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The Scope of History

1.1 Introduction

The sense of the past as different is at the root of history, but this difference is far from fixed and the perception of it varies across time, by cultures and by individuals. The study of history is a key part of this perception. This sense of the past as different is in part ironic, as history is also a matter not only of roots but also of the continuing impact of roots in the present. Indeed, from that perspective, history provides both societies and individuals with a dimension of longitudinal meaning over time which far outlives the human lifespan. As such, it connects us with our past. As a result, memory has become an important feature of historical study as well as a form of history. Memory is important in connecting communities to different interpretations and differing aspects of the past. This feature of the phenomenon of history is readily apparent across the world.

Aside from considering the past in terms of remembrance or recollection, history provides accounts of the future. It does so by providing precedents for contemporary action, forewarning against the repetition of past mistakes and providing the apparent authority of the past for remedies offered for the future. For example, the 'Munich Agreement' (1938), which was part of the appeasement of Hitler, is used as a warning against inaction as frequently as 'Suez' or 'Vietnam' are used to discourage intervention. This is an aspect of the manner in which history provides apparent form and purpose to past, present and future, and thereby gives social value and enjoys reputation. However, many of these certainties have been challenged, and notably so over the last half-century.

The popular view of history, particularly in terms of the past that happened, tends to brush away the difficulties of assessing what did happen and the inconsistencies readily present in its exposition. As students of history find out, the clarity of the past dissolves as it is studied. There has been discussion of the extent to which history is a fictional enterprise created in the minds of historians. This is not so. History is not simply a matter of opinion. You might say to me that China attacked Pearl Harbor in 1940, and I can tell you that it was Japan that attacked, and in 1941. All opinions are not of equal merit.

4 Studying History

There has also been the systematic development of areas of historical inquiry which might once have appeared marginal or, at least, of lesser consequence. These include topics focused on ethnicity, race, culture, custom, gender, sexuality, immigrant and minority groups, women and children. Study of these areas has benefited greatly from the application in historical study of work in sociology, psychology, anthropology and other disciplines. As a consequence, historians are now highly receptive to the theories and methods of social science. The methodological implications of new discourses have also been considerable, notably in the types of material that are scrutinised.

This book offers students a route across the changing nature of historical inquiry. A principal task is to present a clear overview of the most important of these changes and to note that they impact upon scholarship. The first part, Chapters 1 to 3, provides a broad-ranging introduction to the study of history. Here we examine the changing nature of historical inquiry, considering how each age, if not generation, has produced different kinds of history. In so doing, we will see where the major approaches to historical inquiry which students encounter actually come from. The second part (Chapters 4 and 5) goes further by providing readers with a discussion of the sources and methodologies of historians, as well as an examination of the theories and concepts upon which innovations in historical discourse in recent decades have been based. The third part (Chapters 6 to 10) is much more concerned with the student's own practice of history. It is hoped that by making useful suggestions about reading, researching and writing, this part of the book will help students and others to engage more clearly, confidently and effectively with the subject and to develop their insights.

Before continuing, it is necessary to offer a theoretical point, namely that the very nature of historical inquiry forces us to confront many issues of conception and approach. In particular, history is not a neutral discipline founded upon an immutable body of facts. Instead, the past is frequently contested ground, and, both linked to this and separately to it, is perceived differently by competing groups and ideologies. Moreover, in terms of methods of research, as we shall discuss in Chapter 4, history is very much affected by the character and quality of the sources and by the methodologies adopted to deal with them.

1.2 The uses of history

History has a far broader utility and a much deeper social meaning than that represented by the activities of academics. Indeed, the past is our heritage and we feel a part of it, such that it is not gone. Academic

historians are sometimes prone to argue that their activities reflect the wider historical needs and desires of nations, but there is a marked disjuncture between the activities of academics and the need to tell the national story. This contrast has become more apparent as academics have become more marginal, first because of the rise of visual accounts of the past in the media and secondly thanks to the democratisation seen with the Internet. Indeed, in contrast with previous editions of this history, there is more discussion of public history and less of the views of academics. At the specific moment of writing the first draft of this section, the most prominent historical issue in public discussion in Britain is the campaign to remove from Oxford a statue of Cecil Rhodes, a noted nineteenth-century imperialist and also benefactor of the university who is now criticised for his role in British imperialism in southern Africa. It is striking that the discussion is largely conducted by members of the public, not academics, and the key commentators are journalists. So also in the United States with the question of the continued memorialisation of the Confederacy. The irrelevance of academics to the public world of history is readily apparent, and notably so in Britain where academic historians were once figures of considerable public significance, and their conclusions and methods subject to attention and debate. In contrast, few now care as much about such luminaries of the past as E. H. Carr, Geoffrey Elton, A. J. P. Taylor and E. P. Thompson. Today, such scholars will of course make the reading lists for specialist courses. Carr and Elton will still appear on reading lists, or in early lectures on courses designed to introduce university students to the essence of historical scholarship and practice. Both men, now long dead, feature in our work. However, students are more likely to use John Tosh's work, or Richard Evans's book, to frame their attempts to express views on facts, historians, historiography, methods, theories and approaches. Still more recently, scholars talk with more immediacy in Jo Guldi and David Armitage's *The History Manifesto* (2014) because they address history right now. It does not review fashions or approaches, so much as articulate the importance of history as a publicly important enterprise in an age of digital media, on-line sources, and political challenge. History speaks to the present in *The History Manifesto*, a book which notes the move away from narrow specialism to grander-scale accounts fit for an age where more sources are available at the fingertips of the Internet-connected computer user and where the state of world politics acutely needs historians and their works. The true target is the rise of the 'short term' in civic and political culture – something that can even be represented in a measurement of the rise of the term itself. The result worries them: 'the world around us is hungry for long-term thinking. In political science departments and over dinner tables, citizens around the world complain about political

stagnation and the limits of two-party systems. A lack of serious alternatives to laissez-faire capitalism is the hallmark of contemporary world governance' For these authors, universities are the keepers of the ability to question and critique. Institutions of higher education largely outlive businesses and companies, so that 'any search for antidotes to short-termism must begin with them'.

1.3 Television, mass media and history

The thoughts of *The History Manifesto* direct our attention to that screen of the short term: television. Attention to the television and the Internet are both now very prominent – more so than at any time. 'Watching' history now evokes particular meanings and leads to specific issues and particular controversies. Thus, in Britain in 2015, the announcement of a forthcoming BBC series on the history of world civilisations led to discussion about the bias that might be involved. Historians' input to television-making seems also to have grown greatly. In the UK, where once A. J. P. Taylor stood before a camera talking, now there is more lavish production in multiple locations, at home and overseas, in archive and studios, with the roll-call including (far from exclusively) Simon Schama, David Starkey, Suzannah Lipscomb, Lucy Worsley, Mary Beard, Dan Snow, Niall Ferguson and Bettany Hughes. Some scholars have carped, evincing a strange mixture of snobbishness and jealousy. For the historical profession, the positive effects of having so much historical programming is surely that it places the past at the centre of public life in the medium of popular culture, not that it dumbs down or marginalises monographs and articles. For research books and scholarly articles proliferate equally as much as TV history does.

Radio has been an important purveyor of historical knowledge, but the visual is, today, the most powerful medium of modern culture, even if the move from television to television plus Internet is having a range of effects. The visual is increasingly supplanting the literary representation of culture in the hierarchy of importance. This is true not only of Western societies but also elsewhere. By 1986, there were 195 million televisions in the United States and by 1994 99 per cent of UK households had a television. Per capita rates of ownership vary greatly and remain especially low in sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia. Nevertheless, because much of the Third World television viewing is a communal activity (as newspaper reading once was in the UK), with televisions in public buildings such as village halls, the impact of television is greater than the per capita rates suggest.

The use of television meant that news and history were melded, each being treated in an overlapping, if not similar, fashion. Television, indeed,

became a form of record for instant history. Television did so in part by providing common memories. For example, 41.8 million Americans watched President Ronald Reagan's inaugural address in January 1981. National legislatures began to be televised. Telecasts of the floor proceedings of the House of Representatives and the Senate in the USA began in 1977 and 1986, respectively. The French National Assembly was televised from 1993 and the German Bundestag from 1999.

However, although television sought to present itself as a value-free source of news and, therefore, eventually, of history, there were major issues of bias, and these are highly relevant to the question of the sources being produced today and also available for the study of the recent past. For example, in Britain, television coverage of Parliament began in 1989. However, it was hedged by rules about what shots could be shown. In Britain and elsewhere, much was deliberately staged for the cameras. For example, as a political form, State of the Union addresses in America were organised for television.

The television had become politically significant in America with the presidential debates in 1960, as much of the American public gained an impression of both John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, the candidates, through these televised discussions, which were the first held of their kind. The debates have occurred regularly since 1976, and have been seen as of great significance. They are also historical documents of major value. Ronald Reagan's performance in 1980 against Jimmy Carter was important to his success. Like other forms of information, however, the very process of the presidential debates has scarcely been value-free, and this affects the historical record. In 1980, the exclusion of a third-party candidate, John Anderson, at the behest of the other two candidates, killed off his chances of election. There is no mention of this exclusion in the televised debate. In 2004, a report issued by ten campaigning organisations argued that the Commission on Presidential Debates, established in 1987, had 'deceptively served the interests of the Republican and Democratic parties at the expense of the American people' by 'obediently' agreeing to the major parties' demands while claiming to be a non-partisan institution. As a result, the report argued: 'Issues the American people want to hear about are often ignored, such as free trade and child poverty. And the debates have been reduced to a series of glorified bipartisan news conferences, in which the Republican and Democratic candidates exchange memorised soundbites.'

These items become instant history. In part, moreover, there is also a more explicit engagement with what is presented as history. Television, indeed, is both a medium through which public history is created, sustained and reflected, and one through which commercial interests can

seek to profit from popular interest in the past. Due in part to state interest, but also, in many countries, to cultural norms, television's historical coverage is generally in support of the established national account of the past. This was true, for example, of *Frontier of Dreams* (2005), an optimistic, Whiggish and celebratory serialised television history of New Zealand, which was largely written by the historians at the Ministry of Culture and Heritage, a ministry headed by the then Prime Minister, Helen Clark. While academics played a role, including as talking heads in this series, this was very much a public history project. Even though the series was overly simplistic, it was generally accepted by the public as part of a post-colonial nation-building programme. This was a process more conventionally handled in school curricula, but the television proved more effective. Television history, however, can be highly controversial. There can be international sensitivity to televised accounts of the past, as with the complaints from the former Yugoslavia in 2004 about Italian television coverage of atrocities against Italian civilians by Yugoslav forces in 1945.

Historical documentaries present major possibilities and problems for historians and programme-makers. But they also offer rich possibilities beyond those of the historian whose usual medium of representation is the written word. Archive footage or reconstructions convey a sense of period and place, and 'talking-head' experts are usually woven in with such material, providing short vignettes for the purpose of encapsulation. Threads are maintained by adhering to a script, one important aspect of which is the overarching words of an unseen narrator.

As with all TV genres over the years, there has been an evolution in historical programming. Indeed, it is hard to think of the first examples of TV history as the same as recent, more sophisticated, examples. Initially, the format was staid and wooden; it usually took the form of a lecture from an historian standing rather stiffly in front of the camera. The Open University in the UK, which utilised night-time television hours to deliver course lectures, used this format for years in all disciplines, not just history. More generally, A. J. P. Taylor mastered this format for the BBC and was able to talk with great confidence, structure and content without referring to notes. Audiences were also treated to highbrow discussions, as when Hugh Trevor-Roper (later Lord Dacre) debated Taylor's *Origins of the Second World War*. The key development was Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* (1969). This lavish series enjoyed high viewing figures for an art-history-focused account of human progress. The lecture format continued with the satirical magazine, *Private Eye*, commenting on the 'Kenneth Clark prize for getting in the way of the television camera'. Nevertheless, the series made very good use of a balance of the camera and the informed commentator.

Clark can be faulted for a somewhat Whiggish teleology and, more seriously, a failure to use different approaches. This continued to be a characteristic of much TV history, with narrative clarity, i.e. dumbing down, favoured over debate. Even today, TV history provides almost no sense that historians disagree over the interpretation of evidence. Today's format is a far cry from Clark or Taylor standing in front of a camera. Instead, for *A History of Britain* (2000–2) Simon Schama was filmed walking across relevant historical terrain, looking relaxed in his leather jacket. The historian as sole storyteller was still alive and well in the presentation of Schama but, by this time, the cheapness of the Taylor approach had been replaced by budgets which enabled the historian and his team to get out and about. The approach was undoubtedly visually impressive and enormous amounts of research clearly were undertaken; however, it was also expensive, reputedly costing £400,000 per episode. The critics may have had some reservations about the approach or style, but content is most important and for this, too, Schama's approach received criticism, especially from Scotland where historians saw Schama's account as too Anglocentric. It is certainly possible to argue that *A History of Britain* was really a history of England, with lip-service paid to the Celts of Scotland and Ireland only insofar as they contributed to the story of England's expansion. Similar things might, however, be said of a written account: criticisms of content are by no means unique to the television medium of history. Schama's series clearly met with approval as well as support from the BBC and from government: great sums were lavished on the series and he was awarded a CBE (Commander of the British Empire) in 2001. Describing himself as a 'born-again Whig', Schama devoted much attention to what he called the 'soap opera' of the past, but his television series was lambasted for its approach in reviews of the series, which are generally instructive for some of the problems of televised history. In the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* of 8 December 2000, Christopher Haigh found 'too much drama ... a Hollywood version ... a messy soap opera in costume, rich in error'.

Furthermore, television has the ability to collapse history by making 'them' seem like 'us'. Contrasting with received practice in academic circles, this is an ahistorical approach that helps connect audiences with historical characters, a practice that fulfils the profitable goal of accessibility. Re-creations of the past in reality television provide classic examples, as in the highly popular British television series *1900 House* (1999), in which a modern family lived in a house restored to its 1900 state. Initially intended to be a programme about domestic technology, the project was humanised and made more accessible by using a real family or ordinary people. However, the response of the moderns to the past could not

capture the world as it was in 1900. Instead, we saw the dynamics of a late 1990s family set in an alien environment. The same was true of the 2002 British television re-creation of a family's experiences of the Second World War on the home front; although personal reflections made the consequences of the rationing of food and clothes very vivid for the television audience.

Academic historians are apt to be critical of TV history and of those who take part in it. However, it is here to stay. Satellite technology has made the medium more readily available, while greater longevity has enhanced the market as older audiences have time on their hands. Seen in this light, the growth of the popularity of TV history is part of a larger trend, one in which patterns of popular consumption play a crucial role in both context and content. TV history, genealogical research, local history and reading biographies form a substantial part of the lives of a new generation of retirees.

The great popularity of programmes about the forebears of celebrities is particularly notable and is linked to the advance of genealogy as a hobby. This tends to be totally ignored in works of historiography, which is mistaken, as the wider public resonance of history is thereby slighted. The sense of experts not talking to the public, and even more not listening, is also painful. The reality is that TV history has given a new lease of life to the study of the past. The History Channel, the BBC's smaller channels and its digital and Internet platforms, show the array of history on the box. *Time Team*, with Tony Robinson, has made archaeology fashionable and current. Classics and ancient history are aided by the work of Bettany Hughes on PBS, the BBC, History Channel and others. According to her website, Hughes's programmes have been seen by over 250 million viewers world-wide.

Broadcasts, journalism, podcasts, and other forms of dissemination have become important. Academic historians are under pressure now to demonstrate the public value of their work. TV and radio provide one such outlet.

1.4 The Internet

TV history, like cinema history, is a topic in which there is an extensive literature, both assessing individual programmes and the field as a whole. This is far less the case for the Internet, but that is a rapidly growing field for the dissemination of information and opinion about history. In this, as with television, distinctions between news and history are collapsed, and this collapse contributes greatly to the ahistorical character of the field.

The Internet provides consumer content and response. Use increased greatly: from 26 million users worldwide in 1995 to 513 million by August

2001, and about two billion by late 2012. By early 2008, Wikipedia, the on-line encyclopaedia, contained over nine million entries in 250 different languages. Each year, records are broken.

Consumer choice was the key element. It, not governments or businesses, was central in the major markets for new information technology. This situation encouraged rapid improvements in products, as well as a concern to make designs attractive. This process was linked to a more general sense of consumer power that was also seen in conventional media, such as newspapers and radio, with readers/listeners/viewers more willing to change provider and also to question the product. Successive advances in technology were made, each moulded in part by the perception and then the reality of consumer interest.

The Internet permitted a more engaged and constant consumer response, with, as a result, consumers becoming users and users becoming producers, as categories were transformed. Media content and software-based products became a matter of co-creation, and the media industry increasingly provided platforms for user-driven social interactions and user-generated content (like the dependence of eighteenth-century newspapers on items sent in), rather than being the crucial player in creating content. Wikipedia and Twitter were key instances of user-sourced content, with Twitter providing unfiltered real-time information. The latter set a model for how Internet users expected to receive material, and this affected the response to historical material even though it was different in type. Indeed, Twitter is now a veritable cornucopia of historical material. Whilst the dark side of the medium sees rabid views, trolling cruelty, and illiterate spite, there is also light to be had, as historians share news of free written content and new blogs; insights into issues, stories, and sources; and enter into constrained 140-character debates, with hashtags such as #twitterstorians connecting communities of common interest.

At the same time, other media became dependent, in whole or part, on the Internet. An instance of the new form of historical authorship was provided by a book consulted while travelling in 2012. *Romanesque Sites in Germany*, published by Hephaestus Books, lacks, on the title-page, an author or place or year of publication. Readers are referred to a website for further information, while the back cover carries the following notice:

Hephaestus Books represents a new publishing paradigm, allowing disparate content sources to be curated into cohesive, relevant, and informative books. To date, this content has been curated from Wikipedia articles and images under Creative Commons licensing, although as Hephaestus Books continues to increase in scope and dimension, more licensed and public domain content is being added. We believe books such as this represent a new and exciting lexicon in the sharing of human knowledge.

The style of the book is jerky and the coverage uneven, but the economics of authorship in this case offers opportunities for book production. It certainly alters the established pattern of historical works.

The Internet as a source for, and means of, history replicated the earlier situations with books and television in that there were major geographical contrasts. In 1998, nearly half of the 130 million people in the world with Internet access were Americans, whereas Eritrea in north-east Africa only obtained a local Internet connection in 2000, in the process putting every African state on-line. Since the Internet only really became efficient when there were sufficient users to create a widespread system, the take-up rate was particularly important. Internet-based history was an aspect of information wealth and poverty. In 1999, the *United Nations Development Report* highlighted the danger that the new digital technologies might accentuate disparities. Indeed, in 1998, only 12 per cent of Internet users were in non-OECD (less developed) countries; although, by 2000, that percentage (of a much larger number of users) had risen to 21. By 2012, moreover, the world average was about a third, and some Third World regions had respectable uptake rates: in the Middle East, over a third of the population used the Internet. The technology provided particular opportunities for women, who have only a limited public role, and was embraced in countries such as Morocco for the social opportunities thereby opened up. Fewer than one in six of the African population was using the Internet by 2012, but the global uptake of the Internet was far faster and more widespread than the comparable uptake of the telephone a century earlier. Literacy rates were a key factor, but language variety was overcome as a result of the provision and improvement of translation software.

This discussion of the Internet may appear overlong for a book on history, but that is not the case as the coverage and study of history are increasingly on the Internet. In 2010, 1.6 billion people were on-line while in the UK 80 per cent of homes had Internet access. The system was not a passive responder to existing information flows. Instead, it was important in its own right, for example presenting a new form of oral as well as written culture, as patterns of oral communication played a major role in communication on it.

There was also the question of control. The development and design of the computer industry owed much to the American counterculture. In that milieu, free material on the world-wide web was endorsed, the web was presented as democratic and interactive, and previous information systems, such as the book, were castigated. In the 'Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace' in 1996, John Barlow wrote: 'Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace ... You have no sovereignty where we gather ... We will create a civilization of the

Mind in Cyberspace.’ This approach created issues and problems for governments, and not only totalitarian ones. Freedom to publish on the Internet was contested for a number of reasons. Most related to the present but had obvious and important implications for the availability of material on what would become the past, as well as for the discussion of the latter. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights issued by the United Nations in 1948 had declared privacy to be a human right, but the technological and public contexts were very different by the 2000s. Thus, in 2011, the attempt by the British judiciary, applying the Human Rights Act of 1998, to support the use of ‘super-injunctions’ in order to prevent the discussion of matters judged to breach privacy laws was thwarted by the revelation of the latter on Twitter.

Despite claims to the contrary, the Internet does not simply empower the people. More and better information proves most effective in conjunction with the appropriate analytical systems and complementary hardware. It is necessary to have technical skills and computing power in order to mine data, so that the benefits primarily accrued to those able to use these skills and power.

The most obvious characteristic was variety across the world. For example, in 2012, the European Parliament overwhelmingly rejected the Acta anti-piracy agreement, which was presented as a threat to free discussion on the Internet and also as likely to limit the freedom to download films and music. In contrast, the United States and Japan implemented the treaty. Clashes between jurisdictions suggest a messy prospect as attempts to create transnational standards fall foul not just of differing political cultures, but also of the difficulties of enforcing judgements across territorial divides. The recording, presentation and study of history will all be greatly affected by these factors.

The Internet contributed to the concept of a knowledge society. It offered a range and capacity that were different from those of previous national, transnational and, in particular, global information and communications systems. Culture, economics and politics were presented as dynamic, with information a crucial item and ‘messaging’ a major form of interaction, work and opinion-formation.

History net-platforms were an aspect of the latter. The academic profession sought to frame a system in terms of its own authentication, as with peer review for e-books, e-journals, and items appearing on historical networks such as the branches of H-net. However, user influence was crucial: as with the news, it was possible to select feeds rather than to rely on a limited number of sources. The authority of academic validation was strictly limited for non-academics. Indeed, the views of the latter on historical topics became a more significant topic for study.

Moreover, history as an account of the past was affected by the rapidly developing nature of news stories, notably the freneticism and urgency sometimes described in terms of a 'twenty-four-hour news cycle'. The manner in which news was produced and distributed contributed to the way in which historical information and opinion were understood. To some, the situation represented chaos and crisis, but it also reflected the nature of society.

1.5 The relativity of time and change

How far is our analysis based on a conception of time that is anachronistic when applied to the past? Herbert Butterfield wrote in *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931) that 'The study of the past with one eye, so to speak, upon the present is the source of all sins and sophistry in history, starting with the simplest of them all, the anachronism.' The charge of relativism, or 'present-mindedness' (sometimes called 'presentism'), is often levelled at historians, and it is worth some consideration here. Keith Wrightson, in *English Society, 1580–1680* (1982), observed that 'social change in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England was slow. Nevertheless contemporaries knew that they lived in a changing world, however blurred might be their perception of the nature and cause of social change.' The further back we go in time, the slower change seems to us, and the more people found unremarkable things (to us) remarkable (to them). Jan Huizinga, in the preface to his classic study, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924), offered posterity this reminder of the nature of the medieval world: 'We, at the present day, can hardly understand the keenness with which a fur coat, a good fire on the hearth, a soft bed, a glass of wine, were formerly enjoyed.' While such a separation of the subject and object, the historian and the past, may be less startling if we in 2016 consider how life was in the 1950s or 1970s, the further back in time we view, the more valid the statement seems. Huizinga's words thus remain a valid reminder of the integrity of a period or moment.

These things are, of course, relative; but perceptions of change can be compared between one generation and another. There are continuities in history which must not be ignored. When we consider, for example, the notion of the rise or emergence of different ways of life, we are then very close to the periodisation of the past with which historians seem so concerned. George Orwell's remembrance of childhood experiences, in 'The Rediscovery of Europe' (1942), makes a useful, if tongue-in-cheek, point about his childhood classroom experiences which made him 'think of history as a sort of long scroll with thick black lines across it at intervals.

Each of these lines marked the end of what was called a “period”, and you were given to understand that what came afterwards was completely different from what had gone before.’ Orwell likened each change of epoch to a clock striking. Thus, in 1499, Orwell exclaimed, ‘you were still in the Middle Ages, with knights in plate armour riding at one another with long lances, and then suddenly the clock struck 1500, and you were in something called the Renaissance’.

This emphasis upon seemingly overnight change is common. Orwell’s sardonic rendition of the transformation from one age to the next, or one century to another, is important. The idea that each age is unique and different is called Historicism (from the German *Historismus*), and has been very popular among writers of all hues and tendencies since the nineteenth century. Historicists emphasised this idea that time changed society; that, as John Tosh wrote in *The Pursuit of History* (6th edn, 2015), ‘each age is a unique manifestation of the human spirit, with its own culture and values’. He adds: ‘For one age to understand another, there must be a recognition that the passage of time has profoundly altered both the condition of life and the mentality of men and women.’ This succinct statement seems to stand as the ultimate warning against ‘present-mindedness’, or anachronism. However, it also reflected the secularisation of history in Western thought, and a substantive shift from providential ideas which dominated the Middle Ages, wherein history (in this sense human development) was the expression of God’s (unchanging) will on earth.

Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), the prominent Italian liberal historian and social theorist, once wrote that ‘all history is contemporary history’. In other words, each generation rewrites history in the light of its own time and experiences. These prescient words are still relevant. For historians and students of history today, the point about the passage of time – and, with it, the charges of anachronism and historicism – is that we must strike a balance between judging the past by our own standards and entirely stranding the past in its own frozen compartment of history. The problem, then, is one of extremes. If, on the one hand, we adopt a present-minded stance in our approach, we risk overplaying continuities, or indeed manufacturing continuities, between us and our past which do not actually exist. If, on the other hand, we adopt a historicist position, or posit the hermetically sealed epochal approach to history (as evinced in Orwell’s telling passage), we risk removing any thread which might connect our past and our present. This notion of time, of change and continuity, or similarity and difference, is the hardest balance to achieve; yet it is central to our understanding of the nature of history and the dynamics of social developments.

1.6 Controversy and debate: the 'History Wars'

Historical debate is rife, and historians generate much heat in their disagreements. The crisis of the seventeenth century in England, American slavery, the Industrial Revolution, the Third Reich – all have raised much controversy. Over the past two generations, what have become known as the 'History Wars', culture clashes over varying approaches to controversial and difficult national pasts, have consumed great energies in several countries, drawing in politicians and public figures. In Germany the ferocious *Historikerstreit* has largely been viewed as a political debate, into which historians were drawn, thus granting their work elevated status not normally associated with new academic research in the humanities. Such debates usually focus on approaches to the past, the interpretation of the sources, and underpinning arguments about the philosophy of history, and the role of the discipline in public life. Similarly, in Ireland, Australia, Israel, and other places, this interlocking of the political and the historical have generated significant debate and disagreement.

In Australia, arguments emerged over the British imperial legacy and the treatment of indigenous peoples. These debates intensified in the 1980s as the bicentenary of 1788 approached. What is striking about an Australian debate that produced books, articles, TV and print media debates, is the extent of political involvement, with opposing left and right interpretations. The debate crystallised around questions of genocide; the Right refuting what was characterised as 'black armband' approaches, and the Left countering 'white blindfold' positions. The story of a simple, clean, heroic national emergence from the first shoots of European recolonisation turned into something that was dramatically contested. In many ways, the Australian case contrasts with that of New Zealand, where colonial violence against the Maori had met with fierce resistance and so was brutally violent. Here, though white (Pakeha) populations acknowledged that there was a debate to be had, much of it was essentially moved, by government, into the realms of a reparations commission, the Waitangi Tribunal (which took its name from the Crown–Maori treaty of 1841 which European colonists and the imperial state had broken repeatedly). This is not to say that New Zealand entirely achieved ease with itself: Waitangi, its findings, and the reparations paid for lost land, cannot make up for the loss of culture itself. But the tenor of the debate seems far less vituperative than that which rumbled in Australia for two decades.

In Ireland, the 'History Wars' have been shaped by concepts of nationalist and revisionism which are limited in their usefulness. All history is revised eventually; it is what historians do; and not all acts of reconsideration are political. However, in Ireland revisions to canonical

lives, heroic moments, or fast-held shibboleths, struck sensitive chords, and significant and often angry moments occurred. The late Peter Hart's questioning of the idea of a good IRA pursuing a clean fight against the British, 1919–21, which Hart illustrated by challenging aspects of Tom Barry's Cork campaign, and in positing the idea of the ethnic cleansing of Protestants, resulted in strong and dogged counter-attacks. With several historians forensically working over Hart's evidence and claims, the challengers seem to have developed more traction than their progenitor.

Hart, whose works are discussed in the further reading section, is one striking example of the debate that can emerge in the post-colonial settings, where national histories have seemingly more direct political traction than in countries with less dramatic recent pasts. The Hart controversy was fierce, but, in the context of recent developments, it is not so surprising. Once, the profession in the Free State and Republic had been guided by the principles of the founders of *Irish Historical Studies*, Theodore Moody and Robin Dudley Edwards, whose concern was to introduce the type of impartial history denoted by the great national journals, such as *The English Historical Review*, from which they took their inspiration. The Northern Ireland 'Troubles' changed all that, presenting a new intensity and discord in the study of the island's past. The re-emergence of a warring binary divide spilled out into a wider consideration of Irish history and saw Northern Ireland becoming one of the world's most studied territories. This was bound to affect how historians reworked and reconsidered the Irish Revolution, Partition and the extent and limitation of Irish independence.

1.7 Conclusions

The changing world of the Internet underlines the dynamic contexts within which both past and present are understood and considered. This emphasises the lack of any one viewpoint as to what constitutes historical inquiry. More generally, the value of history, its roles and uses, have also been the subject of repeated debate. This is unsurprising given the significance of history to identity and culture, and its role therefore in processes of identification and community orientation. The inherently political nature of these processes encourages contention. Thus, there are major debates over both public education and memorialisation. In each case, it is argued that there is a national approach and in each case there is also considerable controversy as to the form, content and tone of public history. The democratisation and accountability of modern societies, their scrutiny to public attention, encourages this controversy. It ranges from the trivial to the more profound. The world-wide web effect on sources is particularly apparent. For example, on 10 January 2016, China's state

broadcaster pixelated the face of a leading actor, Wong Hai, after he circulated a report on Facebook about *The Secret Emotional Life of Zhou Enlai*, a book that suggested that China's premier from 1949 until 1976 was a secret homosexual. Wong then apologised, thus conforming to the Communist Party's strict enforcement of control about its leaders past and present. In practice, there is public interest in such reports in China.

Public contention is different to the one seen within the academic profession, and notably as it has developed over the last two centuries. Academics see themselves as problem solvers, not storytellers. To them, historical inquiry has a crucial dimension of rigour, and this relates to an understanding both of the problematical nature of historical inquiry and the need for a questioning approach to historical sources. This range of approach to the past, and the tensions that can arise accordingly, will be themes in the coming chapters.

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