

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ROLE OF HISTORY

One of the classic subjects at Basic and Secondary school is History. It is conventionally regarded as providing students with objective fact, firstly about the history of the home countries of students and then later moving to outside students' countries to the continent to which the country belongs and then to an overview of world history. Even at elementary school there will always be some early knowledge of outstanding features of world history, such as the date of the two world wars in the twentieth century and outstanding historical figures such as Catherine the Great or Abraham Lincoln.

Almost always the presentation of this subject is in terms of objective fact. Some analysis of causes and consequences is engaged in at secondary level, but unless students go on to university to study these subjects in depth the views of the objectivity of history of the vast majority of the population in advanced industrial societies are formed before the age of nineteen and are unlikely to be changed during the rest of its lifetime. This can have profound social and political consequences when, for example, versions of history are taught which are at variance with contemporary research. The writer of this textbook was taught an imperial version of British history where the Commonwealth was somehow a successor version to the British Empire with the United Kingdom as first among equals, a version of reality which would have provoked scornful disagreement from any citizen of a non-British Commonwealth country. The British Empire was invariably presented as a largely benign historical reality with negative events either due to British incompetence or the evil and backwardness of the colonized. One example stands out from my basic schooling, the incident known as the Black Hole of Calcutta in 1756 at the beginning of the Seven Years War. Even though the exaggerated account was debunked in 1915, in the 1950s it was still taught as an instance of tyrannical conduct by one of the local Indian rulers and therefore typical of all of them with the original exaggerations in place as fact to be taught in British schools.

Even when the present author studied history as an A level subject for entry to university there was still an emphasis on British genius in the agricultural and industrial revolutions and in nineteenth century political, economic and social reform. The connections, adaptations and comparison with other European countries were ignored in the school textbooks. History in British schools was an ethnocentric subject. The existence of national syllabuses and the absence of electronic information meant that there was reliance on textbooks from which national independent examinations could be built. While this caused few problems with physical sciences, with social sciences and humanities it meant that information was always out of date. In the case of history there was an issue with regard to the ideological basis of the history taught. After 1956 an imperial history was clearly teaching a delusional implication of Britain's contemporary international importance. However, there were other ideological implications which have always had political implications in terms of the politicians' views on which history is taught in schools. This is also true for the United States where long-standing political doctrines have played an important part in the way that history is taught in basic and secondary education. Consequent on all of this is the production of folk myths about the history within Britain and the USA (and indeed in any nation state for that matter.) For example, the "British character" is often believed to be the result of the climate with the British regarded as pragmatic empiricists because they can never predict a day's weather with much certainty. Shedding light on myths such as this is an important element in Cultural Studies.

THE HISTORY OF HISTORY

History has been written in some form since classical times with **Herodotus** (484–425 BCE), “the father of history” although **Thucydides** (460-395 BCE) with his History of the Peloponnesian War was the first to write an historical narrative which was the result of the choices of human beings rather than divine interventions. Roman historians continued the tradition of narrative histories, but it was the great Arab scholar, **Ibn Khaldun** (1332–1406), who put history on a historiographical basis with a scientific method which was unsurpassed until modern times.

A number of schools of thought on history can be discerned in the work of historians through time. The earliest theory underlying history can be described as cyclical that is history repeats itself over time and that there is no real progress. Ancient histories in China and in pre-Columbian American civilizations believed in cycles of mythical history. Both Herodotus and Thucydides suggested that history was cyclical. In the Middle Ages Petrarch and Machiavelli recovered the idea. The Enlightenment philosopher, **Giambattista Vico** (1668-1744), wrote the *Scienza Nuova* which challenged the Cartesian deductive method and in doing so proposed a universal history made up of distinct stages through which all nations pass. In time the barbaric elements in a society undermine it so that it collapses and begins again informed by what happened in the previous cycle. Vico combined a belief in human progress with a cyclical (strictly speaking a helical) theory of history. Vico’s work has had influence on a number of the humanist disciplines, including Cultural Studies. His central tenet in criticizing Descartes was that observation would not lead to understanding how human institutions and actions came into being. A philosopher had to understand how matters stood at the time of an historical event and the circumstance and decisions that led to it. His philosophy was an early example of historicist thinking. In modern times **Oswald Spengler** (1880-1936) in his work, *Decline of the West*, predicted the collapse of western civilization. **Arnold J Toynbee** (1889-1975) saw the development of civilizations as the response to a challenge either physical or social. Civilizations would then decline due to a loss of creativity and the rise of nationalism, militarism or tyranny by a despotic minority. It is said that Toynbee believed societies always die from suicide or murder rather than from natural causes, and nearly always from suicide.

The most common view of history is that it is **linear**, that one event succeeds another. Within this obvious schema there are a number of approaches which try to link events to each other with underlying causes. In the history of Europe and the America the earliest view of history was driven by an eschatological belief in the Second Coming of Christ, a Christian narrative taken over from the Jewish belief in a Messiah. History was seen as a drama culminating in the Last Judgment. Everything in history happened as a result of a divine plan which could not be comprehended by human beings. Ultimately mankind is redeemed from sin and paradise is regained. Islam, too, regards history as the will of God leading to the triumph of the faithful. All these views of history have been used to justify the causes of human suffering and actions which often contradict the more benevolent teachings of a particular religion. They are fundamentally determinist although all subscribe to a notion of individual free will. This leaves us with unresolvable paradoxes in philosophy and ethics.

Secular views of history, such as those of Voltaire and Karl Marx have also regarded history as generally progressive leading to an ultimate good. The prevailing approach in British history from the nineteenth century was the liberal progressive “**Whig view of history**.” This treated British history in terms of a linear progress from barbarism and fragmentary tribal kingdoms through the uniting benefits of a strong monarchy whose power was gradually ceded to parliament and thence to a fully democratically elected House of Commons which had total power. This oversimplified view underlay almost all secondary school teaching of history until the late twentieth century.

Socialists and Marxists also have a progressive view of history. Social democratic views of history see a gradual liberation of all classes of society with an increased consciousness by the members of a society of the social nature of mankind and thus an increasing desire for the good of all. British socialists were partly motivated by Christian socialism which regarded politics as extension of the teachings of Christ. Marxists regard socialism as an inevitable outcome of a combination of material progress in technology and a corresponding need for a greater proportion of humanity to control production. History is regarded as the extension of the control of the means of production to the mass of humanity often through revolution. Human motives play little part in this march to socialism and Marxism shares something of the eschatological motivation of religion.

As history developed from the eighteenth century into a separate, highly-structured discipline it was subject to the effect of the rise of the nation state. This had two effects, the first resulting in the isolation of a country's history from a broader international context and a tendency to invest individuals with an excessive importance in their country's history. The first effect privileges a country's history in contrast with its neighbours and, for example, was endemic in the teaching of history at secondary school level in Great Britain and the USA. The consequences of this could be that secondary school students become chauvinistic, possibly racist and limited in their ability to see historical events in an international context. A good example of this is the way British Constitutional History was taught to the writer in his first year at university. The ending of the Stuart dynasty was related only to changes in the relationships between Crown, parliament and the Church of England and not to the anxiety created by the success of the Counter-Reformation in much of Central Europe.

The second effect led to the **Great Man Theory of History** where history is made by men (almost always men) through the power of their character or their intellect. To a certain extent this was a long-standing element in classical, its successor medieval, renaissance and enlightenment cultures and in monarchical and imperial forms of government. The pharaohs of Egypt were regarded as divine. Alexander the Great aspired to be a god and in the Roman Empire even the most undistinguished emperors became divine with the title of Caesar, the name of one of the last and greatest soldier dictators of the Roman Republic. His name lives on the titles of German and Russian emperors, respectively Kaiser and Tsar. In the modern era Napoleon Bonaparte's military and political career had lasting consequences of nationalism, the Code Napoléon, changes in currency and the metric system for example. The Romantic era made his career a cult and provided a precedent for the careers of Lenin, Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler, not to mention dozens of dictators in the emergent states of the late twentieth century.

Britain and the United States claim to have avoided this leader cult, but one only has to look at the reverence in which Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln are held in their respective countries, regardless of the actual decisions they made and the contexts in which they made them. Outside politics and military careers the Great Man Theory of History has led to the almost deification of artistic and scientific figures such as William Shakespeare and Isaac Newton so that their work and discoveries are regarded as sui generis without reference to their artistic and scientific colleagues and literature and science at the time when they lived.

The Great Man Theory of History runs counter to the reality of human beings as social, language animals. Certainly without Shakespeare his plays would not exist and without Newton the advances in physics and mathematics might have come later although advocates of the scientific work of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Richard Hooke might have something to say about that. What is needed is an understanding how an existing culture enabled a great man to emerge and then an understanding of his or her myth arose and was sustained.

The **Everyman theory of history** opposes the Great Man Theory of History and holds that historical events and change are the results of the cumulative activities of many people. This underpins much of social history and lies behind the great twentieth French “Annales” school of historians which has dominated the discipline in France until the present day. These historians emphasize social rather than political and diplomatic themes and are hostile to Marxist historians who regard history as one of class struggle. Their methods are very useful in examining how contemporary sub-cultures developed.

Another theory which can either oppose or support the Great Man theory of History is the notion of history being motivated by **great ideas**. The German philosopher, Georg Hegel (1770-1831), proposed a dialectic whereby an idea (thesis) is opposed and challenged (antithesis) resulting in a synthesis which becomes a new thesis to be challenged again. History is thus moved by the development of human consciousness. In Hegel’s view sometimes individuals, such as Napoleon, personify an idea. Hegel’s ideas were developed and eventually Karl Marx used the Hegelian dialectic to claim that economic shifts in the control of the means of production resulted in historical change. Marx was a determinist and believed that history was moving inevitably towards Communism, a position that became untenable with the Stalinist and Maoist regimes in the USSR and Republic of China in the twentieth century. Liberal determinists such as Francis Fukuyama (1952 -), whose book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, claimed that western liberal democracy had won the battle of the ideologies and now reigned supreme.

Other approaches to history include the **Geographic-Geopolitical** and ecological and feminist viewpoints. Feminists rightly charge that the role and visibility of women in history from all parts of the earth have been underplayed and overlooked. Certainly when women appear in conventional history it is almost in terms of their effect on men, for example Cleopatra on Marcus Antonius, Joan of Arc on Charles VII of France.

Post-modernism has called into question the validity of any conventional history building on a sentence of Friedrich Nietzsche, “There are no facts, only interpretations.” Deconstruction goes further in trying to demolish any claim to the certainty of historical truth. One can reasonably claim that any one historical account is likely to be partial, but this partiality can be balanced by a different historical method and interpretation especially when historical documents are examined and form the basis of an historical narrative. A current post-modernist orthodoxy is that there is no single truth, but there are truths. This seems a reasonable attitude to take into the study of history.

BRITISH HISTORY

British recorded history begins with Julius Caesar’s account of his two military raids in 55 and 54 BC and the invasion and inclusion of Britain in their empire by the Romans a century later is recorded briefly by Roman historians the chief of whom was Tacitus. It wasn’t until the Anglo-Saxons had settled in Britain and established the early English kingdoms that the first British historian emerged, a scholar of genius, the **Venerable Bede** (672-735). Bede was a polymath and his historical work, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (The Ecclesiastical History of the English People), earned him the title the Father of English History.

Contemporary British historians praise the work as a brilliant success in piecing together the fragmentary written evidence and tradition and verbal accounts available to Bede. The history is in five books the first of which sketches the history of Britain from the raids by Julius Caesar and the development of Christianity in Britain including the mission by Augustine of Canterbury which brought Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons in Kent in 597. The remaining four books trace the spread of Christianity and the conflict with the Celtic church culminating in the Synod of Whitby in 664 which is regarded as a turning point in English history.

Bede's intention was to show the growth and unity of the church in Britain. Bede lived in Northumbria and there is a local bias towards that kingdom and a dislike of the kingdom of Mercia whose power was growing at the time at the expense of Northumbria's. Bede's focus on church history led to an omission of the secular history of English and British rulers except where they might point a moral or illustrate a point. Bede had a clear vision of the purpose of history which is fundamentally different from modern historians.

For if history records good things of good men, the thoughtful hearer is encouraged to imitate what is good; or if it records evil of wicked men, the good, religious reader or listener is encouraged to avoid all that is sinful and perverse, and to follow what he knows to be good and pleasing to God.

Nevertheless, despite the inclusion of miracles and a certain amount of bias towards the Celtic church it is still regarded as a model of clear style and the registration of the facts available to him.

British history continued to be written in medieval times although there was often a clear debt to Bede for accounts of early British history. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries were a golden age for medieval history or chronicles with the educated classes anxious to record where the English came from and establish accounts which legitimized the ruling Normans. There was an absence of histories of the period after Bede's death until the tenth century, but there were networks of verbal accounts and clerics who travelled often collected and disseminated these accounts in a form of intellectual gossip. History was never one of the classical disciplines taught in the monasteries, but there was an audience for history and often it was made entertaining by including legend as well as fact. This period also saw the beginnings of local history. For example, the Winchcombe Annals, written by an anonymous monk, had one paragraph for each year with one sentence for each event recorded. Such a method of writing history often meant that the trivial incident was given as much attention as an important one.

The **legitimizing function of history** led to attempts to establish genealogies for England's rulers. **Geoffrey of Monmouth** (1100-1155) wrote one of the most popular histories of the Middle Ages, *Historia Regum Britanniae* (The History of the Kings of Britain) which was widely disseminated in England, Wales and France. It purports to trace the history of Britain from settlement by Brutus, a descendant of the Trojan hero and mythical ancestor of the Romans, Aeneas, to the death of a Welsh king Cadwallader in the seventh century. Despite his claim that his source was a book given to him by Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, it is accepted that much of the history is the result of a combination of myths, classical culture and Geoffrey's own imagination. His inventions did not go unchallenged with another medieval historian, William of Newburgh (1136-1198) writing "only a person ignorant of ancient history would have any doubt about how shamelessly and impudently he lies in almost everything."

Despite this and other criticisms the work had an immense cultural impact with his legendary British kings becoming the originals of Shakespeare's *Lear* and *Cymbeline* and the invention of the enduring legend of King Arthur, who still provides impetus for historical investigation, archaeology, fiction, poetry and opera. The political impact of King Arthur was that the rulers of England were able to base claims over Wales and England in ancient history rather than the Norman war of conquest in 1066. These claims continued to exist as part of the mythic claim to legitimacy by the British Crown into the seventeenth and was the subject of an opera by Henry Purcell with the libretto by John Dryden in 1691.

The practice of history as opposed to the development of history as an academic discipline gathered pace in the 16th century in two distinct areas, national history and local history. **William Camden** (1551-1623) combined both topography and historical survey in his work

on Great Britain and Ireland. He produced the first work of chorography, which might better be described as history in terms of a regional space in contrast to chronological narrative. It combines both history and geography and its descendant is the historical map. Camden's *Britannia* (1586) was the most influential of these leading to chorographia in Britain being associated with the study of antiquities and establishing an enduring local history tradition in Britain with an increasing number of antiquarians investigating not only local man-made remains, such as prehistoric monuments, but collecting and preserving manuscripts, local legends and verbal traditions. Camden's work was aided by that of John Leland (1503-1552), the father of English local history, who established the county as a base unit for historical research. Like Camden he also investigated national history tracing the descent of the Tudors from the legendary Brutus of Troy and the inevitable King Arthur. History still had a propaganda value for the ruling powers although John Twyne (1505-1581) challenged the veracity of Geoffrey of Monmouth.

The range and sophistication of history accelerated in the seventeenth century. **Sir Robert Cotton** (1570-1631) put together the largest collection of private manuscripts. The Cottonian library has been preserved and items are still referred under his original classification where he organized his collection in book presses with a classical bust on top. For example, a manuscript of Beowulf is classified as Cotton Vitellius A xv. Cotton made his home a meeting place for antiquarians and eminent scholars and such was the independence of research that his collection inspired that Charles I closed the library and Cotton was forbidden access. The growing independence of history from royal hagiography and the reinforcement of myths, such as that of King Arthur, meant that historians came under increasing suspicion. **John Selden** (1584-1654) was a Puritan, Member of Parliament, philosopher and historian. His *History of Tithes* of 1618 caused anxiety among the bishops of the Church of England and was suppressed. Selden's work is significant in the development of history as he introduced elements of philology into the customary chronological narratives of the antiquarians. These continued to flourish, the most notable being **John Aubrey** (1626-1697) famous for his anecdotes of figures such as Shakespeare which he noted down as he heard them in a peripatetic life. His reputation rests on **Brief Lives**, which he gave to the antiquarian, Anthony Wood, with warning that it contained material "not fitt to be let flie abroad" as some of the subjects were still living. *Brief Lives* is important in providing a new style and intimacy to biographical writing. Aubrey's antiquarian researches are now receiving scholarly attention.

The late seventeenth century saw the first great historical work with **Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon's** (1609-1674) ***History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars*** begun in the Year 1641. Clarendon was Charles II's chief minister and adviser until 1667 and consequently the work is defender of the royalist cause. Even so, it draws accurately on documents and accounts of the time whilst giving a royalist interpretation to events. It is still a valuable primary and secondary source for the Civil Wars.

In the eighteenth century history expanded enormously as a discipline with a number of writers and intellectuals of note contributing. Daniel Defoe, novelist, pamphleteer, Tory spy and agent provocateur wrote a *History of the Union of Great Britain* to justify the Union Act of 1707 uniting Scotland and England. His realistic novel, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, is often mistaken for a work of history. Others who wrote works of history included Edmund Burke (1729-1798), the philosopher William Godwin (1756-1836), the poet Oliver Goldsmith (1730-1774), and the scientist Joseph Priestley (1733-1804). Defoe's Tory history indicates the role history writing had in creating propaganda for the rulers of England, but Defoe wrote at a time when intellectual dissent did not put a writer at risk to his life. Other grand narratives emerged to contest official versions and the eighteenth century produced two great historians in the philosopher **David Hume** (1711-1776) and **Edward Gibbon** (1737-1794).

David Hume who is known for his *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739-40), one of the most important works in Western philosophy made his fortune with **The History of England** (1754-1762) a six-volume account of Britain from the raids of Julius Caesar in 55 and 54 BCE to the Glorious revolution of 1688. Hume is indebted to Clarendon's history for his account of the Stuart era and generally he has the paradoxical reputation of being Royalist in sympathy yet supporting the Whig ascendancy of the eighteenth century. It has the distinction of being banned by Thomas Jefferson despite influencing the writing of James Madison particularly in the 10th of the *Federalist Papers*. Hume's underlying political philosophy was that the search for liberty was the best criterion for judging the past. His history reflects a desire for stability following the political and religious fluctuations of the century prior to his writing and is in tune with a moderate conservatism. Nevertheless it freed the writing of history from mythical nonsense about descendants of Trojan heroes and King Arthur and became the standard work until the mid-nineteenth century.

Edward Gibbon took the discipline of history to a new level both in methodology and in literary merit. His major work was **The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire** published in six volumes between 1776 and 1789. The first volume made him, as with Hume's history, wealthy and famous and the succeeding volumes were equally successful. Like Hume Gibbon was influenced by Voltaire's skepticism and anti-clericalism and this had an impact on both his style and method. Despite a lack of primary sources for the later part of his history Gibbon invariably went to primary sources commenting,

I have always endeavoured to draw from the fountain-head; that my curiosity, as well as a sense of duty, has always urged me to study the originals; and that, if they have sometimes eluded my search, I have carefully marked the secondary evidence, on whose faith a passage or a fact were reduced to depend.

Gibbon's thesis was the fall of Rome was due to an abandonment of the original republican virtues of self-reliance and an increased dependence on barbarian mercenaries in the army. This was reinforced by the influence of Christianity which became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. Christianity held out the hope of an infinitely better life after death thus supporting a pacifism and indifference to earthly life. Gibbon regarded Christian sources as mostly secondary and tended to ignore Christian authors. He exposed the numerous fabrications in the numbers of martyrs and saints. He was attacked for what was perceived as an anti-Christian position although church authorities conceded the justness of his research.

As well as introducing the supreme importance of relying on primary sources Gibbon also wrote a literary masterpiece. One characteristic of his work is the use of footnotes, which are among the most entertaining ever written. Some of them are quite bawdy. Criticism of his work includes a tendency to make pagan Roman authorities models of reasonable conduct although there were numerous persecutions of Christian communities largely due to their refusal to acknowledge the Roman emperor as a deity. Sometimes his love of aphorism leads him to slide over the truth, for example in

The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosophers as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful.

which is a wonderfully inaccurate generalization. His account of Byzantium is regarded as hostile despite the eastern Roman Empire surviving a further one thousand years after the capture of Rome by barbarians.

Nevertheless the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* inaugurates modern history as a discipline and has had an influence in areas markedly different from history. The science

fiction writer, Isaac Asimov, admitted that his Foundation Trilogy was designed on the model of Gibbon's work.

With the work of **Thomas Babington Macaulay** (1800 -1859) and **George Trevelyan** (1871 -1962) British history promulgated positions which became entrenched in the teaching of political history in schools and universities until the middle of the twentieth century. Macaulay's "**The History of England from the Accession of James II**" (1848) was an immediate success and is still regarded as a classic of its kind not least for its excellent literary quality. Trevelyan's work ranges from the late Middle Ages where his "**England in the Age of Wycliffe**" attacks the Catholic Church through to the nineteenth century. At one point he was one of the most widely read historians in the world. Unfortunately for him he lived to a great age and after the Second World War was less regarded as a serious historian. However, his "**The English Revolution 1688 -1698**" became a standard work and represented the Catholic King James II as a tyrant whose excesses caused the revolution of 1688 and his three volume study of the role of Garibaldi in the Risorgimento in Italy exaggerated the importance of that flamboyant revolutionary for generations of British secondary students.

The Whig tradition in historiography presents the past as a progression towards ever greater liberty and enlightenment, culminating in modern forms of liberal democracy and constitutional monarchy. In general, Whig historians emphasize the rise of constitutional government, personal freedoms, and scientific progress. The term is often applied generally to histories that present the past as progress towards enlightenment. It is claimed that Whig history has many similarities with the Marxist–Leninist theory of history, which presupposes that humanity is moving through historical stages to the classless, egalitarian society to which communism aspires. Whig history is a form of liberalism, putting its faith in the power of human reason to reshape society for the better, regardless of past history and tradition. It proposes the inevitable progress of mankind. Its opposite is conservative history or Toryism.

Typical of Whig history is to regard the modern British state as beginning with the so-called "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 which resulted in the ousting of the Catholic King, James II. This is abstracted from the European religious conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism which began in the early sixteenth century and was only resolved by the stabilization of Protestant states of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Prussia, Scandinavian kingdoms of Denmark and Sweden and their growth of the economic power from the end of the seventeenth century to the early eighteenth century. Whig historians write the history of Britain in isolation from European history, a product of language constraints, but more importantly the rise in national consciousness and pride following Britain's supremacy in the nineteenth century.

The Whig tradition of history was identified and challenged by **Herbert Butterfield** (1900 - 1979) His "**Whig Interpretation of History**" (1931) is still read to day is essential reading for understanding the role that history plays in British Culture. He wrote in a later book

We are all of us exultant and unrepentant Whigs. Those who, perhaps in the misguided austerity of youth, wish to drive out that Whig interpretation, (that particular thesis, which controls our abridgment of English history,) are sweeping a room which humanly speaking cannot long remain empty. They are opening the door for seven devils which, precisely because they are newcomers, are bound to be worse than the first. We, on the other hand, will not dream of wishing it away, but will rejoice in an interpretation of the past which has grown up with us, has grown up with the history itself, and has helped to make the history...we must congratulate ourselves that our 17th-century forefathers...did not resurrect and fasten upon us the authentic middle ages...in England we made peace with our middle ages by misconstruing them; and, therefore, we may say that "wrong" history was one of our assets. The Whig

interpretation came at exactly the crucial moment and, whatever it may have done to our history, it had a wonderful effect on English politics...in every Englishman there is hidden something of a Whig that seems to tug at the heart-strings.

Nevertheless despite this admission his criticism of Whig history was profound. His fundamental criticism was one of method: "it studies the past with reference to the present." This introduces a number of distortions:

- viewing the British parliamentary, constitutional monarchy as the apex of human political development;
- assuming that the constitutional monarchy was in fact an ideal held throughout all ages of the past, despite the observed facts of British history and the several power struggles between monarchs and parliaments;
- assuming that political figures in the past held current political beliefs (anachronism);
- assuming that British history was a march of progress whose inevitable outcome was the constitutional monarchy; and
- presenting political figures of the past as heroes, who advanced the cause of this political progress, or villains, who sought to hinder its inevitable triumph.

One common distortion is to interpret the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 as the beginning of the British march towards democracy rather than a power-broking arrangement between a politically weak king and powerful nobles.

Butterfield argued that this approach to history compromised the work of the historian in several ways. The emphasis on the inevitability of progress leads to the mistaken belief that the progressive sequence of events becomes "a line of causation," tempting the historian to go no further to investigate the causes of historical change. The focus on the present as the goal of historical change leads the historian to a special kind of editing of historical events, selecting only those which seem important from the present point of view. His alternative to Whig history was "to evoke a certain sensibility towards the past, the sensibility which studies the past 'for the sake of the past', which delights in the concrete and the complex, which 'goes out to meet the past', which searches for 'unlikenesses between past and present'", in other words to practice a certain historicism in historical investigations.

Twentieth century British history has diversified with a number of different approaches underpinned by different ideologies. For example, **Sir Lewis Namier** (1888-1960), attacked the Whig version of parliamentary history in the eighteenth century by the use of prosopography (the collective biography of individuals) where he examined the voting records of every single sitting Member of Parliament. He concluded that voting was more often determined by the local interests of MPs rather than party loyalty, thus challenging the Whig account of Whigs (supporters of the Hanoverian kings and Protestantism) versus Jacobites (supporters of the Stuarts and Catholicism.)

Namier's protégé was **A.J.P. Taylor** (1906-1990) left-wing in personal sympathies in contrast with his mentor who was conservative, Zionist and anti-Polish. Taylor specialized in nineteenth and twentieth century diplomatic history and his most famous work, "**The Origins of the Second World War**", earned him a reputation as a revisionist. In the book Taylor argued against the widespread belief that the outbreak of the Second World War was the result of an intentional plan on the part of Hitler. He began his book with the statement that too many people have accepted uncritically that the Second World War was the result of criminal conspiracy by a small gang comprising Hitler and his associates. Taylor portrayed Hitler as a grasping opportunist with no beliefs other than the pursuit of power and anti-Semitism. He argued that Hitler did not possess any sort of programme and his foreign policy was one of drift and seizing chances as they offered themselves. He did not even consider Hitler's anti-Semitism unique: he argued that millions of Germans were just as ferociously anti-Semitic as Hitler and there was no reason to single out Hitler for sharing the beliefs of millions of others.

Taylor's "**English History 1914–1945**" was an enormous best-seller and in its first year in print sold more than all of the previous volumes of the Oxford History of England combined.

E.P Thompson (1924-1993) wrote "**The Making of the English Working-Class**" which recovered in his words:

the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver, the "Utopian" artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and, if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties.

This book and its companion volume "**Customs in Common**" have great significance for the study of Anglophone culture specifically in redefining the classical Marxist notion of class as a relationship not a structure.

And class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not. We can see a logic in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any law. Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way.

The study of history in Britain has diversified away from political and diplomatic history into studies of specific groups of people, professions and into local history. In the educational system secondary schools are encouraged to undertake the study of the history in the area where a school is located as a balance to the study of a national history. Moreover, different kinds of national history are studied in addition to political history such as the history of British culture, society, economy and technology.

IMPORTANT BRITISH HISTORIANS

Edward Gibbon (1737 – 1794) was an English historian, writer and Member of Parliament. His most important work, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, was published in six volumes between 1776 and 1788 and is known for the quality and irony of its prose, its use of primary sources, and its open criticism of organized religion.

Thomas Babington Macaulay, 1st Baron Macaulay, (1800 – 1859) was a British historian and Whig politician. He wrote extensively as an essayist and reviewer; his books on British history have been hailed as literary masterpieces. Macaulay held political office as the Secretary at War between 1839 and 1841, and the Paymaster-General between 1846 and 1848. He played a major role in introducing English and western concepts to education in India.

In his view, Macaulay divided the world into civilized nations and barbarism, with Britain representing the high point of civilization. He was wedded to the Idea of Progress, especially

in terms of the liberal freedoms. He opposed radicalism while idealizing historic British culture and traditions.

Sir George Macaulay Trevelyan (1876 – 1962) was a British historian and academic. Trevelyan was a great-nephew of Thomas Babington Macaulay, whose staunch liberal Whig principles he espoused in accessible works of literate narrative avoiding a consciously dispassionate analysis that became old-fashioned during his long and productive career. Many of his writings promoted the Whig Party, an important aspect of British politics from the 17th century to the mid-19th century and its successor, the Liberal Party. Once called "probably the most widely read historian in the world; perhaps in the history of the world." Trevelyan saw how two world wars shook the belief in progress. Historiography had changed and the belief in progress had declined.

Sir Herbert Butterfield (1900 –1979) As a British historian and philosopher of history, he is remembered chiefly for two books, a short volume early in his career entitled *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931) and his *Origins of Modern Science* (1949). Over the course of his career, Butterfield turned increasingly to historiography and man's developing view of the past. He thought that individual personalities were more important than great systems of government or economics in historical study. His Christian beliefs in personal sin, salvation, and providence heavily influenced his writings, a fact he freely admitted. At the same time, Butterfield's early works emphasized the limits of a historian's moral conclusions: "If history can do anything it is to remind us that all our judgments are merely relative to time and circumstance."

A.J.P.Taylor (1906 – 1990) was an English historian who specialized in 19th- and 20th-century European diplomacy. Both a journalist and a broadcaster, he became well known to millions through his television lectures. His combination of academic rigour and popular appeal led the historian Richard Overy to describe him as "the Macaulay of our age".

E.P. Thompson (1924 –1993) was a British historian, writer, socialist and peace campaigner. He is probably best known today for his historical work on the British radical movements in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, in particular *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). He also published influential biographies of William Morris (1955) and (posthumously) William Blake (1993) and was a prolific journalist and essayist. His work is considered to have been among the most important contributions to labour history and social history in the latter twentieth-century, with a global impact, including on scholarship in Asia and Africa.

MAIN POINTS

- There are various theories of history, the Great man Theory, the Everyman theory, the Great Idea theory, the Geographic-Geopolitical
- British history can be said to begin with Venerable Bede and in the later Middle Ages with Geoffrey of Monmouth and his invention of King Arthur. History was at the service of English monarchs to reinforce their legitimacy.
- Modern British history began with antiquarians in Tudor times and the collection of historical manuscripts most significantly in the Cotton Collection.
- The first recognizable work of history was written by Lord Clarendon, but Edward Gibbon introduced research into primary sources and artifacts such as coins in his monumental *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.
- British history in the nineteenth century was dominated by the Whig Interpretation of history who invariably dated modern history from the Glorious Revolution of 1688 until

after the First World War when it was challenged by the research methods of modern historians.

- Historians such as A.J.P. Taylor have challenged the notion of deliberate intention in history and EP Thompson has written history from the point of view of working people taking the writing of history from its concentration on the political and military elite.

SEMINAR EXERCISES

- England has its myths of King Arthur and Robin Hood as historical inventions. Are there "historical inventions" of Slovak historical characters. Who was the real Juraj Janošík?
- Consider these real historical personalities, Macbeth and Richard III. Were they as wicked as Shakespeare depicted them? What was closer to the truth?
- Consider the history that you were taught at basic and secondary school. Can you identify any agenda of a political or social nature which causes you to question what you were taught?
- What historical myths are still powerful in British culture? Have any new myths developed in, for example, popular culture in the last fifty years?
- Examine the modern institution of the National Health Service. How would you describe it from a conservative historical perspective and from a social democrat perspective?
- How has the historical view of women changed in the last two hundred years?

READING

Butterfield, H. *The Whig Interpretation of History*. London: Penguin. 1973

Gibbon, E. *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire — Volume 1*.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/731>

Macaulay, T.B. *The History of England from the Accession of James II – Volume I*.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1468>

Morgan, K ed. *The Oxford History of Britain*. Oxford: OUP, revised 2010.

Taylor, A.J.P. *The origins of the Second World War*. London: Penguin. 1964

Taylor, A.J.P. *English History 1914 – 1945*. Oxford: OUP. 1965

Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Penguin. 1991

Thompson, E.P. *Customs in Common*. London: Merlin Press. 1991.

Trevelyan, G. *The English Revolution, 1688 – 1698*. Oxford: OUP, 1938.

See also:

<http://www.straightdope.com/columns/read/1961/is-the-black-hole-of-calcutta-a-myth>