

## PREFACE

AS A YOUNG PERSON seeking change in the world, living through a time of excitements and upheaval, I wanted to become a historian because history really *mattered*; it was necessary for making a difference. I never thought that the connections from history to politics were easy or straightforward, whether in the grander way or just as a guide for personal behavior. Some homilies about the uses of history certainly invited simplicity, marshaling stock quotations made ever more facile by repetition: Orwell's "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past," for example, or Santayana's "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."<sup>1</sup> Learning from history was more complex than that—less transparent, less manageable, less reducible to a set of direct protocols or prescriptions.

But how exactly the past gets remembered (and forgotten), how it gets worked into arresting images and coherent stories, how it gets ordered into reliable explanations, how it gets pulled and pummeled into reasons for acting, how it gets celebrated and disavowed, suppressed and imagined—all have tremendous consequences for how the future might be shaped. All of the ways in which the past gets fashioned into histories, consciously and unconsciously, remain crucial for how the present can be grasped. For political purposes, history is constantly in play. I continue to believe that history matters in that sense. In negotiating the promises and possibilities, and the pitfalls and deceptions, of the past's disorderly presence in the difficult landscape of our social and political lives, the professional historian—someone schooled in the ways of the discipline, intimate with its practices, enabled by its epistemologies—has an essential role to perform.

While this book draws on biography, it makes use of the personal

voice only sparingly and strategically. Readers expecting a detailed account of my own political involvements or outlook will certainly be disappointed. I've tried to avoid straying into the kind of self-referentiality that would collapse the last four decades of historiography into the experience of the historian, charting its movements by reference to an avowedly personal "I," and reducing the explicit object of inquiry to the implicit sensitivities—and dilemmas—of the inquirer. My book is far less than autobiographical in that sense. If it seeks to relate large historical debates, political changes, and social processes to the practices of the individual intellects that engage them, it presumes no pre-given logic to the connection. Indeed, while the political, the historical, and the personal form the triangulated streams of what I want to say, their relationship bespeaks contradictory pressures as much as confluence or collision. It's precisely at those moments of critical tension—involving the breaches between social processes and subjective experience, or between politics and the academy—that this book raises its central questions: What is history? Why do we do it?

My main motivations for writing this book are two. The first is to take stock; the second is to explore history's relationship to politics. With respect to the former, what follows is meant neither as a survey of current approaches and types of history nor as a guide to best practice. Nor is it quite a work of theory, in the manner of another familiar contemporary genre, in which the advocates of "new ways of telling the past," who celebrate the pleasures of experiment and transgression, face off against the champions of the tried and true as they circle their wagons "in defence of history."<sup>2</sup> As should become clear, I'm personally far more disposed to the first of these postures than to the second. But in providing my own take on the contemporary debates of historians about their discipline, I've chosen a rather different tack. Using my own experience as a point of departure, and returning to it allusively along the way, I've tried to present the disagreements among social and cultural historians of the second half of the twentieth century as a journey through a politics of knowledge defined by certain primary and abiding questions in their various forms: of base and superstructure, being and consciousness, structure and agency, material life and subjectivity, the "social" and the "cultural." In so doing, I've tried to see the genealogies of the historian's understanding in a continuous conversation between the main forms of historiographical inquiry and the succession of surrounding political conjunctures.

Here I've chosen the personal voice in order to emphasize precisely the *collective* rather than the individualized nature of how that happens. In my view, our ability to work through the most difficult questions and problematics—the respective challenges of social history and cultural history, in the terms of this book—almost always entails a collective and collaborative effort that too often goes unacknowledged. In traveling down new roads, in exploring new directions, and in engaging with new theories, methods, and ideas, we succeed best by dialogue, by cooperation, and by finding the points of connection beyond our immediate scholarly concerns—whether to other fields, to other disciplines, or to wider contexts of politics and the public sphere. In what follows I seek to relay back and forth between my own experiences as a historian and these larger contexts in a variety of ways. One of the most formative of those contexts was provided by the British 1968; another by the particular institutional environment of the University of Michigan in the 1980s and 1990s.

In telling my own story I'm aware of taking a risk. The perspectives are necessarily partial and subjective. As I take pains to acknowledge from time to time, there are obvious specificities of standpoint—of generation, nationality, geography, gender, sexuality, citizenship, political affiliations, and so forth—quite apart from my preferred kinds of history and theory, which structure and dispose my discussion. My overt presence in the text becomes submerged for quite long periods, then to resurface for the purposes of key discussions, usually at points of transition. Embedded in my account are also certain arguments about British-U.S. and British-German circuits of intellectual exchange which could certainly be developed into the subject of a book in themselves. At the very least I've tried to be explicit and self-conscious about the place from which at any one time I'm seeking to speak. I've certainly tried to deliver the kind of detailed historiographical narrative for our own present that no one else has yet provided. In that sense, the partialities of standpoint are less important: it's the form of the account that matters. In tracking myself as a young (and then not so young) historian moving through contemporary politics and historical studies, I've tried to model the necessary protractedness and arduousness of developing workable ideas. For those at their own beginning stage of becoming historians, I want to show the lifelong character of the process. Above all: we learn through dialogue with others.

I certainly want these reflections to play a part in shaping our

understanding of what historians do, just as I'd like them to illuminate the intellectual-political histories that bring us to where we are now. But I see my book as seeking to *open* a conversation rather than aspiring to bring anything to closure. In that respect, by far the most important feature of the past four decades of historiography has been the huge tectonic shift from social history to cultural history that forms the subject matter of this book. I've been inspired in my outlook as a historian by both of those disciplinary movements. Moreover, despite the unsettlements and disappointments accompanying the impasse of social history, I experienced the so-called linguistic or cultural turn of the 1980s as a vital empowering of possibilities. Yet at the same time I've always been impressed by the obstacles to building a conversation across the resulting differences. The first purpose of my book, consequently, is to step back from the situation created by the "new cultural history" and to consider what the latter may not be accomplishing so effectively. Without in any way disavowing the processes of critique and labors of theory, or the kinds of cultural analysis these have enabled, I want to explore how and in what forms the earlier moment of social history might be recuperated. What has been gained and what has been lost by turning away from the salient commitments of social history? What in those earlier inspirations remains valuable for critical knowledge—and dissent—today?

As I've already said, my reflections on that question will be avowedly partial in all sorts of ways, limited both by my own particular knowledge and expertise—that of a modern European historian trained in Britain, working mainly on Germany, living in the United States—and by the kinds of history I'm mainly interested in writing about. But I've tried as far as possible to cast a very wide net, to educate myself in the concerns of other fields and areas of the discipline, and to reflect self-consciously on the partialities of my standpoint. More to the point, I'd like my own mapping of this territory—the forms of a politically engaged historiography during the past four decades—to resonate not only with those in my own immediate fields, but to speak comparatively or analogously to the experiences of others working elsewhere.

My second motivation comes from politics. In what follows, my concern is not with historiography in some entirely open-ended, capacious, or pan-disciplinary manner, but with a more delimited body of work. I'm interested in those historians since the 1960s who've

sought to link their scholarly practice of the discipline to a politics of large-scale social and cultural change. Using my own passage through these years as a reticent but purposeful counterpoint, and while focusing on three especially notable or emblematic individuals—Edward Thompson, Tim Mason, and Carolyn Steedman—to exemplify and condense the argument, I've tried to capture the ways in which politics and the writing of history are constantly informing each other. *Politics*—whether in the grand, institutional, and macro-discursive dimensions or in the micropolitical, personal, and everyday—can profoundly influence the kinds of history we're able to think and do. *History* and *politics* bleed into each other all the time. Thus my book is about the politics of knowledge associated with social history and cultural history in the broadest of ways.

As I try to emphasize, this isn't a simple or one-to-one relationship. But inscribed in my account is a strong generational subtext centered on the political and ethical meanings of 1968. While Edward Thompson was much older and possessed of a very different political sensibility, his work and presence exercised extraordinary influence on the generations of historians coming of age during the 1960s and 1970s. Tim Mason was certainly among the latter, although just old enough to register a kind of distance. Carolyn Steedman's biography was entirely bounded by the parameters I'm describing, as indeed was my own formation. Again, no *particular* set of standpoints or identifications was entailed by that political conjuncture, and we'd be hard put to assimilate Steedman's heterodox, independently minded originality to any straightforward version of a generational narrative. The argument I'm making is far more about a certain kind of relationship between historians and the public sphere.

In talking about that relationship, however, I'm continually reminded of a double difficulty: historians and the works they produce are no more consistent, stable, or transparent than the practices of a public sphere and the passions and antagonisms that underlie even the most rationalist theories of its constitution. Not only does this book not aim to defuse this double difficulty. It does its best to provoke it. In seeking to illuminate the proliferating tensions in how we now approach the past, it is equally alive to the demands for recognition inhering among them. Only with an understanding of those tensions will history—and the twin categories of the cultural and the social—be made fully available for politics.