past, or at least what we imagine this might have been, guided and restricted by both the extent evidence and our realization that empathy does not mean that we can feel exactly the same

as people in our past. Our contexts will not allow exact matching of feeling in this instance, but they will take us a long way.

It is therefore necessary for us to embrace the personal as well as the impersonal in history, without surrendering to the urge to replace the evidence with romantic or pragmatic notions of what might look better, sound better or what might suit our own purposes better. We are left serving the competing needs of what can appear to be the contradictory forces of reason and imagination.

Yet this apparent paradox, as we have seen, does not stand up to closer scrutiny. What we should do is accept that our creative and scientific selves are both essential aspects of who we are and what we do. They may well be different but they are also complementary; they work together to do different things.

How might we know which to use and when? The balancing act is, perhaps, not quite as challenging as it seems, so long as we acknowledge the necessity of both and the sometimes discrete sets of skills and applications that both entail.

We have seen earlier how selection is an omnipresent aspect of the historian's craft. It involves bridging the gap between, on the one hand, the raw data that indicates a need for a solution and, on the other hand, the processed outcome that shows what the solution might actually be by imagining and realising the "what if". This involves not only the development of correct solutions, but prior to this final outcome comes the positing of other alternatives, some of which might be highly credible but lacking just a little in fit, while others might be very highly fanciful or just plain silly! This process of testing, of trial and error, is an essential part of empiricism.

Thus we can see how a speculative disposition is an essential component of analytical procedure. This is how the relationship between the scientific-rational and the creative-imaginative works. They do not contradict each other, so long as we learn to use each of them properly. It is wisdom which gives us the capacity to do this, to take a creative leap into the past.

So imagination is an essential historical tool for connecting with the audience and also the capacity for historical selection used to select the correct evidence, fill in the gaps in evidence and to form narrative structure. Let us consider, therefore, some of the other competencies that are required of historians to enable the proper exercise of creative choice in their work.

It is essential for imagination to be used in the construction of prose. Wit, humour, tone and colour are all necessary if we are to arouse compassion in our audience; the social function and rationale of creativity is, therefore, to become enabler of empathy. It allows us to connect to the inner worlds of people, to emotions, to their souls. In capturing passion, we give life to the ethereal spirit that resides within us. In capturing life, we create essential connections to our readers.

Thus, if history is in no small measure what we imagine it to be, we are reaching out to the past, present and future of our readers, mapping the unpredictability of human nature.

Is it right to be this imaginative? Or is it better to ask whether or not it is possible for us not to do this, despite our anxieties about the chimera of scientific objectivity? Therefore, is it desirable not to be passionate and creative? Does it make us less human if we are not?

This why creativity matters, but only if we can commit ourselves to the dual responsibility that in thinking creatively, we must also acknowledge and declare our biases, and also constrain ourselves with the evidence. We are able to flirt with the speculative "what if" but at the same time we must affirm the definite "what has been" without giving in to the temptation to give events a different ending.

We must equip ourselves with imagination, the disposition to use it and also the moderating eye of critical scrutiny. Without this dual consciousness, we run the risk of allowing our myth-making to consume our method or, even worse, to become our sole purpose.

So history without passion and engagement lacks humanity, but history which runs away with its passion, which substitutes wholly the search for meaning in place of the search for truths, or which confuses the two, is

dangerous. It might allow the myth-maker to falsify or to manipulate the evidence that we have about what actually happened or, even worse, “prove” a preconceived or predetermined thesis. And so imagination should not lead to the politicization of history. History and the past cannot change just because we fancy it or will it to be so.

This is difficult for us – the natural instinct of the historian is to shy away from creativity because of this and to attempt to strip away the distorting tendencies of our own contexts as writers. Yet imagination also gives us the inspiration, satisfaction, and comfort that come from the generation of meaning; it brings us joy.

Let us imagine for a moment that we were able to construct a perfectly objective history, one which enabled us to lose all traces of our own context. What we would be left with would be a mirror image of another context, one that ennobles rational thought, eliminating emotion as though it were severable and unnecessary, a disposable element of humanity.

This of itself would be a creative act, a by-product of an imaginative act of speculation: what if we could remove intuition and hope and creativity from our intellectual processes?

We cannot do this. Imagination is an inevitable consequence of the historian’s own life, an inescapable influence which is directly related to what we bring to the process. We all create plot, characters, villains and heroes. We can choose and select the pathways so that they react against aspects of our own pasts or that they might affirm them.

In this way, who we are and what we value act as the determinants for our choices as historians. This is never clearer than when we confront the challenges of our own imaginings. It is also apparent when we make those personal choices, either implicit or explicit, about our craft when we seek to uncover what happened in the past.

Look at what drives us as historians. Every historian is possessed of a fascination for old things. Great historians are able to convey this love of the past and infect others with their enthusiasm. They respect and accept

impermanence and transience in human affairs, knowing that like Ozymandias, all shall pass.

At the same time, they are imbued with a deep conviction that there is something in our past which merits protection and conservation. This especially touches us in times of great flux; we look to our past to give us traditions and the security of continuity.

How do we make these choices as to what has intrinsic or extrinsic value? How do we exercise choice as to what we present and, therefore, preserve?

We might like to reference our decision to the norms of the group, but all of us know that we do this on occasion only.

We all have times where we go our own way. In this fashion, the choices we make as historians might coincide with those of the group, but the answer as to what we choose to do must be personal.

In the same way that we make choices about the subject matter, we must also select the appropriate voice. Are we going to be academic or popular in our appeal? Are we seeking to be pragmatic or to write history for its own sake? What structures will we use in our work to answer our fundamental questions, acknowledging (as we must) that there is an intimate relationship between structure and argument in history.

And what of our own legacy? Are we hoping to write history or to make history? Do we want our readers to study history or to become historians themselves? This is a crucial distinction which is centred on whether we rely solely on the power of narrative and content to inform or we are also enable the audience to develop the skills to enter into their own historical inquiry.

What informs these choices can be intuitive or informed by education and process. But ultimately the decisions of historians are personal; they must choose their battlegrounds and defend them.



Conclusion – Ambiguity

History is how we negotiate complexity in making sense of our past.

For many years now, I have taught students that the function of a conclusion is to summarise the essentials of one's argument and to raise any issues that complicate the argument. In other words, tell them what you have decided and then explain what it is that clouds the certainty of your judgments.

And do it quickly!

Please consider, therefore, some tentative conclusions about some of the fundamental questions that people keep asking about history.

History began with story-telling and this narrative urge remains with us today, along with the implicit assumption that the stories that are told are worth telling.

History tells stories of our quest for heroes. Thus, History has a moral, political, educative and even didactic purpose.

History is also the servant of the past itself, seeking to inform us about what really happened.

The events of the past and our records of them cannot be untangled. Who we have been and who we want to be in the future are always connected to who we are now, making context inescapable.

What does it mean to think historically? It starts with asking questions.

Questions historians ask about the past include:

- **Causation** – why did things happen? To what effect?
- **Agency** – how did things happen? Who did them?
- **Evaluation:** – how important were these causes and agents in creating the effect?

Questions historians ask about the records of the past include:

- **Purpose** – why is the author writing and for what audience?
- **Investigation** – what are the best sources of evidence for ideas? How

much can these sources be trusted? How reliable are they for the use to which they are put?

- **Argument** – what do I believe about the past? What do I want to say? Is it worth saying?

In this, there is a distinct difference between “doing history” – being the recipient of and replicating the knowledge, perspectives and ideas previously generated by others – and being an historian.

Historians are those who develop knowledge of the past, who think historically about this knowledge, formulate perspectives about what they know and then articulate historical ideas from this perspective.

In my journey through history, I have seen the following truths present themselves to me:

- **Inquiry** – History is the essential and personal imagining of what might have been.
- **Quest** – History is our quest to understand who we might have been, who we are now and who we might become.
- **Relationships** – History is our public memory.
- **Artefacts** – History is how we reconcile our yearning for scientific certainty with our inescapable need to express our own will through our treatment of the surviving relics of the past.
- **Structure** – History is the gift of order.
- **Ambiguity** – History is how we negotiate complexity in making sense of our past.

There is a seventh proposition too:

- **Craft** – History is an act of love.

What historians do in poring over the evidence and giving to us the refined by-product of many hours of studying and writing is no mere thing. Like artisans, they use a combination of skill, knowledge, professional and

aesthetic judgment to render a work that reflects their vision of the world as it was, as honestly and accurately as they can.

In this way, historians celebrate and affirm who we are, usually for little if no material reward. In the end, their labour represents something different and altogether better than financial gain, perhaps even something noble: that the purposes of thinking historically, being an historian and, ultimately history itself are fundamentally connected to the search for truth about our humanity.

And so this is what I believe that history and being an historian is about.

Yet you do not have to agree with me. For the final “rule” of history is that all of what we say about the past is debatable. Ambiguity cannot be eradicated from our accounts of the past. There is always room for someone else to come along and see something different or new, or at least to see the same thing and express it differently.

This is why I see History as a discipline but not a science – the results of our enquiries, no matter how strong our methodology, are never replicable. There is no formula which can be applied again and again to reach the same outcome.

As individual historians, we evolve over time. Things we seemed critical to us in the past seem less potent now. New evidence arises. Our interests change. And so what we write is not the same now as it was.

This does not make use lesser historians. Consistency is not necessary, although it does help a reader to position an author and make sense of what has been argued.

Historians, instead, are mutable, changing for both personal and contextual reasons. Perhaps the most important of these factors comes with the nature of historical debate itself as a significant and enduring forum for the exchange of ideas

This is the last matter which we must consider – the role and nature of debate in history. In imagining what the past must have been, the historian

says "I think" and in doing so presents an idea that invites and even demands a response from an audience. It must be processed and evaluated, its strengths affirmed, weaknesses detected and imprecisions clarified.

A mark of great history is its capacity to manage ambiguity. It does not tell us what to think. It teaches us what might have been and allows us to determine what purpose these lessons might serve. Great historians invite us to engage in a conversation, negotiating the past through a relationship of mind and values. They say something with vigour and passion, yet leave us room to debate and argue. When agreement is reached, it occurs through a series of voluntary acts on the part of the reader which culminate in decisions about the past.

Poor History leaves no such room. It does not respect the intelligence of the reader, instead imposing one perspective, one view with no room for growth or difference. The arrogance of a "definitive" history positions us as a mute audience listening to the shrill declamations of an orator who is either blithely unaware of the fallibility of any single perspective or assumes a divine capacity to transcend this. Either way, the hollow vanity of this stance reduces what might have been history to the status of propaganda, stripped of its depth and character in favour of a polemic.

Thus, debate and argument are essential. In many ways, they define the operation of history: an unending debate about who we are and what we mean.

Historians love a stoush. We love to weigh up the evidence, scrutinize the competition, make judgments, choose a side and defend it to the hilt, while at the same time tearing down their competitors, uncovering lost evidence, splitting hairs, exaggerating weaknesses and passionately defending what we believe in the race to expose the past in the eye of a reading public.

And so, the past is a contest. Armed with what we have at our disposal, our evidence, our skills and most importantly our resolve, we unroll Clio's scroll, and we begin to write.

About the Author

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Phil has a distinguished track record in effective principle-based leadership, pastoral care and student leadership, school reform and renewal, curriculum and policy development, and community relations. He has written and edited over fifteen books.

Phil was a member of the writing team that produced the History Extension syllabus in New South Wales and has been teaching this course since its inception.

He was awarded a PhD in Australian History from University of NSW, Bachelor of Laws and Bachelor of Arts from University of Sydney and was commissioned as an Officer in the Australian Army Reserve in 1990.

Phil is a proud father of three children and strives to live by his core values of loyalty, service and integrity.



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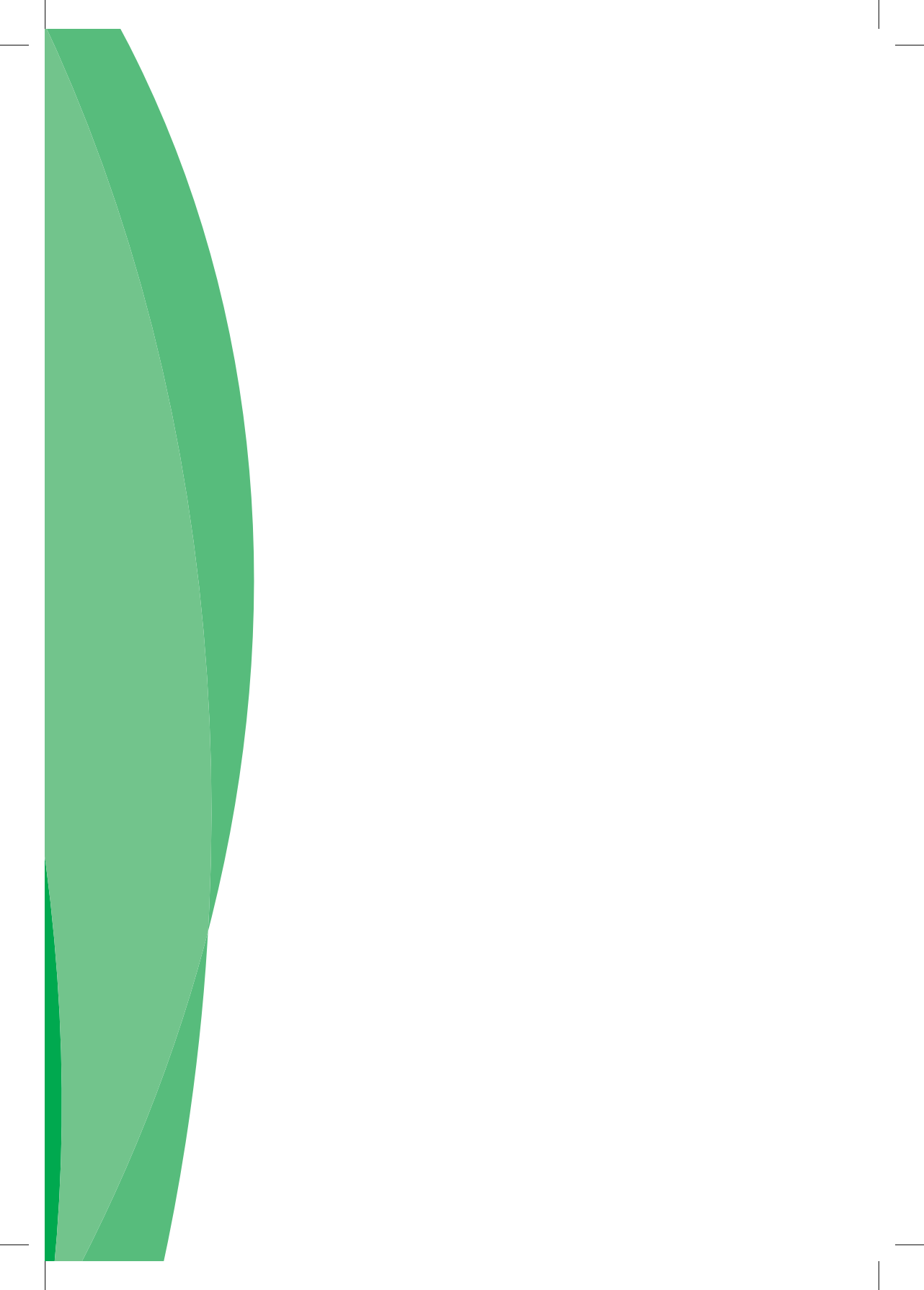
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