

public spaces as varied as museums, local historical societies, TV documentaries, historic sites, theme parks, and CD-ROM "textbooks."

History does matter, and it is important for Americans at the end of the twentieth century to understand how the recent history wars have unfolded, how these struggles are connected to earlier arguments over interpreting the past, and what this tells us about the state of our society. This book argues that contention over the past is as old as written history itself, that the democratizing of the history profession has led to more inclusive and balanced presentations of American and world history, and that continuously reexamining the past, rather than piously repeating traditional narratives, is the greatest service historians can render in a democracy.

What Is History? Why History?

The four most famous historians of the Greek and Roman world were Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, and Tacitus. Together they established historical writing as both a literary genre and an intellectual discipline. Their re-creations of the past were transcribed, read aloud, and remembered. Centuries later, after the invention of printing, the work of the early classical historians took the form of books, which can be found today in libraries, schools, and homes.

But these historians, though the first to write history, were by no means the first historians. For thousands of years before the Greeks, a society's memory was transmitted orally from generation to generation. Bards, storytellers, priests, and griots handed down to their children the collective past worth remembering. Almost every people has folk sayings that express the great importance of memory as precious and socially sustaining. "A people without history is like wind upon the buffalo grass," goes an old Teton Sioux saying. The Yoruba in West Africa tell their children, "However far the stream flows, it never forgets its source." Thomas Jefferson prescribed history for all who wished to take part in democratic government because it would "enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom." By reflecting on the past—other times, other people, other nations—citizens would be able "to judge of the future" and make up their own minds on the "actions and designs of men."

The human mind seems to require a usable past because historical memory is a key to self-identity, a way of comprehending one's place in the stream of time, and a means of making some sense of humankind's long story. It is nearly impossible to step outside of time, to cut oneself off from

the past as if its hand were not upon us. The study of history, moreover, reveals the long, hard path of human striving for dignity. Historical knowledge and perspective, while helping people to think intelligently about contemporary issues, have the deeper potential to provide personal moorings, both secular and religious. Literature, philosophy, art, music, and science have the same potential. But history is the most integrative of all disciplines. For the historian, nothing is beyond notice in the quest to understand the nature and meaning of change, the complexities of human behavior, and the multitude of connections between the past and our world today.

That history matters is indisputable. Americans are devouring huge numbers of history books. They flock to movies such as *Glory* and *Gettysburg*. By the millions they tune in to such television series as *Roots* and *The Civil War*. They visit historical sites in record-breaking numbers, often watching citizen "reenactors" make scenes from the past come alive. They reach deep into their pockets to help preserve, restore, and present the past.

History as Interpretation

In this education-minded nation, where every autumn more than 13 million Americans go to college, students who take history courses know what Rush Limbaugh doesn't: that written history is based on carefully gathered evidence but that historians must weave facts into plausible explanations of the human experience. History without explanation, without analysis, without pattern is barren chronicle. Most students also quickly learn that a great many facts of history come to us in somewhat less than pure form.

In today's history wars, phrases such as "revisionist history" and "historical revisionism" are bandied about as damning indictments of historians, who are seen as misled or malevolent creatures who "kidnap" or "steal" what traditionalists think is a single, agreed-upon history that exists "out there." Even centuries ago, intelligent people would have laughed at the notion that the past is nothing but a set of agreed-upon facts.

Before considering some examples, let us ask a simple question: How are facts determined, and how can all facts be gathered and authenticated before the writing of a history book begins? The number of "facts" is limitless, restricted only by the number of documents that have survived floods, fires, and the trash barrel. But if we could somehow find *all* the facts on a subject, the history of medieval England, for example, or the American westward movement, how would we establish their authenticity and neutrality?

Every individual document—whether in the form of official correspondence, diaries, autobiographies, private letters, legislative proceedings, diplomatic communiqués, newspapers, business accounts, or old Sears Roebuck catalogs—can tell us, as historian Edward Hallett Carr says, no more than “what the author of the document thought—what he thought had happened, what he thought ought to happen or would happen, or perhaps only what he wanted others to think he thought, or even only what he himself thought he thought.”⁷ Moreover, as the philosopher of history H. Stuart Hughes puts it, “Historians—in contrast to investigators in almost any other field of knowledge—very seldom confront their data directly. The literary or artistic scholar has the poem or painting before him; the astronomer scans the heavens through a telescope; the geologist tramps the soil he studies. . . . The historian alone is wedded to empirical reality and condemned to view his subject matter at second remove. He alone must accept the word of others before he even begins to devise his account.”⁸

Even material artifacts from the past—tombstones, campaign buttons, farm tools, dolls, powder horns, claw-footed bathtubs, porsheds, and much more—are inert, and become evidence only when historians ask questions about them. Three of today’s historians put it this way: “These traces, alas, never speak for themselves. . . . Usually they remain where people left them in discarded trunks in attics, in inscrutable notations in ledgers, in the floorings of abandoned buildings; sometimes they are collected in repositories and archives. Some of this physical residue lies forgotten, but close enough to the surface of life to be unexpectedly happened upon. Then like hastily buried treasure or poorly planted land mines they deliver great surprises.”⁹

Any work of history is necessarily selective because historians must choose the most relevant evidence in order to make sense of some part of the past. It is a “preposterous fallacy,” as Carr puts it, that historical “facts” exist “objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian.”¹⁰ “What I want is facts,” says Mr. Gradgrind in Dickens’s *Hard Times*, “Facts alone are wanted in life.” But anyone who studies history for social and cultural nourishment will get a poorly balanced diet if nothing but Rush Limbaugh’s factoids are served. The history-as-facts argument is not simply an uneducated view. It is also an ideological position of traditionalists and the political Right that particular facts, traditions, and heroic personalities, all untainted by “interpretation,” represent the “true” and “objective” history that citizens ought to know.

We are living in an era when unusually strident claims are made about how reinterpreters of history dishonor American traditions and demean Western values. The sky is falling, they say, because new faces crowding onto the stage of history ruin the symmetry and security of older versions

of the past. The argument masquerades under claims of objectivity and neutrality. In fact, one of the most important of all American traditions is education and citizenship that requires open inquiry and healthy skepticism about any account of the past, and open-mindedness to the possibility of new historical perspectives. This kind of tolerance and receptivity is itself a cardinal tenet of Enlightenment thought.

If interpretation—based carefully on information sifted from many sources—is the heart of historical inquiry, it is little different from the work of a lawyer who gathers evidence and builds a case to present to a jury. As detectives collect clues, following one bit of data to the next, so do historians. As lawyers write briefs, so do historians. As journalists amass facts in order to report and analyze today’s happenings, so historians gather evidence to write stories that interpret yesterday’s events.

To understand the *act* of writing history we must also recognize, as Thucydides did twenty-five hundred years ago, that the past is necessarily embedded in the present human condition. Frederick Jackson Turner, whose “Frontier Thesis” in American history made him famous, understood that to comprehend the United States on the eve of World War I “demands that we should rework our history from the new points of view afforded by the present.”¹¹ Carl Becker, a much revered historian of the same generation, spoke of the humility that all scholars ought to have in their search for the most convincing re-creation of the past: “In the history of history a myth is a once valid but now discarded version of the human story, as our now valid versions will in due course be relegated to the category of discarded myths.”¹² England’s Lord Christopher Hill echoes this: “History has to be rewritten in every generation because, although the past does not change, the present does; each generation asks new questions of the past, and finds new areas of sympathy as it re-lives different aspects of the experiences of its predecessors.”¹³

If today’s conservative politicians who yearn for an American golden age find it to their advantage to regard historical revision as an un-American activity, they will have to convince the public that there is, or has ever been, one indisputably true history. Again, the words of Carl Becker are useful: “It should be a relief to us to renounce omniscience, to recognize that every generation, our own included, will, must inevitably, understand the past and anticipate the future in the light of its own restricted experience.”¹⁴

Lawrence Levine, a recent president of the Organization of American Historians, has reiterated the necessity of continuously reevaluating the past. We cannot escape viewing history “through the prism of a changing present,” he writes, and need not regard this prism as “a prison” that condemns historians to a “flawed vision.” On the contrary, the present is “not