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HISTORY

AN INTRODUCTION TO THEORY, METHOD AND PRACTICE

PETER CLAUS AND JOHN MARRIOTT

SECOND EDITION



History

Demystifying the subject with clarity and verve, *History: An Introduction to Theory, Method and Practice* familiarizes the reader with the varied spectrum of historical approaches in a balanced, comprehensive and engaging manner. Global in scope, and covering a wide range of topics from the ancient and medieval worlds to the twenty-first century, it explores historical perspectives not only from historiography itself, but from related areas such as literature, sociology, geography and anthropology.

Clearly written, accessible and student-friendly, this second edition is fully updated throughout to include:

- An increased spread of case studies from beyond Europe, especially from American and imperial histories
- New chapters on important and growing areas of historical inquiry, such as environmental history and digital history
- Expanded sections on political, cultural and social history
- More discussion of non-traditional forms of historical representation and knowledge like film, fiction and video games.

Accompanied by a new companion website (www.routledge.com/cw/claus) containing valuable supporting material for students and instructors, such as discussion questions, further reading and web links, this book is an essential introduction for all students of historical theory and method.

Dr Peter Claus is Access Fellow and Lecturer in History, Pembroke College, University of Oxford. His doctoral research on the Corporation of London was followed by work on the history of the City and East End of London, which developed into an interest in unofficial forms of urban social investigation in the metropolis along with a commitment to outreach, public history and the democratisation of the archive.

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History

An Introduction to Theory, Method
and Practice

SECOND EDITION

Peter Claus and John Marriott

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Prologue

History matters

WHAT DID HISTORY EVER DO FOR US?

In the sense of both what happened in the past and the study of that past, history matters. At a personal level, history offers us an unrivalled means of making sense of where we have come from, and therefore where we are in the modern world. In this respect, we are all historians by instinct. The extraordinary popularity of history programmes, costume dramas, documentaries, historical novels and heritage sites testify to the enduring importance of history in our lives. While literature and the media may tend to produce a consensual view of the past, it is as well to remember that in practice the interpretation of the past is contested, often with devastating consequences. Different interpretations of the past have provoked, and continue to provoke conflict between peoples. When this escalates into war, opposing sides justify their actions by appealing to particular versions of the historical record. And past grievances – real or imaginary – which are fuelled by selective interpretations of the past, have often served as powerful stimuli to action.

But can history be a force for good in shaping our thinking about the present and the future? It is fashionable to bemoan the failure of contemporary leaders to learn from the mistakes of the past. Certainly, the atrocities perpetuated in continued conflict around the world have a sickening familiarity. And yet the rise of fascism as a European power, or the nuclear bombing of civilian populations thankfully seem remote possibilities. As for the future, well, historians are not astrologers; the vast majority would contend that since historical change always has unforeseen consequences it would be rash in the extreme to predict what is likely to happen in the future.

HISTORY, THIS BOOK AND YOU

This book is not intended, however, to persuade anyone of the importance of history. We anticipate that by the time you read it as a prospective historian or enthusiastic amateur, the case would already have been made in your mind. Rather, we wish to provide an accessible introduction to some of the concerns that have preoccupied historians over time. Instinctive though we may be as historians, we can become better historians if we take the trouble to learn something about the discipline of historiography, that is, how historians go about the task of exploring the past. This seemingly simple project is fraught with difficulties. From the time of Herodotus and Thucydides in the ancient world, the role of the historian and the very nature of history have been contested. For the past two thousand years, therefore, the boundaries of history have been fluid. Even now, some hundred or so years after the establishment of history as an academic discipline, we are not

entirely sure what ‘proper’ history is, or where the line separating history from, say, sociology or geography runs.

The difficulties are further compounded when we broach the question of historical truth. At school we were inclined to believe the claims that history books told us about the past as it actually happened. Much of this derives from the moment in the late nineteenth century when the discipline of history emerged, and embarked on what was considered as a realistic mission to retrieve the truth from the past. Prior to this, people who wrote about the past had other objectives in mind, most notably the political imperative to consolidate the authority of the state or peoples they represented. Many historians today are also committed to historical truth, but despite the various methods used to retrieve it, historical truth remains an elusive goal. Some critics go as far as to suggest that the promise is entirely false for the historical record is always open to different interpretations, and who is in a position to decide which one is the truth?

Thus while there may have been a perceptible shift away from the further reaches of linguistic theory, where postmodernism and ‘deconstruction’ methodologies have sought to convince us that there is no such thing as historical truth, and where history is merely a ‘text’ that can be read in endless different ways, historians continue to reflect on their craft. This book seeks to be part of that reflection but is written unapologetically for real tutors, real students and relates to courses actually being taught in colleges and universities today.

With an increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches, as well as a greater focus on the processes of historical study and writing, courses on theory, method and historiographical practice seem to grow in number and significance. Our ambition is to be part of this debate about historiography but also to provide a resource to students working at both an introductory and an advanced level. In doing this, the book enthusiastically engages with theoretical perspectives and methodologies that have provided the foundation for what it recognized as good historical practice, but also engaged with areas such as literature, sociology, geography and anthropology which have entered into productive dialogues with history.

WHY THE BOOK?

The publication of the book is timely. Some of the classic introductory texts which opened up debates within historiography, such as E. H. Carr’s *What is History?* (1961) and G. E. R. Elton’s *The Practice of History* (1967), now look decidedly dated in that they do not address the important developments of recent years. John Tosh’s popular and admirable *The Pursuit of History* (2009) claims to be an introduction to modern history, but is not for the person coming to history for the first time. We felt the need for a textbook that encompassed the broad range of historical inquiry in ways which were accessible to the non-specialist. We have assumed no previous knowledge of the discipline, eliminated as far as possible the use of jargon, and drawn upon historical examples which we anticipate will be of interest to a modern readership. Above all, in writing the book we had in mind a person who was about to embark on a serious study of history, and therefore needed to know more about the nature of the discipline from examples of studies undertaken by some of its leading figures. We hope too that it may be of interest in some of the areas it touches upon to postgraduates eager to consolidate their knowledge and to take that knowledge up to another level. Although this is a textbook, we are anxious not to imply that closure is either likely or desirable in history; in all areas of our discipline we would want to treat history as very much open to dispute. Indeed, we would like to encourage debate and dispute among students and general readers alike.

The book is not designed to be read sequentially; rather, we consider it as a handbook, and prefer that you simply dip into individual chapters when the need arises to know more about particular aspects of the discipline. The book is, however, organized in a way to help you make sense of the material. Here we have adopted the three broad themes of the title – theory, method and practice – which are addressed in turn. Theory is divided into three parts. In Part 1, Perspectives and themes, we begin by talking through issues which have been seen as the defining elements of history, in particular, the pursuit of historical truth, the nature of interpretation, causes in history, and the ordering of time. It will come as no comfort to know that these fundamental features of historical inquiry raise complex issues which continue to be hotly debated, but we take you carefully on the first steps of the journey.

Part 2, Histories and philosophies, examines the theoretical precepts and broad trajectory of modern historical practice, the origins of which can be traced to ancient Greece and Rome, but which were fundamentally reshaped during the Enlightenment, developed in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and challenged in recent times by the critiques launched by postmodernism and postcolonialism. In Part 3, Varieties, we describe some of the more influential strands of history that have emerged in the postwar period as a challenge to traditional approaches. Their boundaries may be defined only imprecisely, but historians working in the fields of, say, cultural, global or public history have greatly extended the scope of historical inquiry, and at the same time placed on the agenda new ways of thinking about who and what are legitimate subjects and objects of study and, indeed, who might be regarded as a bona fide historian. Part 4, History and other disciplines looks at the often troubled relationships between history and disciplines within the social sciences, including geography and anthropology. Given that the boundaries of history are fluid and permeable, it comes as no surprise to learn that historians have tended to borrow freely from other disciplines. By breaking down what are often artificially constructed barriers between disciplines, this too has opened up exciting new avenues of historical inquiry. Finally, in Part 5, Doing history, we provide more practical guidance on some of the problems encountered by an historian embarking on an exciting venture of research. The focus is on evidence – what forms it takes, how it is gathered and stored, the opportunities opened up by digital archives, and some of the problems these present for us.

We have attempted to make the material accessible not only by avoiding overly complex theoretical discussion but also through various pedagogical devices. Each chapter therefore begins with a short introduction which elaborates on the themes in the context of the study of history. At the end of the chapters, there is a brief section entitled 'Postscript' which explains why the issues raised remain important to the study of history, and why they should be taken seriously by practising historians. Finally, the 'Further reading' section provides a selection of books and articles which we have found useful and hope will extend and deepen your awareness of the overarching themes.

WEBSITE

As a companion to the textbook we have constructed a website. This contains a range of supplementary materials which are designed to provide more in depth study of the themes raised in the book. Thus, for example, we include discussion documents and further readings, further illustrations and questions which might be usefully be addressed and which may be useful for students and their instructors.

HISTORY, THE BOOK AND US

Both of us are modern historians. Peter Claus has researched histories of the metropolis and education and has been committed to widening participation and the democratization of the archive, while John Marriott is a cultural and intellectual historian with a long-standing interest in London and Empire during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In writing this book we have understandably drawn upon knowledge of our particular specialisms, but at the same time we have attempted to widen the geographical and temporal scope of the book by including discussions of historical episodes in ancient and medieval periods, from both European and non-European worlds.

This is the second edition of the book. We have eagerly grasped the opportunity substantially to revise its content and approach. We have provided the structure with a stronger chronological narrative, and written new chapters on important areas of historical inquiry such as environmental history and the advances in digital history. Equally, we have extended the spread of historical examples and now give much greater emphasis to experience beyond Europe, most notably American and imperial histories.

Finally, we are ever more conscious of the diverse and hugely popular ways in which historical knowledge is created and disseminated. And so we have moved outside the academy to reflect on the production of history in the broadcast, cinematic, literary and digital worlds. Though often dismissed by historians as inaccurate, naïve and fanciful, these genres are worthy of consideration in their own right. Historical fiction, documentaries, films and even video games are some of the most powerful sources of historical knowledge and can be neither ignored nor accepted uncritically.

We stated at the outset that our primary intent was not to persuade anyone of the relevance and excitement of history, but we share a passion for the subject which we hope comes over in the writing. If some of this happens to rub off onto potential historians then perhaps that is no bad thing for at least one of our unstated goals will have been met.

Acknowledgements

It would seem an act of madness in this age of research assessment exercises, focused subject specialisms and narrow periodizations to embark on a textbook that roams across periods, disciplines and geographical boundaries with little apparent regard for the particular expertise of its authors. Hence our thanks are due to those colleagues and readers of the book who have helped us enormously to convey historical ideas and concepts familiar to us as experienced tutors, but often through the use of examples less familiar, say from the early modern or medieval periods or from the ancient world. If we have not always pulled this off it is our responsibility and not theirs.

Colleagues include Paul Sinclair at St Clare's College in Oxford, a medieval scholar, Dr Roy Edwards, University of Southampton who was instrumental for the section on business history, Avichag Valk (all things Tudor) and Jonathan Valk (all things ancient) in New York, Samuel Claus in Oxford (for his deep and encyclopedic knowledge of video games – a result of many years of painful research), Xavière Hassan, The Open University, Dr Abigail Green, Brasenose College, Oxford, Brian Smith (Shetland Archive) with his deep and wide knowledge, especially in this case, archaeology, Ken Warman (BSix College, Hackney), plus our colleagues at Pembroke Stephen Tuck (America) and Nicholas Cole (America and digital archives where he is transforming the field), Adrian Gregory (twentieth century and the First World War), Isabel Holowaty, history librarian at the Bodleian and Laura Cracknell at Pembroke.

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The late Raphael Samuel has been a point of contact for both Peter and John. While Raph may have resisted the notion of a textbook, seemingly fixed in a point of time, he may well have appreciated the attempt to create a cross-disciplinary narrative that falls outside any special focus on period or subject and which may have utility for students of history.

At Routledge, the History Editor Dr Eve Setch and Senior Editorial Assistant Amy Welmers have eased the passage of the book with good grace and humour, while our copy editor Amy Thomas has responded with fortitude to what must have been seen as our unreasonable suggestions for last-minute revisions to the manuscript.

Finally we thank our families: Xavière Hassan, Samuel Claus, Avichag and Jonathan Valk, those beautiful kids from New York, Aya, Nava and (never forgetting) Jonah, plus June and Malcolm Claus on behalf of Peter, and for John, Kanta and the twins Kabir and Karishma.

THEORY



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PART 1

PERSPECTIVES AND THEMES



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Proof and the problem of objectivity

- 1 History: a science or an art?
- 2 History and the status of historical knowledge
- 3 Choosing evidence, challenging interpretations
- 4 Causes in history

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces history both as a discipline and as an approach to historical knowledge. While it cannot be comprehensive, we aim nevertheless to explore some of the fundamental problems faced by historians as they seek to understand past societies. How they do this is determined by many factors. At its simplest, however, it largely depends upon whether history is regarded as a science which has the historian as objective fact finder and analyst, or alternatively, as an art in which the historian presents an interpretation of the past that is a result of either personal experience or the social and cultural milieu in which the historian is located. The first section introduces these issues by looking afresh at the argument first raised in the 1960s between historians E. H. Carr and Geoffrey Elton but in the newer context of postmodernism. It sets out the varying ways in which these prominent historians approached the discipline and dealt with historical evidence in all its varied forms. Section 2 uses historical writing concerned with the events of 1857, the Indian 'Mutiny', in order to discuss whether history is a dependable basis of knowledge that can provide a comprehensive and reliable explanation of how past societies change. The third section focuses on another dispute between historians, that of Chartism. Chartist was a mid-nineteenth-century radical political and social movement in Great Britain that demanded far-reaching reform. We shall see how historical facts are generated but also how historians select evidence and then use innovative techniques to inform our historical understanding. This section will explain how historical explanations for a single historical event or period can radically change over time, either by the discovery of new evidence or, more likely, by shifts in the ways historians approach the evidence. Finally, we investigate the problem of causation in history. Since the Enlightenment, which will be encountered in Chapter 5, historians and social scientists have attempted to identify precisely what caused particular historical episodes to take place, but have these efforts been successful? Can we really ever know for certain what the causal factors were, or is this ultimately a futile quest?

6 Perspectives and themes

SECTION 1: HISTORY: A SCIENCE OR AN ART?

Why bother? Why study history? Why does history matter? For professionals who teach and research history it provides, let it be said, a source of income and occasionally a very pleasing one at that. But it is much more than that. Most historians are deeply engaged in trying to uncover the past, not only because there are fascinating stories to be told, but also because the telling of the past has enormous contemporary importance. Our understanding of the present relies in large part upon how we view the past, and this vital issue is of concern to us all, whether or not we are trained historians. This recognition lies at the very heart of what we would describe as historical imagination – an imagination possessed by all those who look to the past as a means of understanding their place in the contemporary world. Something of this spirit is captured by the comic writer and raconteur, Stephen Fry:

Great and good men and women stirred sugar into their coffees knowing that it had been picked by slaves. Kind good ancestors of all of us in this room never questioned hangings, burnings, tortures, inequality, suffering and injustice that today revolts us. If we dare to presume to damn them with our fleeting ideas of morality then we risk damnation from our descendants for whatever it is that we are doing that future history will judge as intolerable and wicked: eating meat, driving cars, appearing on TV, visiting zoos, who knows? We haven't arrived at our own moral and ethical imperatives by each of us working them out from first principles, we have inherited them and they were born out of blood and suffering – as all human things, and human beings are. This does not stop us from admiring and praising the progressive heroes who got there early and risked their lives to advance causes we now take for granted. In the end, I suppose my point is that history is all about imagination rather than facts. If you cannot imagine yourself wanting to riot against catholic emancipation say, or becoming an early Tory and signing up to fight with the Old Pretender, or cheering on Prynne as the theatres are closed and Puritanism holds sway . . . knowing is not enough – if you cannot feel what our ancestors felt when they cried 'Wilkes and Liberty!' or indeed cried 'Death to Wilkes!' if you cannot feel with them, then all you can do is judge them and condemn them, or praise them and over-adulate them. History is not the story of strangers, aliens from another realm, it is the story of us had we been born a little earlier. History is memory, we have to remember what it is like to be a Roman, or a Jacobite or a Chartist or even – if we dare, and we should dare – a Nazi. History is not an abstraction, it is the enemy of abstraction.

(*The Observer*, 9 July 2006)

Although this raises a series of important points about the nature of history to which we return in the course of this book, it does not address the question of precisely *what* history is. Here we encounter the first difficulty, for as you make your way through this chapter, indeed this book, you will realize that this seemingly simple matter masks some complex issues. Note, for example, that there is a profound ambiguity in the term 'history'. When we talk of 'history', do we mean what happened in the past? Or do we mean what is written and taught about the past, that is, historiography? It is usually clear from the context which meaning we are using, but the very fact that we have the same term to describe both meanings says something rather important. Studying history at a more advanced level should make us a little more circumspect about the nature of the relationship between the past and what is written and taught about the past. Fry uses the term

history as writing about the past; that too will be the approach of this chapter. In particular, we shall examine the extent to which history as a discipline can be seen, crudely put, as either a science or an art and the consequences of taking one view over the other.

The former Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge, Sir Geoffrey Elton (1921–94), put it succinctly: history is at once interesting and exciting, amusing and instructive, but above all it encompasses a quest for the past. Yet Elton opposed the idea that historians should have an empathy for the past, for such an emotional engagement displaces what should be the object of the historian, namely, rational enquiry into past events. As a traditional historian, he believed very much in the possibilities of history as an exercise in empirical or fact-based truth, and the ability of the historian to analyze objectively the results of research with a high degree of precision.

These ideas were expressed in Elton's *The Practice of History* (1967), which remains a useful elaboration of how history is conventionally viewed. It is a book, however, which was written consciously as a rejoinder to E.H. Carr (1892–1982) and his *What is History?* (1961), which had argued for a rather more sensitive approach to historical evidence. For Carr, history is subjective because historians are recognized as part of the process of doing history, unable to separate prejudices and presuppositions from conclusions drawn solely from evidence. It is this factor above all others that has secured Carr's reputation as a radical historian, while Elton is seen as a defender of the conservative approach to history. If both views are caricatures – arch conservative and radical – each historian has left us with a legacy upon which we can build.

This spat between Elton and Carr on the status of historical knowledge is by common consent the defining debate about how the study of the past should be approached. While Elton was unquestionably suspicious of history's ability to predict the future, he nonetheless understood the role of the historian and saw history as 'scientific', that is, a method based upon rational inquiry. By approaching evidence critically, he argued, historical truth can be revealed. 'Hard work' and 'clear thinking' would promote a healthy scepticism as the historian investigates the primary sources or considers the views of other historians.

According to Elton, the successful resolution of all historical problems depends upon the appropriate use of evidence. To this end three main stages of reading evidence are required: a review of the available evidence (what sources exist?), the informed criticism of that evidence (what does it testify to?), and from that process the framing of answers (what actually happened in the past?). Historical research must therefore 'arise from the evidence not from the mind of the enquirer', thereby avoiding the 'preconceived notions' of the historian. By following these guidelines, the historian 'well trained in the principles of scholarship' can reveal the truth, or 'as near to the truth of the past as he has any hope of getting' (Elton, 2002, pp. 46, 80). In his *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study* (1991), Elton develops these arguments by rejecting theory, 'theory mongers' and the abstraction of history because theory imposes ideas upon the evidence in ways which compromise its objectivity or distort its use. Elton was thus adamant that the involvement of the historian as a subjective individual, the 'infiltration of historiographical methods' and the 'problem of historical reconstruction' should be 'reduced to a minimum'. The historian must act only as a conduit through which the experiences of the past travel; indeed, a relationship with the dead provides the thrill and challenge of history. If nothing else, for the 'honest historian', as Elton put it, just doing history allows 'the enormous enlargement of one's acquaintances', a list that is renewed and refreshed with every visit to the archive (Elton, 2002, pp. 79, 83, 142).

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Yet historians are social and cultural animals, prompting the suggestion that history is less a science and more an art: it is constructed through the imagination of a particular moment rather than discovered through experiment or objective methodology. The past can reveal truths which are part of our personal and collective lives. If, for example, we consider a landscape beautiful, it is because we have absorbed historical assumptions that influence how we understand that landscape. Mountains were seen only as obstacles to easy travel before the eighteenth century, and then subsequently regarded as glorious monuments to nature; these changing views were not based on objective approaches to the evidence but in sensibilities that emerged from the Enlightenment; that is, notions of the sublime majesty of nature that quite simply changed dramatically with the influence of Romanticism that emerged from or against the Enlightenment (see Chapter 5). In this context, for example, we may have an idea of the English village that is bucolic, charming and seemingly unchanging, the very epitome of Englishness. It may consist of a church, a duck pond, a war memorial, a cricket pitch or village green and a public house or 'pub', a sense of England as a pastoral idyll symbolized by the thatched roofed house or, perhaps, the 'babbling brook' or haystack, even if this particular feature of the countryside actually disappeared from English fields almost half a century ago (Samuel, 1994, p. 107). It is an image that contrasts with landscapes of smoking chimneys or rows of terraced houses that make up the 'pit' village of the former mining communities, the 'dark satanic mills' demonized by writers such as William Blake, Charles Dickens and Arnold Bennett. These images and narratives of industrialization were evoked when Victorian artists and writers described industrialization or the 'condition of England'.

Outside a European sensibility, this aesthetic may never be known, and instead the thatched roof in an English village could be seen as a sign of poverty. People of earlier periods might have read the picture differently not because they lacked humanity, sensibilities, taste, or should somehow be considered inferior to those who lived in Western cultures, but because the historical milieux in which they lived were simply different. William Cobbett (1763–1835), pamphleteer and social commentator, recalled in his *Rural Rides*, sometime in the 1820s, travelling through the rolling hills of the Cotswolds in England, not far from the city of Oxford. He hated the picturesque scenery: to him the livestock that populated its gentle hills and slopes would feed the 'Great Wen' or large drain; the teeming multitudes of London. Before Cobbett, or certainly in the century before he was born, the argument that the Cotswolds was a storehouse for the industrial masses could not have been made or would have been made in a quite different way.

It could be argued then that whatever period or era of history we live in is steeped with sensibilities and aesthetics that colour our lives and shade how we learn or write history, thereby challenging our efforts to be dispassionate in the way we read evidence. This may give us pause to consider whether our consciousness of eras and epochs can ever be identified in an objective manner. Did the middle classes feel themselves to be continually 'rising' or could the ancients have known that they were ancient any more than we can know precisely that we are somehow 'postmodern'. Johan Huizinga's highly speculative but extremely stimulating *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (2001), first published in 1924, looked at the culture of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century France and the Low Countries and concluded that artists, as well as theologians, poets, chroniclers, princes and statesmen should be treated 'not as the harbingers of a coming culture, but as perfecting and concluding the old' (Huizinga, 2001, p. x). Chivalry, hierarchy, gothic forms and symbolism that were so important to medieval architecture, art and life were not the rotten remains of a stagnant, 'dark' or 'middle' age in history whose only real purpose was to stand in contrast to the bright, humanist 'Renaissance period' that was about to be born. If we were alive then, unknowingly on the cusp of the medieval and early-modern eras, we would surely have been

subject to a maelstrom of influences that dictated our attitudes to what might be uniquely considered *at that moment* to be pleasing in appearance.

If the contemporary observer can therefore differentiate between the beauty and ugliness of the rolling hills of the Cotswolds, and make historical judgements about what a landscape represents or how it has changed, it is because our experiences in the present are altogether more encompassing than attempts to recapture the past through the acquisition of analytical skills or training for historians proposed by Elton. Examples from the history of landscape, aesthetics or the competing ideas of the English village, serve to illustrate the message at the heart of this section: that history does indeed matter in a way that would find agreement between both Carr and Elton, yet in differing ways.

'The past is a foreign country' is the opening line to the novel by L. P. Hartley called *The Go-Between*, and is a place where 'they do things differently'. This articulates how from the perspective of Elton and others, the present is indeed separated from the past: 'they' are separated from 'us'. And yet as David Lowenthal noted in his 1985 book *The Past Is a Foreign Country*:

During most of history men scarcely differentiated past from present, referring even to remote events, if at all, as though they were then occurring. Up to the nineteenth century those that gave any thought to the historical past supposed it much like the present. To be sure, the drama of history recorded major changes of life and landscape, but human nature supposedly remained constant, events always actuated by the same passions and prejudices. Even when ennobled by nostalgia or depreciated by partisans of progress, the past seemed not a foreign country but a part of their own. And chroniclers portrayed bygone times with an immediacy and intimacy that reflected the supposed likeness.

(Lowenthal, 1985, p. xvi)

Only with the rise of scientific-type methodology when importance came to be placed on ways of gathering evidence objectively, could distinctions in time be made between 'then' and 'now'. This is a theme that we shall return to in the next chapter. Some commentators interested in questions that arise from the quest for historical objectivity and coherent narratives, such as the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, have articulated an overwhelming need to revive histories that promote synthesized or unified themes concerned with class, nation, ideas and so forth. However universal or 'whole' narratives such as the story of nation or class have been, efforts to foster and promote a single, coherent and integrated history have become increasingly difficult, precisely because of renewed efforts to write histories of gender, race and so on that speak to our lives in the here and now.

Like Elton, Himmelfarb has argued that a downplaying of political history over a number of years has encouraged historical knowledge to be treated in isolation, with each topic treated like a piece of a jigsaw but where seldom a complete picture comes into view. The real distinction that Himmelfarb makes, however, is between an 'old' history that attempts to understand contemporaries in their own terms, and the 'new' history which, while laudable in taking notice of, say, the historical role of women or black people, tends to interpret the past solely through the optic of the present (Himmelfarb, 2004). This fragmentation of historical narratives into stories about 'identities' has happened under the influence of literary theory which, she argues, deconstructs the language used in historical sources to the point where the voice of the author is given no authority and the meaning of which can never be truly known. The text and the language of the text, from this perspective, have no context besides the preoccupations and concerns of the historian in the present day (see Chapter 9).

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We are presented then with a serious choice about how history as a discipline works, what it can reasonably do and how it is approached. Taking our cue from historians such as Elton or Himmelfarb, is objectivity something we should strive for? Or is the subjectivity and (to an extent) present-mindedness of Carr and others more convincing? What are the pressures and influences bearing down on us as we 'do' history, and can we resist these pressures to the extent that we can really know things about the past? To address these questions, and to introduce others, we shall need to take a trip to India and the British Raj.

SECTION 2: HISTORY AND THE STATUS OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

The Indian Mutiny began in the summer of 1857 and was finally crushed nearly a year later. It has entered into our popular imagination, but just note how. The use of the term 'mutiny', rather than, say, revolt, suggests that this was a traitorous act perpetrated by subjects of the British crown. This was how it was seen at the time, and helps to explain why the retribution of the British was so brutal. A memorial in Delhi remembers the mutiny. Built by the British in 1863, it takes the form of an octagonal shaped tower and ornamental facade in the gothic style. It is dedicated to the memory of those soldiers and loyal Indians of the Delhi Field Force who were killed or died of disease during what now might be considered as the initial war for Indian independence. In 1972 a new plaque was added, correcting any impression given on the original memorial that the 'enemy' were anything else but, as it is inscribed, 'freedom fighters and martyrs of India'. And so this was how the history of the Mutiny was first built and then reconstructed.

The mutiny was ostensibly sparked by the replacement of standard issue Minie rifles with Pattern Enfield's rifle-muskets. Both Hindu and Muslim soldiers were now required to bite off the end of the cartridge which was widely rumoured to be caked with cow or pig fat, thus in one stroke causing offence to each religious group that made up the Indian ranks of the East India Company's Bengal Army. The origins of the revolt, however, were complicated, and drew variously upon a range of grievances over the ways in which the British had intruded in the economic and cultural life of Indian peoples. Many of our generation learnt nothing about the Indian Mutiny of 1857/8 at school. Parents, no doubt as part of the general reassessment of the empire that took place in the midst of post-war decolonization, may have told stories about the cruelty of the British as they took revenge on the hacking to death of 260 women and children in the massacre of Kanpur in July 1857, or by lashing the mutineers to the mouths of cannons and blasting them to oblivion – a form of execution that the British reasoned was quick, yet spectacular, so giving fair warning to would-be protesters who harboured any lingering doubts about the wisdom and might of British rule. Above all, these were acts of calculated cruelty since – as the British knew full well – Hindus believed that the body needed to be intact in order to be reincarnated.

As far as the historiography of the revolt is concerned, let us look at an account by a noted, if traditional, historian of India, and ask what it reveals about his approach to an understanding of the repercussions of the mutiny. Percival Spear's *A History of India*, first published in 1965, contains the following passage:

In the summer of 1858 northern India lay inert and lacerated. The wisdom of Canning and strength of men like Sir John Lawrence restrained and soon ended the punitive measures and clamours for vengeance which followed the wake of the armies. But much remained



FIGURE 1.1 Summary executions by the British of Indian rebels in 1857, depicted by the Russian artist Vasily Vereshagin in 1884.

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to be done. Most of the rebel leaders were killed in battle like the Rani of Jhansi, or disappeared like the Nana and Bakht Khan of Delhi, or were executed like Tantia Topi. The Emperor Bahadur Shah had been promised his life. After a trial of doubtful legality he was exiled to Rangoon where he died in 1862 at the age of eighty-seven. The Mughal family lost its royal status. Delhi and Lucknow slowly returned to normal life, but Delhi with its territory lost its semi-independent position and was attached to the Punjab. A number of implicated princelings lost their states and their lives. In Oudh Canning's confiscatory proclamation was not withdrawn, but its application was left to the discretion of the new Chief Commissioner Montgomery, and its rigour mitigated by a system of regrants.

These were the immediate and local results; there followed a number of measures of great importance. The East India Company ended its long career as the ruling power in India; a new attitude was adopted toward the princes; the army was reorganised; a new beginning was made in associating Indians with the supreme of their country. The new age was ushered in and its intended spirit defined in the Queen's proclamation of 1 November 1858. If good can come out of the evil the mutiny can claim the credit for most of these measures. There remained the psychological gulf between the peoples of India and Britain. This gulf was not created by the Mutiny as we have seen. The forces of separation had outstripped that of cooperation and the hope of self-government. This spirit was reinforced by that of fear on the British side and the resentment which it aroused was

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deepened by the memory of defeat and vengeance on the Indian. In this sense the Mutiny was a calamity whose effects only time could heal. Happily the progressive forces of reform and cooperation were not consumed but only consumed by the smoke of passion. They had received a severe set-back, but the next fifty years showed that it was a check rather than a halt.

(Spear, 1990, pp. 227–8)

Given that Spear, as a traditional historian, stressed the value of factual evidence, what facts did he actually use in this passage? We noted the following:

- 1 The Indian Mutiny ended in the summer of 1858
- 2 Most of the rebel leaders were killed, executed or disappeared
- 3 Clamour for vengeance against the Indians was tempered by the Viceroy Lord Canning and the Governor of the Punjab, Sir John Lawrence
- 4 Delhi lost its independence and was absorbed into the Punjab
- 5 The East India Company lost its colonial authority, the Indian army was reorganized and Indians began to be incorporated into the apparatus of government
- 6 Queen Victoria issued a proclamation in November 1858 which outlined new policies toward India

In order to save time, these ‘facts’ are listed in a rough chronological order. They are all evidential facts that cannot seriously be disputed, at least not without some difficulty. But in themselves – even when arranged in the order that they happened – they say nothing about the nature of the British response to the revolt. Alone these facts do not constitute history; that is, they are part of the past but beyond their mere selection they are not yet part of historiography. They are like a catalogue of information, and so only become history when they are linked one to another as part of a narrative framework. Spear has done precisely this. Let us, however, look in a little more detail at what is going on in the passage. What he does here is to use the chronicle of events as building blocks of a particular story with a beginning (the end of the revolt) and an end (the subsequent fifty years of British rule). A number of important points follow from this:

- 1 The story is put together by linking the various chronological elements in causal relationships. The Indian Mutiny resulted in the death or disappearance of many of the rebel leaders. In the immediate aftermath there were demands for vengeance but these were silenced by the British authorities. Lessons were learnt from the mutiny. Measures were introduced to heal the wounds. The separation between Briton and Indian which had caused the mutiny were mitigated by the Queen’s proclamation, the end of the reign of the East India Company and the introduction of Indians in colonial administration
- 2 The story thus unfolds as a secondary narrative of British colonial authority in India. Britain ruled with humanity and harmony until events forced a separation, resulting in the mutiny, the defeat of which left India devastated and humiliated. But although the mutiny was a tragedy, in the longer term it promoted progressive forces of cooperation and hope which once again led to a happy and benign colonial relationship. Just consider how the language in the passage reinforces this narrative. India was ‘inert’ and ‘lacerated’; the ‘wisdom’ of Canning, the ‘strength’ of Lawrence muting the cries for vengeance; ‘good came out of the evil of the mutiny’

This narrative is part of a larger narrative that Spear inhabits in which colonial rule is exercised by the British as progressive and benign, and operates for the benefit of both colonizers and colonized. The story, however, is only one of many that can be constructed using this chronicle. Another, from the perspective of an Indian rebel could certainly be imagined or even retrieved from *exactly* the same evidence but it is one absent in Spear. Thus as an alternative history we could interpret the evidence as follows:

- After years of suppression large sections of the Indian population decided to take matters in their own hands and drive the British out of India
- The revolt was nearly successful, but because of the military superiority of the British and their access to technology such as the telegraph, the nationalist struggle was defeated
- The British press cried out for vengeance against those who had been responsible for the atrocities. Many of the rebels were executed, but not on the scale that some had wished for
- The British government now recognized that their rule could no longer be based on military power alone, and therefore decided to take due account of India's religion and customs in order not to cause offence, and assimilate influential sections into the British ruling elite as a means of diverting them from future nationalist struggle

What this example illustrates is that seemingly objective accounts based on hard factual evidence are riven by ideological influences, such as the historians' feelings about the nature of British rule in India. Here there is a critical difference between historical and evidential truth. There are certain truths in history but these tend to be evidential. Interpretations can never be self-evident truths because they are always open to challenge. All we can hope for is that through a dialogue between theory and evidence we can approach historical truth even though we never truly arrive there.

The received 'story' about the British Raj and others like it – the attacks by white settlers on American 'red' Indians in countless Westerns ('Got him' we shouted as they were shot from their horses), ruthless Nazis in comics, forever exclaiming *Achtung* – take us directly to questions about the nature of history, our understanding of the past and the role of the historian. Bearing in mind that many of us don't come to these subjects without prejudice, how can we gain access to the past with enough understanding and complexity that we neither accept unquestioningly an impressionistic historical narrative nor reject one that is broadly convincing to an intelligent reader? In short, how might we determine the status of historical knowledge?

In order to consider this question we must return to the historian Geoffrey Elton. The rather comfortable view held by Elton that the past is there and all we have to do is record it in a logical and coherent way is one which formed the cornerstone of the discipline of history when it emerged in the nineteenth century, largely with the life and work of the German historian, Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886). Von Ranke, whom we shall meet again in Chapter 8, lived by his famous maxim that the job of the historian was to show the past as it really happened. Since then, many important historians, with Elton-inspired rationalism, have attempted to do precisely this. From the perspective of Carr-like subjectivists, however, the whole edifice of that particular maxim is built on the mistaken premise that the past is out there just waiting to be discovered and then recovered by professionals trained in all the appropriate skills of gathering evidence and putting the fragments together again to form a whole picture true to its original likeness.

According to Elton 'the reality – yes, the truth – of the past exists in materials of various kinds, produced by the past at the time that it occurred and left behind by it as testimony' (Elton, 1998,

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p. 52). What Elton is claiming here is that evidence is the basis of proper History with a capital 'H'. Historians are firmly bound by its authority, and must not use fiction to fill in the gaps that inevitably exist. It is in the sources – the evidential facts – that Elton's 'truth' can be found. But it is, of course, only the skilled, the professionally trained historian, who is able to do the proper work with such sources – only he or she who with an objective and open mind can select, evaluate and arrange them into a meaningful account of the past. These then are questions that take us to the heart of what it means to be objective in our approach to history; that is, how we can be free of bias or prejudice caused by personal feelings, excessive imagination or memories, and who it is that we can regard as a *bona fide* historian.

Now there are elements of this argument with which no historian, professional or otherwise, could quarrel. Elton recognizes that history is not the study of the past (we have no time machine to allow us to travel back in time), but the study of what remains of the past in the present. Clearly we must take evidence seriously: approach it with honesty and integrity, even if we find it does not accord with an argument we are trying to make. Historical facts found in the evidence cannot under any circumstances be squeezed into preconceived notions of what it is that we wish to argue and made to fit a pre-existing theory. Similarly, evidence ought not to be disregarded if we find it does not accord with our argument, no matter how beautifully designed that argument may be. We certainly should not make up evidence; making doubtful causal links between persons and events that may strengthen that argument but which would make that argument false. Even with these basic provisos, there remain real problems in relying purely on evidence as the necessary basis of an historical account.

Underlying Elton's approach to history is the premise that somehow the process of research and writing can be undertaken in an objective way by the historian. In a sense, Percival Spear's book on India contained that assumption. Others argue that subjectivity is unavoidable, that we are all creatures profoundly influenced by both the past and by history. Perhaps what Elton fails to recognize is the sheer impossibility of tackling evidence with neutrality. Not that all historians have a particular axe to grind – most are not engaged in propaganda work which blatantly sets out to assassinate historical characters or causes. Nor are we especially motivated by emotions such as anger, love or contempt. Rather, we all inhabit particular social and political environments which will inevitably influence how we construct our histories. For the new social historians of the 1960s and 1970s, as we shall find in Chapter 12, subjectivity became a virtue when certain historians were encouraged to use their own experiences in the present to shape their reading of historical evidence. This was true in particular of socialist and feminist historians who encouraged a dialogue between workers and historians.

It is the increasing recognition of the importance of historical truth that has given rise to something of a transformation in historical thought over the last twenty years. Such has been this transformation that there are now currents in the philosophy of history which almost completely invert the relationship between evidence and interpretation. As we have seen, for Elton evidence is the origin and basis of all historical knowledge, whereas more recent interventions point to the critical importance of the interpretation of evidence and indeed the status of evidence. We introduced the term postmodern in the opening section, and return to the topic in Chapter 9, but for now it is enough to say that postmodern historiography denies that historical truth is possible. The past is not out there simply to be grasped, but is actively created by historians working with particular values, ideologies and interpretations. The task, then, is not only to scrutinize the evidence, but also to reveal the processes through which that evidence is used to create interpretations of past events. This in many ways can be seen as a healthy development, not least

in revealing the hidden ideologies in historical accounts. Unfortunately, as in all such movements when established orthodoxies are being challenged, an awful lot of heat is wasted in vituperative debate, insult and misrepresentation.

Both these positions are unfair and untenable. We cannot dismiss the whole corpus of previous historiography as theoretically naive simply because emphasis is given to this evidence rather than to the problem of interpretation. Many historians working within this tradition have provided us with rich, sophisticated accounts of historical events and change. If we subsequently wish to read them with due recognition of the moment they were produced and the framework they inhabited, then they must retain their value. Yet, equally, we cannot dismiss postmodern history as a mere figment of their imaginations. To our knowledge, no historian working within this tradition would dismiss evidence as inconsequential – that, for example, the Holocaust had no material reality; all take it seriously. Postmodern historians, however, argue that for it to be understood, that materiality has to be appropriated by ideas and theories about the nature of historical change, of the rituals of human behaviour and the very status or form of writing itself. Historians, needless to say, are not neatly divided between ‘empiricists’ and ‘postmodernists’. When we say ‘empiricists’ we mean (in brief) historians that rely on fact-gathering and the narrow use of our senses to interpret those facts. All historians, however, are cognizant of the need to explore the limits of historical knowledge and the place of the historian in the creation and transformation of knowledge as they encounter the fragments of the past in the present. To do this well, something must be known about choosing and interpreting evidence – the very issues confronted in the next section with a survey of the historiography of Chartism.

SECTION 3: CHOOSING EVIDENCE, CHALLENGING INTERPRETATIONS

Monday was a traditional day of riot and protest in Britain and was derived from a traditional holiday called St Maundy. Probably for this reason, on Monday, 25 September 1838, the Manchester Political Union organized a rally at Kersal Moor, Salford in the north of England, where an estimated 300,000 people gathered and marched from the Manchester factories to the moors accompanied by bands and carrying banners rescued from the ‘massacre’ at Peterloo in 1819. ‘More pigs less parsons’, or ‘For children and wife, we war to the knife’ exclaimed the banners as they were carried that day by the so-called Chartist who demanded the ‘six points’ of political reform, namely, universal male suffrage, annual parliaments, vote by secret ballot, abolition of the property qualification for members of parliament, payment of MPs and equal electoral constituencies.

Chartist activity, intense though it was, had all but ceased by the final National Convention in 1858. Nonetheless, in its aftermath, all Chartism’s demands were subsequently granted except, mercifully, annual parliaments. Since then, the rise and fall of Chartism has attracted much attention from historians: was it economic, social or political in nature? Was it a national or a regional movement? Was it well or badly led? Was it revolutionary? Did it succeed or fail? The purpose of this section then is to use Chartism as a case study in order to demonstrate how historians build knowledge through innovative approaches to research and the deployment of evidence, and in so doing transform our historical understanding.

Some historians have located Chartism in the long history of radicalism beginning with the seventeenth-century agitation by the Levellers, and their ‘People’s Agreement’ which included demands for popular sovereignty and the extension of suffrage, or the dissenting, agrarian

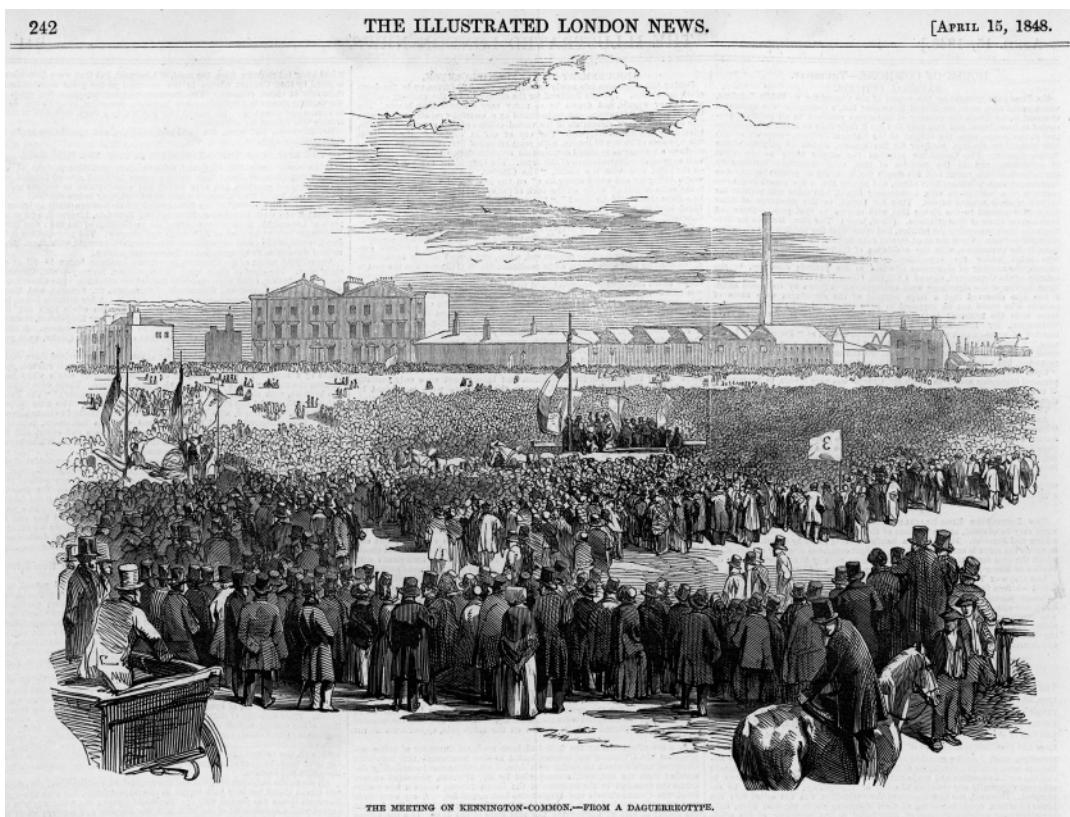


FIGURE 1.2 Chartist meeting at Kennington Common, London, April 1848. Although large, the gathering signalled the demise of the movement.

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communism of the Diggers. Alternatively, the election of the radical John Wilkes in the Middlesex elections of the 1760s and 1770s (mentioned briefly in the opening section and discussed again in Chapter 10) is sometimes regarded as the beginning of the democratic impulse in Britain (see Chapter 8). Whatever its origins, radicalism in Britain received a boost from the American and French Revolutions and the radical pamphleteering of such activists as Obadiah Hulme, James Burgh and Major John Cartwright in the 1770s, which acted as counterweights to popular loyalty and led to the state suppression of radical agitation in the mid-1790s. Radicalism revived at the end of the French wars or else went underground, while political radicalism such as that of the Tory William Cobbett (he from the first section who despised the Cotswolds because it fed the industrial masses in London) prospered, taking us down to Peterloo in 1819 and beyond. Next, the rise of philosophical radicalism and economic reform gave rise to influential figures such as the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham, and promoted a heightened interest in parliamentary reform. A quiescent state in the mid-1820s, during a period of relative prosperity, was followed by revival of activity over religious disabilities in 1828–9 which informed middle class agitation down to the First Reform Act of 1832, the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, and emergence of working-class agitation that fed Chartism until (and beyond) the European revolutions of 1848.

This largely working-class agitation demanded land nationalization and legislative change to free workers from 'industrial slavery'. Reforms to the poor law, support for the unemployed and calls for the disestablishment of the Church of England as administrators of relief to the poor, and for a system of free education (including the establishment of industrial schools) anticipated the rise of the welfare state of the early twentieth century. Likewise, the reforms to the state anticipated an inclusive pluralism that brought nonconformists (non-Anglican Protestants), Catholics, Jews and atheists into the 'pale of the constitution' in advance of the introduction of universal suffrage and the rise of mass politics.

Given this narrative, how has Chartist been treated by historians? How have they chosen which evidence to highlight and how have they interpreted that evidence? What, more generally, has characterized the changing approaches to these questions? Early histories of radicalism made an explicit link between the political and social motivations for Chartist – 'the knife and fork question'. Both Fabian (the intellectual arm of the British labour movement that argued for the evolutionary transformation of capitalism) and Marxist histories regarded Chartist as the forerunners of the modern Labour movement. A key figure in the movement and in its subsequent historiography was Francis Place (1771–1836). A follower of the radical William Godwin (1756–1836) and a member of the London Corresponding Society, which boasted of its unlimited membership sympathetic to the egalitarian aims of the French Revolution, Place had made his name as part of the Westminster elections with Francis Burdett. He also, in 1838, with the London Working Men's Association, helped to draft the People's Charter; only thereafter becoming disillusioned with Chartist and its rainbow coalition of currency reformers, socialist and cooperative followers of Robert Owen, and local heroes with their almost infinite variety of colourful views. After opposing factory reform and supporting the Anti-Corn Law League, he retired to write the voluminous account of his times which Robert Gammage's *History of the Chartist Movement* (1894), Graham Wallas' *Life of Francis Place* (1898) and countless scholars have drawn upon since.

The Place collection held in the British Library has been known about and used by historians since at least the 1890s. Evidence of the Chartist experience, however, was not yet fully known until the 1940s, and the interpretation of Chartist had advanced little. Marxist histories highlighted 'physical force' Chartist as part of a heritage of revolutionary politics and this too was of a piece with contemporary Communist politics. Likewise, both Theodore Rothstein's *From Chartist to Labourism* (1929) and Reg Groves' *But We Shall Rise Again* (1938) emphasized the evolutionary and revolutionary strands within Chartist but did so with a Popular Front agenda in mind (the touchstone of radical politics and historiography in the 1930s that argued for a united force on the left to counter right-wing and reactionary politics). Fabian historiography (in which for these purposes we can count G.D.H. Cole's *Chartist Portraits* (1941), continued the biographical tradition begun by Gammage), tended towards framing the 'moral force' element of Chartist as part of a constitutional and gradualist politics that he largely supported in his own day. Cole and then the historian George Kitson Clark (1900–75), in a 1953 book, were keen to emphasize how 'rational Chartist' or 'hungry Chartist' was a movement broken by working class divisions of the sort that wrecked the 1950s Labour Party, then out of power, and which served as a warning to internal dissidents of the danger of division. The concern was with contemporary working class unity as much as it was with the objective truths thrown up by historical research.

That Chartist served as a cautionary tale for those on the Left facing a formidable foe was emphasized less by the Liberal historians J. L. (1872–1949) and Barbara (1873–1961) Hammond who in their very popular *The Age of the Chartists, 1832–1852* (1930), did something to address the

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ambivalence Liberals had hitherto felt towards Chartistism. Likewise, Asa Briggs (1921–2016) wrote *Chartist Studies* (1959) and opened up a commentary from a social democratic perspective. Questions were posed about the effect of the trade cycle on the ebb and flow of Chartist militancy, seen very much as a local and regional phenomenon. As a celebrant of the radical tradition, Francis Williams, a journalist and Labour Party activist, wrote *Fifty Years' March: The Rise of the Labour Party* (1949) and *The Magnificent Journey: The Rise of the Trade Unions* (1954), but did so in a way that presented the history of radicalism as the history of class, which by then had become a shared determinant among historians of various political traditions.

Enter Dorothy Thompson (1923–2011) who was perhaps the most influential historian of Chartistism. Her students and followers – James Epstein, Neville Kirk, John Saville and Geoff Eley – together transformed Chartist studies, emphasizing the national characteristics of Chartistism as the culmination of a ‘literate and sophisticated’ working-class radicalism which simultaneously renewed Chartistism as a political, rather than an economic movement. In the intervention launched by *The Chartists: Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution* (1984), Thompson:

- saw a need for a general survey of what we thought we knew about Chartistism
- rejected local studies which suggested that Chartistism was simply a series of protest movements
- introduced a longer timeline for Chartistism (back to 1832)
- placed less emphasis on the heterogeneity of Chartist support, rethinking the occupations of Chartists
- detected a common language based on what she argued to be a coherent political and social programme

Chartism is thus an example of an historical question that has been through several phases of historiography, its parameters set firm by both the evidence and the conceptual boundaries of the discipline. Biographical accounts focused on leadership, placing emphasis on ‘moral force’ or ‘physical force’ Chartistism, the political or social aspects of their demands, Chartistism as a series of local protests versus Chartistism as a systematic national movement – all at one time or the other came to prominence. The archive, such as the Place papers, had been all but exhausted but still historians have found ways of reading evidence in new and interesting ways; this leads us to an important recent intervention in our understanding of Chartistism by Gareth Stedman Jones.

Stedman Jones in an essay called ‘Rethinking Chartistism’, republished in *Languages of Class* (1983), transformed our knowledge of Chartistism and simultaneously the methodology of modern historical studies. Stedman Jones adopted the notion that language – how we describe the world – is prior to our experience of it. In short, for Stedman Jones social being was not reflected simply in consciousness to be revealed through empirical procedures of Marxism, it was organized by language. Thus by studying the language used by Chartists, he insisted that the movement was not a perfect contemporary reflection of a revolutionary class-consciousness in the 1840s but instead employed language that was situated as a challenge to the ‘Old Corruption’ of land, church and aristocracy which belonged to the period before 1832. This language was of the eighteenth century, not the 1840s, the decade in which Chartistism ostensibly thrived. It was language used by Wilkes in the 1760s and 1770s and by other radicals in the 1790s following the French Revolution, not a language that could possibly be used to critique a new industrial order. Thus the banners carried onto Kersal Moor in 1838 with which we began the section – ‘More pigs less parsons’ – was indeed a political language but one aimed at the church not the poverty induced by industrialization. Nor could Chartistism be a mirror held up to Peel’s 1841–6 government measures.

As suggested by Miles Taylor (1996), an historian of nineteenth-century popular politics, Thompson and Stedman Jones had much in common:

- both were sceptical about Chartism as a local phenomenon
- both said Chartism was not simply a protest movement but had greater coherence
- both wanted to emphasize the political elements of Chartism
- both recognized the rational nature of Chartist arguments
- both located Chartism within a longer chronology of radicalism

They disagreed profoundly, however, about why Chartism collapsed and they did so not because new evidence had become known but because new interpretations were now available. For Thompson it was because the working class had lost the collective belief that they could reform politics in the conditions thrown up by mid-century capitalism; for Stedman Jones it was the collapse of the Chartist critique of the state, a critique inherited from a pre-reform politics. (We shall say more about the state in Chapter 10.) This disagreement was as much a disagreement of approach to the relevant facts: for Stedman Jones, Chartism could not respond to the limited nature of factory reform – new policing legislation, reform of local government and the New Poor Law; for Thompson, the state restricted newspapers and trade unions, crushed class consciousness, which in turn led to the collapse of Chartism.

The result of this debate about what we consider to be evidence and how we approach it, has led to fresh strands of enquiry: especially the systematic study of language and symbols; what the early historian of Chartism Robert Gammage once called the ‘gaudy trappings’ of Chartism – poetry, ballads, hymns, banners and flags. Thompson was always inclined to seek out the expressive aspects of the movement, but this and revisions based on the languages of what the historian Edward Royle called ‘Chartist culture’, have seen some rich work undertaken in popular politics more generally. Patrick Joyce in his *Democratic Subjects* (1994) attacked class as a universal category and looked instead for ‘other discourses of “the People” that were not confined to Chartist agitation’. Margot Finn (1993) took Chartism beyond its usual periodization, connected it to European nationalism and socialism of the 1860s, while Eugenio Biagini and Alistair Reid took up Chartism, like Stedman Jones, as one part of a radical tradition that stretches forward to influence both Gladstonian Liberalism and a nascent Labour movement.

The most recent contributions to Chartist scholarship have not successfully challenged the approach of Stedman Jones, although Ariane Schnepf’s *Our Original Rights as a People* (2006) has attempted just that. Instead there are studies which take the reader across the whole narrative of Chartism, such as Malcolm Chase’s *Chartism: A New History* (2007), and W. Hamish Fraser’s *Chartism in Scotland* (2010). There is even a turn back to biography that had originally characterized historical writing about the Chartists from the 1850s with Stephen Roberts looking at the career histories of Chartist figures Thomas Cooper and Arthur O’Neill in his *The Chartist Prisoners* (2008). Yet none of these worthwhile additions to the genre was content to make do with accepted ‘facts’; instead they did what historians ought to do – they concentrated equally on both the choice and selection of evidence, and balanced theory and evidence.

By focusing on this one area of historiography we should be in a position to pull together some of the themes of the chapter. Whether the historian is objective or subjective about the Chartist phenomenon is not important if it is believed that historical evidence remains unsullied by the unreasonable prejudice of the historian or even influenced by the time in which the history is researched and written. Nor should an approach that regards the historian as objective, treating the

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past as quite unconnected to the present, necessarily be a right-wing or conservative idea. The radical historian, E. P. Thompson (1924–93), for example, saw wife sales (like his essays on ‘rough music’ in 1972 or the ‘moral economy’ in 1971) as an instance of a ‘rebellious traditional culture’ among the masses against a background of industrialization, an illustration of ‘the disassociation between patrician and plebeian cultures’. This suggested a concern for radical and class-based experiences but these historical experiences were, Thompson maintained, first revealed to him through primary sources.

Thompson as a Marxist did not collapse into a subjective empathy – the historical imagination that Stephen Fry invited us to apply to the past may well have been far too soft focused and woolly for Thompson. He used the archive in order to glimpse social relations among a stratum of society previously treated with condescension: an attempt by the mainly rural poor to claim rights in the face of a rapidly changing economy and a plebeian culture that was separate from its patrician counterpart. In using that archive he applied method just as surely as Elton. Indeed, in an argument with Raphael Samuel in the pages of the *History Workshop Journal* in the 1990s, Thompson railed against the ‘modish subjectivism now so current’ and argued that the evidence of the archive was not ‘silent and inert to be manipulated into any form the questioner proposed. Nor can the choice of context or setting be decided by the flip of a coin’. When Samuel suggested that the idea of wife sales as an unofficial form of divorce was ‘like any piece of historical reasoning and research, it was a child or creature of its time’, Thompson insisted instead and not without irritation that his argument had derived ‘from the instances which kept popping up in the newspapers when I was researching’ (Thompson 1992). From this debate alone we can see that advances in our knowledge of the past depends upon – indeed thrives on – the judgements of historians and continued debates among them. History is about argument and so solid advice for any student would be to ‘go argue’.

SECTION 4: CAUSES IN HISTORY

We wish to end this chapter by focusing on the most important – and intractable – question faced by historians today, namely, can historians ever *explain* what happened in the past? The question may seem an obvious one, but it is perhaps surprising how little attention it has commanded among historians in the long term. As we shall see when we come, in Chapter 5, to review how the discipline developed, the question of interpretation was not taken seriously until the Enlightenment. Previous historians had tended to work in order to chronicle events as a means of celebrating past achievements, or of bolstering the claims of particular rulers. In this respect, history rarely rose above the level of propaganda. Furthermore, if ever they articulated a sense of historical process by describing, say, how a particular society progressed, this was almost invariably seen as the result of divine providence or accident.

The other barrier which modern historians needed to overcome was that of positivism, a system of thought that had dominated historical inquiry since the nineteenth century. We have already touched on this in the earlier discussion of Geoffrey Elton, a twentieth-century historian who continued to adhere to this philosophy, but now it is necessary to flesh out the arguments a little. Positivism was a philosophy of knowledge that had its roots in, and came to define the methodology of the natural sciences in the early modern period. It held that priority be given to the compilation and organization of facts on the basis of which general (scientific) laws could then be induced. Historians were seduced by this approach, and so set about gathering all the facts they

could lay their hands on. Not only that, they recognized that the facts – or historical evidence as they preferred to call this material – needed to be as reliable and authentic as possible. Much time was therefore devoted to a critical examination of the gathered evidence before it could be given their seal of approval. The result was a vast increase in the store of evidence, almost all of which derived from documentary sources such as commentaries, state papers, court records and correspondence. (It was to be many years before other sources including archaeological, literary and photographic were taken seriously.)

The transition from facts to general laws, however, which seemed to be accomplished with great success in the natural sciences, worked less well in history. The main problem was in the evidence itself. Scientific evidence tended to be much more secure, reliable and controllable. Facts were gathered by scientists under strictly monitored conditions. They derived from first-hand observation which, if necessary, could be repeated time and again. No historian enjoyed such privileges. The inevitable outcome was that history remained rooted in the compilation of facts which came to be seen as its sole *raison d'être*. Thus it was that nineteenth-century historians such as von Ranke could claim that the task of the historian was to report things as they actually happened.

Alternative currents of thought emerged in the course of the century which challenged this comforting orthodoxy. Sociological thinking gained momentum. Led by Auguste Comte (1798–1857), sociologists began to argue that historical evidence offered something more important and interesting than the mere recording of events (Collingwood, 1961, pp. 128–31). If historians could not follow the example of natural scientists, then he proposed a new social science of sociology, which would use historical and contemporary evidence as the platform to launch into an investigation of the causal connections among the facts, on the basis of which sociologists could explain patterns of human behaviour and derive laws of societal change. Thus, according to Comte, the sociologist was a super-historian because he or she elevated history to the rank of a science, and historians to scientists instead of mere collectors and recorders of evidence.

The second impulse for change came from the work of Charles Darwin. The idea of a static natural world had long been discarded before *The Origin of Species* first appeared in 1859, but that of evolution through natural selection was truly original and seismic in its impact. Despite its many detractors, evolution conquered science, and began increasingly to appeal to historians. Evolution, after all, was predicated on the notion of progress over time, and so it came to be viewed as a theory that could be applied as much to historical as natural change. Grand theories about the steady progress of civilization, particularly in the modern era when the Enlightenment had banished the age of bigotry, darkness and superstition, and industrialization and liberalization provided great hope for the future of a free and prosperous human race owed much to this current of thought.

This exciting opening up of historical inquiry, however, presented a whole new range of philosophical and methodological questions with which historians still grapple. Many historians employed narrative as a vehicle to identify causal links. Story telling was an integral part of positivist approaches to the past, especially in biographical accounts where the motives of individual actors could readily be unearthed, and so it was a matter of framing their narratives with a greater rigour. Diplomatic and political histories have been, and continue to be prone to approaches relying on the stated intent and tactics of the main players (Tosh, 2002, pp. 142–50). Individual motive, however, has proved an uncertain and unreliable guide to historical causation. There is often a real discrepancy between what historical actors say about their motives, understandings and policies, and how they actually choose to act in particular situations. The stated aims of the Court of Directors of the East India Company, for example, are poor guides to

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measures taken by company officials on the ground in eighteenth-century India. Equally importantly, individuals rarely display an awareness of structural changes such as modernization, demography or popular sensibilities within which they worked and which necessarily underpinned the historical changes they witnessed.

Ultimately, because human behaviour is extraordinarily complex, as are its causes, one-dimensional explanations are unreliable and inaccurate. Stephen Kern has recently highlighted some of these issues by exploring the changing interpretations of murder in western culture and the bodies of knowledge upon which they have drawn (Kern, 2004). His emphasis is chiefly on literary forms but the same motifs operate in works of history. Concomitant with the rise of sociology in the early decades of the nineteenth century, Kern argues, western thinkers transformed understanding of human behaviour and its causes. Advances in disciplines including genetics, economics, biology, criminology and philosophy provided the impetus, but they were most popularly evident in the novel which came to act as a filter for 'scientific' explanations. Crime fiction is a particularly good example. Early novels of this genre displayed strongly determinist causal factors such as monomania in *Moby Dick* and poverty in *Oliver Twist*, but as the century wore on these factors became increasing layered and multifaceted. With this, the search for unambiguous causality found in many Victorian novels was abandoned as writers more willingly accepted open-ended plots with no definite closure (*ibid.*, p. 12).

The pleasing irony here is that this move to complexity and uncertainty reflected broader structural changes in society, notably the increasing interdependence and remoteness of social and economic relationships which resulted from the expansion of industrial capitalism and urbanization. History, in other words, caused shifts in the ways in which causality itself was viewed. And these changes were manifest in the broad causal themes identified by Kern, namely, ancestry, childhood, language, sexuality, emotion, mind, society and ideas, all of which featured strongly both in scientific research and crime fiction. A few examples from Kern must suffice. In *Dracula* (1897), Bram Stoker skilfully combines ancestry and criminality. The count is heir to predatory impulses passed down through the bloodline from one generation to another. But Stoker also drew freely upon the work of the influential Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso who had done much to popularize the notion that 'criminal types' had clearly recognizable features. Thus, the count was identified as a criminal type with an imperfectly formed mind, evidence of which could be detected in his aquiline nose, bushy eyebrows and pointed ears. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) depicts the use of hormones to activate and quell aggressive impulses. In his dystopian vision, female embryos are injected with male sex hormones, the urges of adult females are placated with mammary gland extracts, and adults chew sex-hormone gum. When necessary to discharge aggression, hormones are even used to simulate murder. And when in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) the house of a poor farmer is about to be bulldozed, his murderous intent is defused by the driver's assertion that there is no one to blame and therefore no one to be shot. Anonymous, remote corporate greed is ultimately responsible for the farmer's desperate plight.

These are solitary fictional characters whose experiences may not translate that readily into history. Except that there are abundant examples from biographies of real historical actors which employ the same strategies and narrative devices in identifying causal relationships. The all-too-numerous studies of Hitler, for example, include the full range of sociological, psychological, economic and sexual motives in attempting to explain his monstrous behaviour. Rudolph Binion's psycho-history *Hitler among the Germans* (1976) is typical. Binion proposes that traumas from Hitler's early life were largely responsible for his subsequent genocide of the Jews. Before his birth, Hitler's mother lost three children to diphtheria, in response to which she became over-

protective of Adolf, breast feeding him well into teething but simultaneously conveying feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Later she was diagnosed with breast cancer and had a double mastectomy, largely on the recommendation of a Jewish doctor. But the cancer returned, and Hitler insisted the doctor – against his better advice – apply daily a pungent drug Iodoform to the suppurating scars, but to no avail for the mother died, probably from ingesting the drug. Using notions of oral trauma and Freudian oedipal theory, Binion uses these events to explain Hitler's hatred of Jews and the constant references he makes to the removal of the poison and cancer within German society (Kern, 2006, pp. 79–85).

Most historians, however, justifiably remain sceptical of such approaches. The elevation of largely accidental events to principal causal status in explaining momentous historical happenings is misleading, even foolhardy. Quite apart from Binion's reliance on uncertain psychoanalytical theory, there remains the whole question of whether historical change can be explained by reference to a single factor. Arguably, Hitler's hatred of the Jews had just as much to do with Germany's crisis following defeat in the First World War, the ancient lineages of anti-semitism, and an aggressive nationalism.

In order to develop the critique of moncausal explanations let us consider examples of somewhat limited historical thinking about other momentous events. It is widely believed that the United States was eventually compelled to enter the Second World War by the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, but as John Gaddis shows with admirable clarity, the reality was rather different:

It would make no sense . . . to begin an account of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour with the launching of the planes from their carriers: you'd want to know how the carriers came to be within range of Hawaii, which requires explaining why the government in Tokyo chose to risk war with the United States. But you can't do that without discussing the American oil embargo against Japan, which in turn was a response to the Japanese takeover of French Indochina. Which of course resulted from the opportunity provided by France's defeat at the hands of Nazi Germany, together with frustrations Japan had encountered in trying to conquer China. Accounting for all this, however, would require some attention to the rise of authoritarianism and militarism during the 1930s, which in turn had something to do with the Great Depression as well as the perceived iniquities of the post-World War I settlement, and so on.

(Gaddis, 2002, p. 95, cited in Hewitson, 2014, p. 105)

The oft-quoted claim – to take another example – that the First World War was caused by the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand is likewise suspect for it ignores the deeper structural shifts brought by imperial and industrial rivalries, the struggles over resources, inept diplomatic manoeuvrings, and even the destructive impulses of modernization. And so it is simply not true (as we have found in this very chapter) that the Indian Mutiny was caused by forcing sepoyys to bite rifle cartridges smeared with pig fat, or that the abolition of slavery was driven solely by humanitarian desires to free enslaved Africans and their descendants.

So where does all this leave the question of historical causation? If we reject the idea of a single causal factor, or of the determining influence of individual actors then are we necessarily forced to accept the view that historical causation is multivalent and multilayered? Yes, we think it does; and yet does this get us any further? It may well be that the sheer plurality of causation prevents us from achieving a totally satisfactory – and satisfying – explanation of any historical event. Perhaps the philosopher of science K. Codell Carter was right when he insisted 'how totally pointless,

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hopeless, and downright silly it is to think one can ever state *precisely* what it is for one thing to cause another' (Carter, 2003, p. 199 cited in Kern, 2006, p. 26).

Inspired by the call of Comte and others, many historians applied themselves to the task of uncovering general laws that could explain the course of historical change. One of the most influential was, of course, Karl Marx (see Chapter 8). All history is the history of class struggle, he declared, and it was this which acted as a motor force to drive historical transformation from primitive communism through distinct stages to capitalism and eventually communism. Such approaches proved extremely resilient and versatile as they gave rise to most of the subsequent schools of interpretative history striving for a narrative of universal application. Marxism, the *Annales* school, modernization theory and the histories of imperialism were all built on nineteenth-century precursors. In the past thirty years, however, these have come under increasing attack. Few historians would now accept Marxist narratives. Not only do they rely too heavily upon determinist conceptions of the relationship between the economic base and societal infrastructure, but they are also wedded to a teleology of historical change which when compared with the detailed record is unreliable. It goes further, for now, as part of the postmodern critique of historical practice, all such grand narratives have largely been abandoned (Chapter 9).

What, then, is left to the hapless historian in pursuit of the holy grail of causation? If we are still interested (as we should be) in explaining human behaviour, then it remains the case that this has to be seen in the appropriate historical context in all of its manifestations. This is easier said than done. The paucity and fragility of much historical evidence, the distinction of relationships which are causal rather than merely linked, and the ordering of causal hierarchies according to their relevance continue to present significant challenges; and if we find monocausal approaches unattractive, or are overwhelmed by causal plurality, then perhaps we might make progress by thinking in terms of limits or boundaries. Thus recourse to an understanding of broad, underlying structural processes may provide the key also to an understanding of human actors, not in the sense of determining their behaviour but rather of setting limits to, or defining the boundaries of the options which are available to them. Joan Wallace Scott has nicely stated the case:

[S]ubjects do have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them. Being a subject means being 'subject to definite conditions of existence, conditions of endowment of agents and conditions of exercise. These conditions enable choices, although they are not unlimited'.

(Scott, 2007, p. 793)

Precisely what a subject is, or what conditions we are interested in takes us into debates that cannot be pursued here. Such complex debates on causation continue to exercise the more philosophically minded historians, and the obscure detail need not trouble us unduly. But it is vital to retain a critical perspective on historical writing by constantly asking what notions of causality obtain, with what results?

POSTSCRIPT

Many of us were encouraged to believe at school that since history books recorded events as they happened they were reliable and truthful statements about the past. Hopefully, anyone who has continued an interest in history – whether an established researcher or someone reading a history

book or watching a television documentary as a source of relaxation and entertainment – has had the resourcefulness to develop a more critical awareness of such accounts, and therefore should be sufficiently aware of the need to ask probing questions about the nature of the evidence presented and how it has been used by the writers.

What is clear from the consideration in this chapter of how historians have approached the past is that there is no consensus; indeed the topic has remained a contentious one. In the course of the nineteenth century when history emerged as a discipline in its own right, the task of the historian was seen to be that of recording things as they actually happened. This seemed obvious enough. Under appropriate circumstances, any historian trained in the techniques of working with evidence could produce a solid picture of the past. This vision of the role of the historian has proved to be remarkably enduring; indeed, many historians today would accept in large measure that this is what they strive for.

Recent scholarship, however, has begun to unsettle this rather too convenient approach. Until we have a time machine, it is argued, historians cannot work in the past, but examine in the present what evidence has survived from the past. Even historians are creatures of their time, and so are in some ways influenced by the spirit of the age no matter how much they may wish to rise above such mundane considerations. The debate between Geoffrey Elton, in the blue corner, representing the traditional historian, and E. H. Carr, in the red corner (no necessary significance here in the colour coding), representing a more critical approach to evidence, addresses directly these sorts of concerns. Unlike Elton, Carr contends that since we are all unable to divorce ourselves from contemporary political and social concerns, our approach to historical evidence can never be objective or dispassionate. This challenges the idea of the potential neutrality of the historian as recorder and questions whether we can ever gain access to historical truth.

In certain respects, we can. We know beyond reasonable doubt, for example, that Earl Cornwallis surrendered to the combined forces of North America and France on 19 October 1781, that a Bosnian nationalist assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914, and that Jawaharlal Nehru declared Indian independence from British rule at midnight, 17 August 1947. Yet historical debates still rage on the historical significances of these events and whether (another preoccupation of this chapter) historical cause can be established by the historian.

The topic of historical causality is neglected at our peril; that one agent, structure or event is the ‘cause’ of an historical trend, is difficult to defend. Thus although we have access to what might be described as evidential truth, that same evidence can be used in very different ways by historians to construct a narrative and hence interpret the historical significance of the episode. When Percival Spear wrote of the aftermath of the Indian Mutiny, he used limited evidential truths to forge a distinct account that in many respects is open to challenge by historians who have less sympathy for British rule. Theories on nationalist struggles, the role of the individual in historical processes, the nature of imperial power and so on will thus shape how historians view evidence.

Carr concluded that evidence and theory must be in continual dialogue, that is, theories must be tested against evidence, and evidence viewed through the lens of theory. The theory in question can be that suggested by Gareth Stedman Jones to historians of Chartism. Without digging up a single new fact, Stedman Jones has suggested an approach to existing evidence that has utterly transformed the way modern historians think about both Chartism as a movement and popular politics more generally.

These, then, are the sorts of questions we should bear in mind when approaching the past. The past is gone – we can never gain access to it except through the evidence which has survived to the present. What we do with that evidence determines the sort of accounts which are written.

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