

I. BECOMING A HISTORIAN

A Personal Preface

WHEN I WAS DECIDING to become a historian, interdisciplinarity had yet to haunt the corridors of history departments. It was further from doing so in Britain than in the United States. I came to Balliol College, Oxford, in October 1967 coveting access to a new universe of knowledge, poised at the portals of scholarship and learning. To my chagrin, the first term brought only Gibbon and Macaulay, de Tocqueville, Burckhardt, and—last but not least—the Venerable Bede. Amid this chronically unimaginative Oxford pedagogy, which sought to dampen the intellectual ardor of youth in the cold shower of antiquated knowledge, by far the worst experience was plowing through Bede's eighth-century *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. The inveterate archaism of this requirement beggared belief. As I made my way through that interminable chronicling of the Christianizing of England, whose relevance for historical education in the later twentieth century escaped me, I took consolation in the marauding exploits of Bede's nemesis, King Penda of Mercia, whom I always imagine rampaging his way across the monastic landscape as a ferociously bearded avenger of truly Pythonesque proportions, heroically defending England's last redoubt of vigorous paganism.

Oxford study of history was nothing if not consistent. In our second term, my fellow students and I began a long odyssey through the entirety of British history, beginning with the burial mound at Sutton Hoo. Five semesters later, we ended safely before the outbreak of World War II. Looking back, I'm reminded of how little of my excitement about history came from these formal undergraduate studies. Oxford's Modern History School seemed organized precisely for the purposes of restraining imaginative thought, keeping our perceptions tethered to the discipline's most conservative notations. Many stu-

dents in the late sixties were moved by a strong and often passionate sense of history's relevance for the present, after all. We saw it not only as an aid to effective political thinking but also as a tool for honing a critical social consciousness and for making our way toward a workable political ethics. Yet Oxford's disciplinary guardians kept such things dourly at bay. My time there was spent living inside a paradox. Any excitement at becoming a historian grew in the interstices, after hours, or beyond the Modern History School altogether. Effective learning happened despite, rather than because of, the curriculum. Its custodians willfully closed their eyes to the changes occurring outside.¹

This reminiscence can be chased a little further. I arrived in Oxford painfully green and ill equipped. At some point in my early teens, a bookshop had opened in Burton-on-Trent, five miles from where I grew up. Byrkley Books won no prizes for the richness of its inventory, but it did claim an extensive display of Penguins and Pelicans, which gave me a certain greedy access to the Western intellectual canon, contemporary social commentary, and serious fiction. For all its other virtues, the Swadlincote Public Library had precious little to offer in that respect, and my parents had neither the income nor the wherewithal to provide much at home. On my occasional visits to the Burton bookshop, therefore, I consumed its wares voraciously, extending my horizons in a very indiscriminate, hit-and-miss way. My first historical interests are now a source of embarrassment. I read variations on the pompous and sentimentalized nationalist history delivered by conservative patriots during the first two postwar decades in Britain, for which the grandiose multipart television documentary celebrating Churchill's war leadership, *The Valiant Years*, was the epitome.² I could count as an antidote only A. J. P. Taylor's weekly book reviewing in *The Observer*, together with his various television lectures.³ On these bases, I made myself into an intellectually conservative, but modestly effective, autodidact.

At Ashby-de-la-Zouch Boys' Grammar School I had none of those formative mind-awakening encounters so often recorded in the memories of intellectuals. One history teacher definitely encouraged an early interest in medieval castles. A later history teacher was more attuned to the world of scholarship, opening my first window onto serious academic history. In my last year at school, he introduced me to the journal *Past and Present* and plied me with a series of historio-

graphical controversies, including those surrounding Elton's *Tudor Revolution in Government*, Taylor's *Origins of the Second World War*, and the general crisis of the seventeenth century.⁴ He also had me translate a text by Max Weber on the sixteenth-century price revolution, which helped my German, if not my knowledge of the history of social thought. An academic manqué marooned in a stagnant provincial backwater, my teacher clearly kept abreast of historical debates. He must have been a contemporary of Eric Hobsbawm and Raymond Williams in Cambridge before the war, I now realize, though certainly without sharing their politics.

I wasn't the only freshman historian to arrive in Balliol underendowed with cultural capital. Nonetheless, it was hard to experience the disparities. Most of my contemporaries simply seemed to know more—to have read more of the right kinds of books, to have traveled more widely, to speak more languages with greater facility, to have the right references at their fingertips, and generally to be sure they belonged. This preparedness didn't always correlate with the advantages of class. Roughly half of the group were from public (that is, fee-paying) schools, half from state schools. Of the two most disconcertingly knowledgeable of my twelve contemporaries, the first came from an elite public school, knew several languages fluently, and was already working on the Mexican Revolution (whose place in history came as complete news to me). The other, from a Merseyside comprehensive school, arrived for our first orientation bearing a copy of Fernand Braudel's *Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, five years before it appeared in English translation.⁵ Measured by this, I was definitely a late starter.

I recount these sometimes painful antecedents to make a general point. We become historians by many different routes. In my own case, nothing in my family or schooling pushed me in that rather particular direction. My early years contained no big experiences or set of affiliations driving my curiosity, no traumas or tragedies lodged in the collective memory or the family past. In grammar school, my relationship to history unfolded via pragmatics and a series of accidents—it was something I happened to be good at—with a logic not especially open to my own control. The official curriculum, whether in grammar school or at the university, never captured my imagination. What made the difference was the pressure of events in the wider political world. For many of my own generation, a relationship to history was

ignited by the dramatic and exciting demandingness of the time, by the intrusion of its ethical and political urgencies. In that sense the “ordinariness” of my and many other working-class and lower-middle-class lives was made extraordinary by the educational chances we were given and by the large-scale political events that suddenly and unexpectedly supervened. And of course it’s all the subsequent acquisition of knowledge—of theory, of politics, and of history—that now gives me, in Valerie Walkerdine’s words, “the way to look from the vantage point of the present to the fantastic shores of the past.”⁶

Fired by the desire for understanding, rather than merely an undergraduate earning a degree, I was propelled into being a historian by 1968. As we can now see, a series of quite different historiographies were already lying in wait, eager to ambush the complacencies of the British historical scene. Exactly how this happened remains a fascinating question of intellectual history in itself. But for those of us who were undergraduates at the time, the breakthrough to new kinds of history—even more, to a new vision of what doing history could mean—owed very little to what was happening in our classrooms. For my required work in the history of political thought, I may have been slogging through Aristotle, Hobbes, and Rousseau (actually I wasn’t, because my reading for that part of my final examinations came wholly at the last minute), but my real mind was on Marx. The locus of most of my reading and thinking developed a quite contingent relationship to what was needed for my degree. About the importance of constitutions and the arbitrariness of unaccountable power, I learned as much from my encounters with college and university authorities as I did from studying the 1832 Reform Act or even the February Revolution of 1917. The works that inspired me were placed in my hands only partly by my appointed teachers. They came much more from what was happening outside academia.

I still remember how I first heard about Edward Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*.⁷ Chatting with me in front of Balliol opposite the Paperback Shop, which had just received its new Penguin titles (a monthly moment of excitement in those days), Paul Slack, then a Balliol junior research fellow, pondered the purchase of the Pelican edition of Thompson’s book—which, at more than one predecimal pound in 1968 prices, implied a serious budgetary decision.⁸ That alone was reason to take notice. First published five years before, *The Making* was sniffily dismissed by the Industrial Revolu-

tion's mainstream historians—as I learned in 1968 from Thompson's new postscript, where he answered his critics. Shamed by ignorance—I had the dimmest understanding of the political and historiographical backgrounds for all this—I set about filling in the blanks. By the autumn of 1968, I was the owner of a copy of the Gollancz hard-back edition and devoted a large part of the winter to reading it. At a time when my disillusionment with history in Oxford was bottoming out, it renewed my belief.

At one level, the present book lays out one person's journey through the shifting landscape of historical studies during the ensuing decades. I realize that to many readers, such a first-person account may seem self-inflating, possessing at best some minor curiosity value for a few immediate students, colleagues, and friends. But my real purpose goes far beyond this. I'm interested in charting the impact of some vital features of contemporary intellectual history on historians' thought and practice. For my own part, an ideal of politically engaged and theoretically informed history formed the lasting outcome of my Oxford time. I certainly believed strongly that history needed to meet the highest standards possible in conventional scholarly terms, based in the most creative and reliable empirical investigations and the most exhaustive archival research. But history also had to be relevant. Trying to balance that ideal has never been easy. Approaching history politically can lead to misplaced moralizing, off-putting didacticism, and unhelpful simplification. But history's usefulness can't be extricated from an appreciation of its pedagogy. Some broader ambition toward such appreciation has moved historians' best achievements during the past four decades.

This relationship of history to politics is not simple. History is more than either an instrument or a mirror. But the scholarly debates of historians are inseparable from politics in the widest sense of the term—all the partially visible philosophical, sociocultural, and strictly political baggage historians bring with them into the scholarly arena; the wider contentiousness implied by their position-taking within institutions and the public sphere; and the broader political issues and controversies that shadow their concerns. All these factors helped frame history's purpose during the past three decades. For those on the left, the new kinds of history inspired by feminism will spring readily to mind, as will the parallel challenges presented by the growing centrality of race for contemporary public life. Further illustrations can eas-

ily be multiplied.⁹ The debates among historians have in each case been finely linked to wider developments in the public sphere, sometimes in direct response, but just as frequently via indirect influence or partial borrowings, whether from the political processes themselves or through related discussions in other academic disciplines. The resulting changes cannot be isolated from the ethical and practical dilemmas facing historians on the ground—in the decisions about what and how to teach, in conflicts about hiring and the setting of academic policy, in the handling of relations with colleagues, and in the general dailiness of departmental life.

The importance of this public world for the changing purposes of historians can't be gainsaid. Historians today think, teach, and write in an environment profoundly different from the one I entered in the late 1960s. They've been required to respond not just to the various transformations internal to the discipline, including the remarkable changes in the sociology of the profession, but also to the constant pressure of events in the wider social and political arenas. Those larger contexts have encompassed passionate debates about theory and methods across the academic disciplines, as well as far-reaching conflicts over the purposes of higher education.

Recounting my particular version of this story, in careful counterpoint with the general intellectual histories it partially reflects, may have some modest usefulness as a foil for others. My hope is that mapping a series of personal encounters between the tasks of historical writing and the surrounding political climate may make it possible for others to recognize their own analogous accounts, whether converging with mine or not. By thus using my experience to explore the complex back-and-forth between history and politics—between trying to be a good historian and trying to act politically in effective and ethical ways—I may be able to add something to the more familiar historiographical narratives of our time.

As I grapple with the meanings of the extraordinary changes in the discipline of history during my adult lifetime, I'm often struck by the orderly logics and implicit progressivism that so many of the existing accounts tend to display. This is far more a feature of historiographical commentary in the United States than in Britain, perhaps, and also very much a feature of retrospectives published since the 1960s.¹⁰ Methods improve, archives expand, subareas proliferate, bad interpretations are junked, and better interpretations mature. Historians'

understanding only gets better. Innovations are proposed, conflicts rage, breakthroughs are secured, changes get institutionalized, and new advances begin. Incurrable upholders of earlier orthodoxies fade into the night; new priorities of teaching, research, and publication settle into place; a higher plane of sophistication ensues. Of course, I'm overstating this progression for effect. But in declaring their credentials during the 1970s and 1980s, the various schools of social historians certainly produced one genre of narratives like this. Since then, the "new cultural historians" speak another.

This "progressivist" effect has many particular forms. For those of us embracing Joan Scott's advocacy of gender history in the course of the 1980s, for example, gender swiftly graduated from being a "useful category of historical analysis" into a necessary one, whose benefits promised a higher form of understanding.¹¹ The same might be said of other associated recognitions, from the growing salience of ethnicity and race or the new work on diverse sexualities to the general endorsing of cultural constructionism and its pervasive languages of analysis. But in making the case for such advances, particularly through the more confrontational types of public disputation usually involved, certain risks are always entailed.

In the course of winning one's argument and thereby establishing some influence over resources, a certain measure of pluralism easily gets impaired. Unfortunately, the temptations of purism persistently intrude on contemporary historiographical debate. Sometimes less perceptibly, but often with full and explicit aggression, the exponents of any new set of approaches all too readily equate acceptance of their insights with an approved degree of intellectual sophistication. But whether we hold the classical ground of such now-questionable grand narratives as "the nation," "science," "emancipation," or "class" or prefer such emergent emphases as "identity" and "difference," we can surely acknowledge the degree to which one epistemological standpoint all too easily works preemptively against others.

These logics of advocacy and temptations of certitude, powered by the politics of commitment and the ethics of conviction, enlist us all. At various times, I've been as guilty of these habits and tendencies as anyone else, savoring the radicalism of controversies and sharpening the relevant differences to their best polemical edge. At the same time, I've always tried to keep some room for critical distance. Staying attuned to the public sphere of politics, as opposed to the isolated

scholarly and intellectual arena, certainly helps in this respect. The chastening that results from so many repeated disappointments and unexpected reversals in the political world makes it easier to accept the impermanence of the changes occurring in intellectual life. Indeed, being a historian during the last third of the twentieth century has required learning to live with a condition of virtually continuous flux. On the most fundamental terrain of the various theory disputes successively waged by historians, I've personally always needed a generous pause for thought. I've been too conscious of the difficulty—of the persisting areas of disagreement and of the frequent transience of the latest best thing—to want to go all the way. Indeed, it's often precisely *inside* the remains of that ambivalence, it seems to me, that the most creative histories can be written.

Moreover, the impulse for such creativity invariably comes from outside the discipline. For that matter, it originates beyond the academy altogether. The boundaries between history's professional precincts and the wider realms of the public are far more porous than most academic historians might allow. Once we admit that porousness, we relativize our understanding of the professional historian's influence. If we ask where a society gets its sense of the past, for instance, only delusions of grandeur could induce historians into claiming much of the credit. For most people, knowledge about the past comes very rarely from its professional guardians and then usually at several times removed. Even those of us squarely inside the profession spend much of our time responding most urgently to questions coming from elsewhere, from beyond the safety of the archive, the library, or the seminar room.

Once we probe the provenance of our own motivations with any honesty, as I tried to do at the start of this discussion, the force of these observations comes through. Particularly if we examine the sources for our enthusiasm and the webs of early curiosity—the idiosyncratic mixtures of deliberation, desire, external influences, and pure serendipity that first move most of us into becoming historians—the unschooled or naive quality of our sense of the past ought to become extremely clear. It would be silly to suggest that historical education in the more formal or didactic sense never plays its part, though in most schoolteaching, this works as often to alienate or deter as to influence and inspire. Amid the larger turmoil of our images and assumptions about the past, it's the circulation of everything else that

makes this question of the provenance of motivations so hard to sort out.¹²

In what follows, I track some of the most decisive changes in historical studies of the last four decades. Needless to say, this is not a comprehensive or full account. Large numbers of key controversies and agenda-setting debates and whole types of history are left out. Not all my friends and colleagues will find themselves or recognize their interests in the narrative I am about to lay out. But, for good or ill, the narrative describes some main directions of radicalism, intellectual excitement, and theoretical and methodological innovation between the 1960s and now. The story I want to tell opens, at the beginning of that period, with the dramatic new rise of social history, which in its turn was intricately connected to contemporary political events. As I intimated earlier, that convergence of historiographical and political developments also coincided with my own intellectual and political coming-of-age.

When I arrived in Balliol College, Oxford, in October 1967, the historiographical landscape was already in the process—although I little knew it—of being dramatically opened up. It's impossible to be too emphatic about just how inspiring and truly exhilarating the impact of social history turned out to be. In the English-speaking world more generally, this impact had three principal sources. First was the long-gestating influence of the group who became known as the British Marxist historians, together with the broader coalitions of economic historians, labor historians, and social historians they helped to build. Next came the more immediate impact of the social sciences, which began from the late 1950s to challenge the thinking and practice of many historians. Finally came the inspiration offered by the *Annales* school in France, whose key works became more systematically translated during the 1970s. In all three ways, social history aspired, with great and high-minded ambition, to deal with the big questions of how and why societies change or not.

Of course, there are many reasons for wanting to study history. After all, history's pleasures are many-sided. They include the pleasures of discovery and collecting, of exhaustiveness and pursuit, of the exotic and the unfamiliar, of serendipity, and—last but not least—of mastery. History is also a site of difference; in the loose sense of the term, it offers contexts for deconstruction. History is where we go for defamiliarizing our ideas and assumptions; it is our laboratory, where

we question the sufficiencies of apparently coherent and unified accounts of the world, and where the ever-seductive unities of contemporary social and political discourse may also be named, de-authorized, and upset.

But for me, neither the pleasures nor the critiques of history can be complete without the seriousness of larger understanding—without the possibility of making the world more knowable in some overall or meaningful sense. Part of that condition is also making the world more changeable, not as a basis for actually changing the world itself necessarily (as these days that seems a little too much to expect), but at least to show how the changeability of the world might be thought or imagined. In that sense, history is about the critical recognition of given fixities, about exploring how the openings and closings of knowledge can occur, about examining the categories through which we understand our relationship to the world, about disturbing familiar assumptions and allowing us to see the unnecessities of closure. It can bring into focus the possible horizons of a different way. In my understanding, history can become both inspiringly and pragmatically prefigurative.

In relation to that larger ambition, there have been two massive waves of innovation since the 1960s, each drawing its momentum from exciting and contentious interdisciplinary conversations. The first of these, extending from the 1960s into the 1980s, involved the discovery of social history. The second wave, cresting during the 1990s, produced the “new cultural history.” Both movements shared a relationship to the political debates of their respective times. They bore the desire for a kind of democratic inclusiveness, through which hidden and suppressed histories could be recognized and disempowered groups could enter the profession. While the main emphases differed—new social historians stressed material life, class, and society, while their culturalist successors refocused on meaning and on the forms of perception and understanding that people make and display—each wave brought a radical broadening of the historian’s legitimate agenda. Over a thirty-year period, by means of these two movements, the practices, subject matters, and composition of the historical profession became dramatically pluralized.

But the movement out of social history into cultural history was no straightforward progression. It also entailed some losses. It was achieved through bitterly fought controversies over goals, theories,

and methods. In embracing the contemporary skepticism about grand narratives, for example, and in substituting microhistories of various kinds for the macrohistories of capitalism, state making, revolution, and large-scale transformations, many historians also came to retreat from the ambitious social analysis and explanation that was so inspiring in the 1970s. In 1971, leading British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm published an enormously influential essay called “From Social History to the History of Society,” in which he argued that the real point of the new approaches was not so much the recognition of previously “hidden” or marginalized subjects or groups (although that certainly was important) but the opportunities this now created for writing the history of society as a whole.¹³ This meant partly a commitment to generalization and theory, to trying to keep the whole picture in view, and partly a particular analytical approach aimed at understanding all problems to some degree in their social context. Of course, in 1971—and certainly for Hobsbawm—that tended to imply that social and economic causes and explanations were primary.

One of my key contentions is that we don’t have to reinstate the primacy of social explanation and a materialist model of social determination, or insist on the causal sovereignty of the economy and material life, in order to take seriously the tasks of social significance or social analysis. Now that much of the heat and noise surrounding the new cultural history has started to die down, it’s time to reassert the importance of social history in the main sense advocated by Hobsbawm in his 1971 essay, namely, that we need always to keep relating our particular subjects to the bigger picture of society as a whole—whether we are social historians, political historians, cultural historians, or whatever. Hence come the terms of my title, which also seek to reclaim the relevance of Marxist approaches for this goal. I maintain that we can hold on to all of the gains of the new cultural history without having to abandon everything we learned as social historians. As it happens, I was trained personally neither as a social historian nor as a cultural historian, but that has never stopped me from learning how to be both; utilizing either approach is more a matter of general theoretical and analytical standpoint than of which card-carrying professional identity you embrace.

I offer a word of caution: the temporalities of these movements—the successive turnings to social history and to cultural history—were by no means as clear-cut as my scene-setting discussion implies. The

high tide of the popularity of the new cultural history from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s hardly prevented many social historians from doing their work, and many of those who embraced versions of the “cultural turn” also continued practicing what they had previously learned. The speed of the various transitions made an intermingling of approaches almost inevitable. Within only a handful of years, for example, my early excitements at discovering Marxism and other traditions of social theory during the late 1960s and early 1970s were followed by the new challenges of feminism and similar critiques. By the end of the seventies, the default materialism anchoring social history’s novel ascendancy was already wavering, and during the 1980s and early 1990s, it gradually crumbled away. Social historians were edged out of the discipline’s coveted center ground by “new cultural historians” and the advocates of the so-called linguistic turn. Yet by the turn of the new century, there were already signs that these freshly established culturalisms were themselves starting to fall under review.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this book detail aspects of the changes in historical thinking during the last forty years, proceeding from what I call (with only a little self-irony) the utopia of social history, through a discussion of the latter’s limits and disappointments, to the renewed possibilities opened up by the so-called cultural turn. Each of these three chapters closes with an example taken from different areas of historiography, intended both to illustrate the main trajectories of progressive historical writing and to capture my own intellectual passage. Without discussing their work exhaustively or in any complete and rounded sense, my purpose is to use each of three remarkable historians—Edward Thompson, Tim Mason, and Carolyn Steedman—to make an argument about the strengths and failings of social and cultural history. Their works provide snapshots of the best achievements of an ambitious and politically engaged history across the period I’m surveying: Edward Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, published in 1963, remains one of the several genuinely great books of the big social history wave; Tim Mason’s pioneering studies of Nazism during the 1970s took the explanatory ambitions of social history to the outer limits of their potential; Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman*, published in 1987, represented the best edge of the emerging new cultural history. The present book closes, in chapter 5, with some thoughts about the circumstances faced by historians in the present.