# 1 Historical awareness

*This chapter looks at the difference between memory, whether individual or collective, and the more disciplined approach towards the past that characterizes an awareness of* history. *All groups have a sense of the past, but they tend to use it to reinforce their own beliefs and sense of identity. Like human memory, collective or social memory can be faulty, distorted by factors such as a sense of tradition or nostalgia, or else a belief in progress through time. Modern professional historians take their cue from nineteenth-century* historicism, *which taught that the past should be studied on its own terms, 'as it actually was'. However, this more detached approach to the past can put historians in conflict with people who feel their cherished versions of the past are under threat.*

'Historical awareness' is a slippery term. It can be regarded as a universal psychological attribute, arising from the fact that we are, all of us, in a sense historians. Because our species depends more on experience than on instinct, life cannot be lived without the consciousness of a personal past; and someone who has lost this through illness or ageing is generally regarded as disqualified from normal life. As individuals we draw on our experience in all sorts of different ways – as a means of affirming our identity, as a clue to our potential, as the basis for our impression of others and as some indication of the possibilities that lie ahead. Our memories serve as both a data bank and a means of making sense of an unfolding life story. We know that we cannot understand a situation without some perception of where it fits into a continuing process or whether it has happened before. The same holds true of our lives as social beings. All societies have a collective memory, a storehouse of experience that is drawn on for a sense of identity and a sense of direction. Professional historians commonly deplore the superficiality of popular historical knowledge, but *some* knowledge of the past is almost universal; without it one is effectively excluded from social and political debate, just as loss of memory disqualifies

one from much everyday human interaction. Our political judgements are permeated by a sense of the past, whether we are deciding between the competing claims of political parties or assessing the feasibility of particular policies. To understand our social arrangements, we need to have some notion of where they have come from. In that sense all societies possess 'memory'.

But 'historical awareness' is not the same thing as social memory. How the past is known and how it is applied to present need are open to widely varying approaches. We know from personal experience that memory is neither fixed nor infallible: we forget, we overlay early memories with later experience, we shift the emphasis, we entertain false memories and so on. In important matters we are likely to seek confirmation of our memories from an outside source. Collective memory is marked by the same distortions, as our current priorities lead us to highlight some aspects of the past and to exclude others. In our political life especially, memory is highly selective, and sometimes downright erroneous. It is at this point that the term 'historical awareness' invites a more rigorous interpretation. Under the **Third Reich** those Germans who believed that all the disasters in German history were the fault of the Jews certainly acknowledged the power of the past, but we would surely question the extent of their historical awareness. In other words, it is not enough to invoke the past; there must also be a belief that getting the story right matters. History as a disciplined enquiry aims to sustain the widest possible definition of memory, and to make the process of recall as accurate as possible, so that our knowledge of the past is not confined to what is immediately relevant. The goal is a resource with open-ended application, instead of a set of mirror-images of the present. That at least has been the aspiration of historians for the past two centuries. Much of this book will be devoted to evaluating how adequately historians achieve these ends. My purpose in this opening chapter is to explore the different dimensions of social memory, and in so doing to arrive at an understanding of what historians do and how it differs from other sorts of thinking about the past.

**Third Reich**
The technical term for the National Socialist (Nazi) regime in Germany, 1933–45. Reich (roughly 'Empire') was used to denote the original medieval German Empire and the unified German Empire (the Second Reich), which lasted from 1871 to 1919.

## I

### *Social memory: creating the self-identity of a group*

For any social grouping to have a collective identity there has to be a shared interpretation of the events and experiences that have formed the group over time. Sometimes this will include an accepted belief about the origins of the group, as in the case of many nation states; or the emphasis may be on vivid turning points and symbolic moments that confirm the self-image and

aspirations of the group. Current examples include the vital significance of the **Edwardian suffrage movement** for the women's movement and the appeal of the '**molly house**' sub-culture of eighteenth-century London for the gay community in Britain today.[1] Without an awareness of a common past made up of such human detail, men and women could not easily acknowledge the claims on their loyalty of large abstractions.

The term 'social memory' accurately reflects the rationale of popular knowledge about the past. Social groupings need a record of prior experience, but they also require a picture of the past that serves to explain or justify the present, often at the cost of historical accuracy. The operation of social memory is clearest in those societies where no appeal can be made to the documentary record as a corrective or higher authority. Precolonial Africa presents some classic instances.[2] In literate societies, the same was true for those largely unlettered communities that lay outside the elite, such as the peasantries of pre-modern Europe. What counted for historical knowledge here was handed down as a narrative from one generation to the next, often identified with particular places and particular ceremonies or rituals. It provided a guide for conduct and a set of symbols around which resistance to unwelcome intrusion could be mobilized. Until quite recently popular memory in a largely illiterate Sicily embraced both the Palermo rising of 1282 against the Angevins (the 'Sicilian Vespers') and the nineteenth-century Mafia as episodes in a national tradition of avenging brotherhood.[3]

But it would be a mistake to suppose that social memory is the preserve of small-scale, pre-literate societies. In fact the term itself highlights a universal need: if the individual cannot exist without memory, neither can society, and that goes for large-scale, technologically advanced societies too. All societies look to their collective memories for consolation or inspiration, and literate societies are in principle no different. Near-universal literacy and a high degree of residential mobility mean that the oral transmission of social memory is now much less important. But written accounts (such as school history books or popular evocations of the World Wars), film and television perform the same function. Social memory continues to be an essential means of sustaining a politically active identity. Its success is judged by how effectively it contributes to collective cohesion and how widely it is shared by members of the group. Sometimes social memory is based on consensus and inclusion, and this is often the function of explicitly national narratives. It can take the form of a **foundation myth**, as in the case of the far-seeing Founding Fathers of the American Republic, whose memory is still invoked today in order to shore up belief in the American nation. Alternatively, consensual memory can focus on a moment of heroism, like the story of Dunkirk in 1940, which the British recall as the ingenious

**Edwardian suffrage movement**
The movement in the period before the First World War to obtain the parliamentary vote ('suffrage') for women. It is best known for campaigns by the militant suffragettes, although it was the more moderate suffragists who finally obtained votes for women in 1918.

**'molly house'**
An eighteenth-century covert meeting house for homosexual men. Molly houses remained little known until Mark Ravenhill's play *Mother Clapp's Molly House* (2001) was staged to widespread acclaim at the Royal National Theatre in London.

**foundation myth**
A story, usually much-treasured, about the foundation of a group or people. One of the most famous is the biblical story of the Creation. Nations often have semi-'official' versions of their origins, usually involving national hero figures, but foundation myths can be found in schools, army regiments and even companies. 'Myth' need not imply that the story is entirely false, merely that it has developed into a simplistic, usually rosy, version of events.

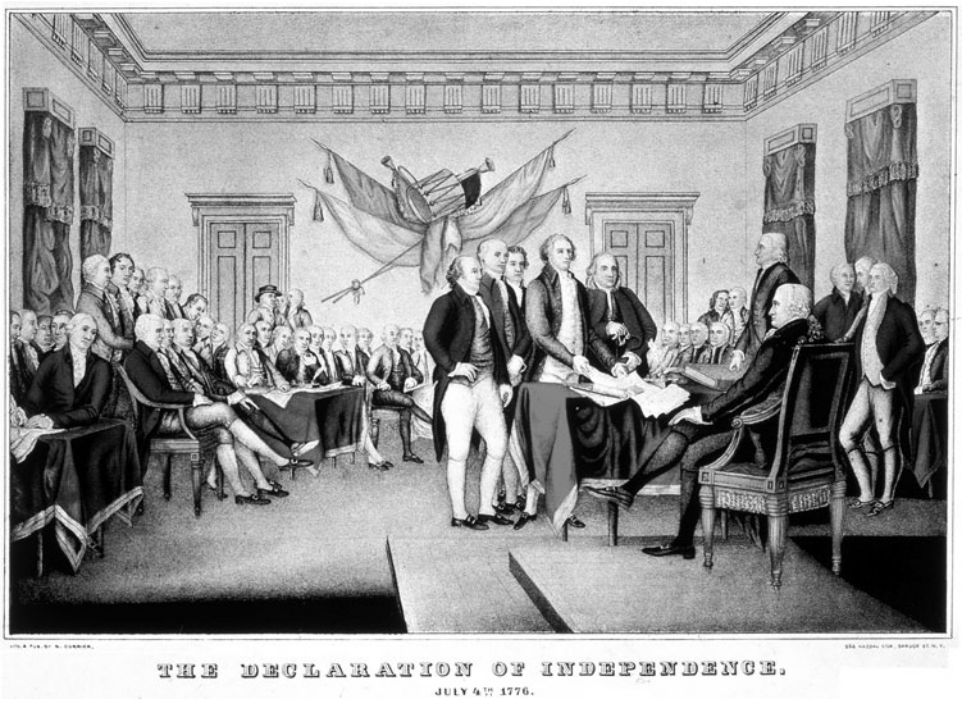


*Figure 1.1* Foundation myth: the Declaration of Independence by America's 'Founding Fathers' in 1776 remains an iconic moment in American history of immense symbolic importance. American school history books still present it in resolutely heroic terms. © Bridgeman Art Library/Capitol Collection, Washington, USA.

escape that laid the foundations of victory (see Chapter 11 for fuller discussion).

### *Social memory of past oppression*

But social memory can also serve to sustain a sense of oppression, exclusion or adversity, and these elements account for some of the most powerful expressions of social memory. Social movements entering the political arena for the first time are particularly conscious of the absolute requirement of a past. Black history in the United States has its origin in the kind of strategic concern voiced by Malcolm X in the 1960s. One reason why blacks were oppressed, he wrote, was that white America had cut them off from their past:

> If we don't go into the past and find out how we got this way, we will think that we were always this way. And if you think that you were in the condition that you're in right now, it's impossible for you to have too much confidence in yourself, you become worthless, almost nothing.[4]

The purpose of much British labour history has been to sharpen the social awareness of the workers, to confirm their commitment to political action and to reassure them that history is 'on their side' if only they will keep faith with the heroism of their forebears. David Montgomery's work on the American labour movement combined studies of shop-floor relations with the wider class environment in which workers developed their political consciousness. 'When you come right down to it', Montgomery remarked, 'history is the only teacher the workers have.'[5] In Britain the inaugural editorial of ***History Workshop Journal*** declared that the historical reconstruction of working people's experience was 'a source of inspiration and understanding'.[6] Working-class memories of work, locality, family and politics – with all the pride and anger so often expressed through them – were rescued before they were pushed out of popular consciousness by an approved national version.

***History Workshop Journal***
A collaborative research venture set up by a group of left-wing historians led by Raphael Samuel (1934–96) at Ruskin College, Oxford, to encourage research and debate about working-class and women's history.

The women's movement of the past thirty years has been if anything more conscious of the need for a usable past. For feminists, this requirement is not met by studies of exceptional women such as Elizabeth I who operated successfully in a man's world; the emphasis falls instead on the economic and sexual exploitation that has been the lot of most women, and on the efforts of activists to secure redress. According to this perspective, the critical determinant of women's history was not nation or class, but **patriarchy**: that is, the power of the household head over his wife and children and, by extension, the power of men over women more generally. Because mainstream history suppresses this truth, what it offers is not universal history but a blinkered account of half the human race. These are the themes which, to quote from the title of a popular feminist text, have been 'hidden from history'.[7] As one American feminist has put it:

**patriarchy**
A social system based on the dominance of fathers, and, by extension, of men in general.

> It is not surprising that most women feel that their sex does not have an interesting or significant past. However, like minority groups, women cannot afford to lack a consciousness of a collective identity, one which necessarily involves a shared awareness of the past. Without this, a social group suffers from a kind of collective amnesia, which makes it vulnerable to the impositions of dubious stereotypes, as well as limiting prejudices about what is right and proper for it to do or not to do.[8]

For socially deprived or 'invisible' groups – whether in a majority such as workers and women, or in a minority such as blacks in America and Britain – effective political mobilization depends on a consciousness of common experience in the past.

## II

### *Historicism – liberating the past from the present*

But alongside these socially motivated views of the past has grown up a form of historical awareness that starts from quite different premises. While social memory has continued to open up interpretations that satisfy new forms of political and social need, the dominant approach in historical scholarship has been to value the past for its own sake and, as far as possible, to rise above political expediency. It was only during the nineteenth century that historical awareness in this more rigorous sense became the defining attribute of professional historians. There were certainly important precursors – in the ancient world, in Islam, in dynastic China and in the West from the Renaissance onwards. But it was not until the first half of the nineteenth century that all the elements of historical awareness were brought together in a historical practice that was widely recognized as the proper way to study the past. This was the achievement of the intellectual movement known as *historicism*, which began in Germany and soon spread all over the Western world (the word comes from the German *Historismus*).

The fundamental premise of the historicists was that the autonomy of the past must be respected. They held that each age is a unique manifestation of the human spirit, with its own culture and values. For one age to understand another, there must be a recognition that the passage of time has profoundly altered both the conditions of life and the mentality of men and women – even perhaps human nature itself. Historians are not the guardians of universal values, nor can they deliver 'the verdict of history'; they must strive to understand each age on its own terms and to take on its own values and priorities instead of imposing ours. All the resources of scholarship and all the historian's powers of imagination must be harnessed to the task of bringing the past back to life – or *resurrecting* it, to employ a favourite conceit of the period. But historicism was more than an antiquarian rallying cry. Its proponents maintained that the culture and institutions of their own day could only be understood historically. Unless their growth and development through successive ages were grasped, their true nature would remain elusive. History, in short, held the key to understanding the world.

### *Seeing through the eyes of the past*

Historicism was one facet of Romanticism, the dominant movement in European thought and art around 1800. The most influential Romantic literary figure, Sir Walter Scott, aimed to draw readers of his historical romances into the authentic atmosphere

of the past. Popular interest in the surviving remains of the past rose to new heights, and it extended to not only the ancient world but also the hitherto despised Middle Ages. Historicism represented the academic wing of the Romantic obsession with the past. The leading figure in the movement was Leopold von Ranke, a professor at Berlin University from 1824 until 1872 and the author of over sixty volumes. In the preface to his first book, he wrote:

> History has had assigned to it the task of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of the ages to come. To such lofty functions this work does not aspire. Its aim is merely to show how things actually were [*wie es eigentlich gewesen*].[9]

By this Ranke meant more than an intention to reconstruct the passage of events, though this was certainly part of his programme.[10] What was new about the historicists' approach was their realization that the atmosphere and mentality of past ages had to be reconstructed too, if the formal record of events was to have any meaning. The main task of the historian became to find out why people acted as they did by stepping into their shoes, by seeing the world through their eyes and as far as possible by judging it by their standards. **Thomas Carlyle** believed more fervently in historical recreation than any other nineteenth-century writer; whatever the purpose of historical work, 'the first indispensable condition', he declared, was that 'we *see* the things transacted, picture them wholly, as if they stand before our eyes'.[11] And this obligation extended to *all* periods in the past, however alien they might seem to modern observers. Ranke himself strove to meet the historicist ideal in his treatment of the wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Others tackled the Middle Ages in the same spirit.

**Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881)**
A popular, though controversial, Victorian writer and historian. He was the author of a long, colourful account of the French Revolution.

Ranke's much-quoted preface is also important as a disclaimer of relevance. Ranke did not maintain that historical research served no purpose outside itself; indeed, he was probably the last major historian to believe that the outcome of studies such as his own would be to reveal the hand of God in human history. But he did not look for practical lessons from the past. Indeed he believed that detachment from present-day concerns was a condition of understanding the past. His objection to previous historians was not that they lacked all curiosity or **empathy** but that they were diverted from the real task by the desire to preach, or to give lessons in statecraft or to shore up the reputation of a ruling dynasty; in pursuing immediate goals they obscured the true wisdom to be derived from historical study. In the next chapter I will consider more fully the question of whether relevance is necessarily incompatible with historical awareness. But during the first half of the nineteenth century, when Europe experienced

**empathy**
The ability to enter into the feelings of others (not to be confused with sympathy, which denotes actually sharing them). The term is often used to describe a historian's approach to the 'foreignness' of past societies. In the 1980s there was an ultimately ill-fated attempt to assess children's ability to empathize with people in the past for examination purposes.

a high degree of turbulence in the aftermath of the **French Revolution**, history was politically contentious, and unless a special virtue had been made of detachment, it is hard to see how a scholarly historical practice could have become established. Although very few people read Ranke today, his name continues to stand for an **Olympian** impartiality and a duty to be true to the past before all else.

**French Revolution**
The tumultuous political events in late eighteenth-century France that overturned the monarchy and established a republic based upon the principles of the Rights of Man. It involved considerable violence and chronic political instability, until Napoleon staged a military coup in 1799.

**Olympian**
Detached and remote, like the Greek gods on Mount Olympus.

### *The 'otherness' of the past*

Historical awareness in the sense understood by the historicists rests on three principles. The first, and most fundamental, is *difference*; that is, a recognition of the gulf that separates our own age from all previous ages. Because nothing in history stands still, the passage of time has profoundly altered the way we live. The first responsibility of the historian is to take the measure of the difference of the past; conversely one of the worst sins is **anachronism** – the unthinking assumption that people in the past behaved and thought as we do. This difference is partly about the material conditions of life, a point sometimes forcibly made by the surviving remains of the past such as buildings, implements and clothing. Less obviously, but even more importantly, the difference is one of mentality: earlier generations had different values, priorities, fears and hopes from our own. We may take the beauties of nature for granted, but medieval men and women were terrified of forests and mountains and strayed from the beaten track as little as possible. In late eighteenth-century rural England, separation and remarriage were sometimes achieved by means of a public wife-sale; although this was in part a reaction to the virtual impossibility of legal divorce for the poor, it is hard for the modern reader not to dwell on the extreme patriarchal values implied in the humiliation of a wife led to market by her husband and held by a halter.[12] During the same period, public hangings in London regularly drew crowds of 30,000 or more, both rich and poor, and usually more women than men. Their motivation varied: it might be to see justice done, to draw lessons from the deportment of the condemned man or to register indignation at his death; but all shared a readiness to gaze on an act of cold-blooded cruelty from which most people today would recoil in horror.[13] More recent periods may not be so strange, but we still have to be alert to many evidences of difference. In mid-Victorian England it was possible for a thoughtful educated person to describe the teeming poor of East London as a 'trembling mass of maggots in a lump of **carrion**'.[14]

**anachronism**
A historical inaccuracy in which elements from one historical period (usually the present) are inserted into an earlier one, such as the use of modern language or attitudes in historical films and dramas.

**carrion**
The carcasses of dead animals on which scavengers feed.

Historical empathy, which has been much vaunted in classroom practice in recent years, is often taken to mean a recognition of the common humanity we share with our forebears; but a more realistic (and also more rigorous) interpretation of empathy

dwells on the effort of imagination needed to penetrate mentalities held in the past, which are irremediably removed from anything in our experience. As the novelist **L.P. Hartley** remarked, 'The past is a foreign country'.[15] Of course, like all foreign lands, the past is never entirely alien. As well as the shock of revulsion, historians experience the shock of recognition – as when they come across unaffected spontaneity in the behaviour of parents towards children in seventeenth-century England, or uncover the consumerist culture of eighteenth-century London. 'All history', it has been said, 'is a negotiation between familiarity and strangeness.'[16] But in any scholarly enquiry it is the otherness of the past that tends to come to the fore, because the passage of time has made exotic what once seemed commonplace.

**L.P. Hartley (1895–1972)**
British novelist. His novel *The Go-Between*, about a young boy who carries messages between a pair of lovers, is told through the memory of the boy grown to adulthood. The novel's opening line, 'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there', has been adopted by historians trying to put across the dangers of imposing modern assumptions on previous ages.

One of the ways in which we measure our distance from the past is by periodization. Labelling by century has this effect, as does the recognition of centenaries. More significant are the labels devised by historians themselves, since these express a view about the characteristics of the period concerned. As Ludmilla Jordanova has observed, 'marking time is the business of historians'.[17] The most vexed of these labels is 'modern'. Until the nineteenth century it was common to refer to all history since the fall of the Roman Empire as 'modern'. In universities 'modern history' is still sometimes used in that generic sense. In most current contexts, however, 'modern' has a narrower focus. It is identified with industrialization and the coming of mass society (in consumption, politics and culture) during the nineteenth century. The intervening epochs between the ancient and modern worlds are divided up between the medieval and early modern periods, with the fifteenth century usually treated as the bridge between the two. These terms are indispensable to historians, but they are paradoxical. In one sense they signal historical difference (we are not 'early modern'); but they also impose on the people of the past labels that had no meaning for them. In other words, they represent an act of interpretation, devised with the benefit of hindsight – and patently so when historians argue about the merits of different versions. It should also be noted that these labels are Eurocentric, and that they cannot easily be applied to histories in other parts of the world.[18]

### *Putting 'otherness' in context*

Merely to register such instances of difference across the gulf of time can give a salutary jolt to our modern assumptions. But historians aim to go much further than this. Their purpose is not only to uncover the strangeness of the past but to explain it, and that means placing it in its historical setting. What may seem bizarre or disturbing to us becomes explicable – though not necessarily less shocking – when interpreted as a manifestation of

a particular society. To recoil in horror from the grisly details of witchcraft accusations in early modern Europe or colonial America is certainly to acknowledge the gulf that separates that time from ours, but this is no more than a point of departure. The reason why we understand this phenomenon so much better now than we did thirty years ago is that historians have positioned it in relation to beliefs about the human body, the framework of popular religious belief outside the Church and the tensions over the position of women.[19] *Context* is thus the second component of historical awareness. The underlying principle of all historical work is that the subject of our enquiry must not be wrenched from its setting. Just as we would not pronounce on the significance of an archaeological find without first recording carefully its precise location in the site, so we must place everything we know about the past in its contemporary context. This is an exacting standard, requiring a formidable breadth of knowledge. It is often what distinguishes the professional from the amateur. The enthusiast working on family history in the local record office can, with a little technical guidance, substantiate a sequence of births, marriages and deaths, often extending over many generations; the amateur will come to grief not over factual omissions but because of an inadequate grasp of the relevant economic or social settings. To the social historian, the history of the family is not fundamentally about lines of descent, or even about plotting average family size down the ages; it is about placing the family within the shifting contexts of household production, health, religion, education and state policy.[20] Everything in the historian's training militates against presenting the past as a fixed single-track sequence of events; context must be respected at every point.

### *The historical continuum*

**scramble for Africa**
The term given to the process by which, in the 1880s and 1890s, almost the entire African continent was taken over by European powers. The term, which was used at the time, reflects distaste at the naked greed with which the Europeans jostled with each other to grab vast areas of land with no thought at all for the welfare of the African peoples who lived there.

But history is more than a collection of snapshots of the past, however vivid and richly contextualized. A third fundamental aspect of historical awareness is the recognition of historical *process* – the relationship between events over time which endows them with more significance than if they were viewed in isolation. For example, historians continue to be interested in the application of steam power to cotton spinning in the late eighteenth century, not so much because it is a striking instance of technical and entrepreneurial ingenuity but because it contributed so much to what has come to be called the Industrial Revolution. Specific annexations during the **scramble for Africa** attract attention because they formed part of a large-scale imperialism by the European powers; and so on. Apart from their intrinsic interest, what lies behind our concern with these instances of historical process is the much bigger question of how we got from 'then' to 'now'. This is the 'big story' to which so many more restricted enquiries contribute. There may

be a gulf between 'us' and 'them', but that gulf is actually composed of processes of growth, decay and change which it is the business of historians to uncover. Thus the fuller understanding we now have of witchcraft in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries begs the question of how this form of belief came into decline and disrepute, to the point where in Western society today it is subscribed to by only a very few self-conscious revivalists. Historical processes have sometimes been marked by abrupt transitions when history, as it were, speeded up – as in the case of the great revolutions. At the other extreme, history may almost stand still, its flow only perceptible with the hindsight of many centuries, as in patterns of land use or **kinship systems** in many pre-industrial societies.[21]

**kinship systems**
Social systems based upon the extended family.

If historical awareness rests on the notion of continuum, this cuts both ways: just as nothing has remained the same in the past, so too our world is the product of history. Every aspect of our culture, behaviour and beliefs is the outcome of processes over time. This is true not only of **venerable** institutions such as the Christian Churches or the British monarchy, which are visibly the outcome of centuries of evolution; it applies also to the most familiar aspects of every day, such as marriage or personal hygiene, which are much less often placed in a historical frame. No human practice ever stands still; all demand a historical perspective which uncovers the dynamics of change over time. This is one reason why it is so important that students should study large swathes of history. At present in British schools and universities there is so much emphasis on the virtues of documentary study and narrow specialism that major historical trends tend to disappear from view.

**venerable**
Worthy of respect and reverence, especially by virtue of age and wisdom.

## III

### *Are professional historical awareness and popular social memory in opposition?*

In the sense understood by the historicists, then, historical awareness means respecting the autonomy of the past, and attempting to reconstruct it in all its strangeness before applying its insights to the present. The effect of this programme was to drive a bigger wedge between elite and popular attitudes to the past, which has persisted until today. Professional historians insist on a lengthy immersion in the primary sources, a deliberate shedding of present-day assumptions and a rare degree of empathy and imagination. Popular historical knowledge, on the other hand, tends to a highly selective interest in the remains of the past, is shot through with present-day assumptions and is only incidentally concerned with understanding the past on its own terms. Three recurrent features of social memory have particularly significant distorting effects.

### *The distorting effects of tradition*

The first of these is respect for *tradition*. In many areas of life – from the law courts to political associations, from churches to sports clubs – belief and behaviour are governed by the weight of precedent: an assumption that what was done in the past is an authoritative guide to what should be done in the present. Respect for tradition is sometimes confused with a sense of history because it involves an affection for the past (or some of it) and a desire to keep faith with it. But there is very little of the historical about appeals to tradition. Following the path laid down by the ancestors has a great deal to be said for it in communities that neither experience change nor expect it; for them present and past can scarcely be distinguished. That is why respect for tradition contributed so much to the cohesion of society among small-scale pre-literate peoples – and why indeed they are sometimes referred to by anthropologists as 'traditional societies'. But such conditions no longer exist. In any society with a dynamic of social or cultural change, as indicated by external trade or social hierarchy or political institutions, an uncritical respect for tradition is counterproductive. It suppresses the historical changes that have occurred in the intervening period; indeed it positively discourages any attention to those changes and leads to the continuance of outward forms that are really

*Figure 1.2* The State Opening of Parliament. Much of the ritual at this annual ceremony has strong historical resonance, but this should not be confused with a professional, analytical sense of history. Such traditions can, in fact, conjure up the past to obscure the political reality of the present. © Getty Images/AFP.

redundant – or which we might say have been 'overtaken by history'. One reason for the famed stability of parliamentary government in Britain is that Parliament itself enjoys the prestige of a 700-year history as 'the mother of parliaments'. This confers considerable legitimacy: one often hears it said that Parliament has stood the test of time, that it has been the upholder of constitutional liberties and so on. But it also results in a reluctance to consider honestly how Parliament actually functions. The ability of the House of Commons to restrain the executive has declined sharply since the Second World War, but so far the immense tradition-based prestige of Parliament has blunted the demand for fundamental reform. Such is the authority of tradition that ruling groups have at various times invented it in order to bolster their prestige. Almost all the 'traditional' ceremonial associated with the royal family was improvised during the reign of Victoria, yet this rooting in specific historical circumstances is just what the whole notion of 'tradition' denies.[22] In modern societies, tradition may hold a sentimental appeal, but to treat it as a guide to life tends to lead to unfortunate results.

### *The invented traditions of nationalism*

The consequences of respect for tradition are particularly disturbing in the case of nationalism. Nations are of course the product of history, and the same national designation has usually meant different things at different times. Unfortunately, historians have not always kept this truth at the forefront of their minds. For all their scholarly principle, the nineteenth-century historicists found it hard to resist the demand for one-dimensional, nation-building history, and many did not even try. Europe was then the scene of bitterly contested national identities, as existing national boundaries were challenged by those many peoples whose sense of nationhood was denied – from the Germans and Italians to the Poles and Hungarians. Their claim to nationhood rested partly on language and common culture. But it also required a historical rationale, of past glories to be revived, or ancient wrongs to be avenged – in short, a tradition that could sustain the morale of the nation in the present and impress the other powers of Europe. Historians were caught up in popular nationalism like everyone else, and many saw no contradiction between the tenets of their profession and the writing of self-serving national histories. František Palacký was both a historian and a Czech nationalist. He combined his two great passions in a sequence of books that portrayed the Czechs as a freedom-loving and democratic people since the dawn of historical time; when he died in 1876 he was mourned as the father of the Czech nation.[23] Celebratory histories of this kind lend themselves to regular rituals of commemoration, when the national self-image can be reinforced in the popular

mind. Every year the Serbs mark the anniversary of their epic defeat at the hands of the Turks on the field of Kosovo Polje in 1389, and in so doing reaffirm their identity as a brave but beleaguered people; they continued to do so throughout the crisis in former Yugoslavia.[24] In such instances the untidy reality of history is beside the point. Nation, race and culture are brought together as a unified constant. Other examples span the modern world; from the Nazis in Germany to the ideology of black separatism in the United States. **Essentialism** or 'immemorialism' of this kind produces a powerful sense of exclusive identity, but it makes bad history. Not only is everything in the past that contradicts the required self-image suppressed; the interval between 'then' and 'now' is telescoped by the assertion of an unchanging identity, impervious to the play of historical circumstance.

**essentialism**
Relating to the basic nature (the 'essence') of people or nations.

The process of tradition-making is particularly clear in newly **autonomous** nations, where the need for a legitimizing past is strongly felt and the materials for a national past are often in short supply. Within two generations of the War of Independence, Americans had come to identify with a flattering self-image: in taming the wilderness far away from the corruptions of the old society in Europe, their colonial forebears had developed the values of self-reliance, honesty and liberty that were now the heritage of all Americans: hence the enduring appeal of folk heroes such as Daniel Boone. More recently, many African countries have faced the problem that their boundaries are the artificial outcome of the European partition of the continent in the late nineteenth century. In a few cases, such as Mali and Zimbabwe, descent can be claimed from a much earlier state of the same name. Ghana adopted the name of a medieval trading empire which did not include its present territory at all. Elsewhere in the continent, political leaders have invoked timeless qualities from the precolonial past (like Julius Nyerere's *ujamaa*, or brotherhood) as a charter of identity. To forge a national identity without some such legitimizing past is probably impossible.

**autonomous**
State of self-governing independence.

But appeals to an unchanging past are not confined to new or repressed nations. Nineteenth-century Britain had a relatively secure sense of nationhood, yet in the work of historians at that time is to be found an unchanging national essence as well as the idea of change over time. William Stubbs, usually regarded as the first professional historian in Britain, believed that the reasons for the growth of the English constitution through the Middle Ages lay 'deep in the very nature of the people'; in this reading parliamentary government became the expression of a national genius for freedom.[25] Essentialist categories come readily to the lips of politicians, particularly at moments of crisis. During the Second World War, Winston Churchill invoked a tradition of dogged resistance to foreign attack stretching back to Pitt the Younger and Elizabeth I. Liberal commentators were uncomfortably

reminded of this vein of **rhetoric** at the time of the Falklands War in 1982. Pondering the lessons of the conflict, Margaret Thatcher declared:

> This generation can match their fathers and grandfathers in ability, in courage and in resolution. We have not changed. When the demands of war and the dangers to our own people call us to arms – then we British are as we have always been – competent, courageous and resolute.[26]

**rhetoric**
Originally the ancient Greek art of public speaking, but more usually used nowadays to mean points that rely on the persuasive power of words or voice rather than actual argument.

Nationalism of this kind rests on the assertion of tradition, rather than an interpretation of history. It suppresses difference and change in order to uphold identity.

## IV

### *Nostalgia – history as loss*

Traditionalism is the crudest distortion of historical awareness, because it does away with the central notion of development over time. Other distortions are more subtle. One that has huge influence is *nostalgia*. Like tradition, nostalgia is backward-looking, but instead of denying the fact of historical change, it interprets it in one direction only – as change for the worse. Nostalgia is most familiar perhaps as generational regret: older people habitually complain that nowadays the young are unruly, or that the country is 'going to the dogs', and the same complaints have been documented over a very long period.[27] But nostalgia works on a broader canvas too. It works most strongly as a reaction to a sense of loss in the recent past, and it is therefore particularly characteristic of societies undergoing rapid change. Anticipation and optimism are never the only – or even the main – social responses to progress. There is nearly always regret or alarm at the passing of old ways and familiar landmarks. A yearning backward glance offers consolation, an escape in the mind from a harsh reality. It is when the past appears to be slipping away before our eyes that we seek to recreate it in the imagination. This was one of the mainsprings of the Romantic movement, and within historicism itself there was a sometimes unduly nostalgic impulse, as scholars reacted against the industrialization and urbanization around them. It is no accident that the Middle Ages, with its close-knit communities and its slow pace of change, came into fashion just as the gathering pace of economic change was enlarging the scale of social life. Ever since the Industrial Revolution, nostalgia has continued to be one of the emotional reflexes of societies experiencing major change. One of its commonest expressions in Britain today is 'heritage'. When the past is conserved or re-enacted for our entertainment, it is usually (though not

invariably) presented in its most attractive light. Bygone splendours, such as the medieval tournament or the Elizabethan banquet, naturally lend themselves to the pleasures of spectacle; but everyday life – such as the back-breaking routines of the early industrial craft shop or the Victorian kitchen – is also dressed up in order to be visually appealing. A sense of loss is part of the experience of visiting heritage sites.

The problem with nostalgia is that it is a very lopsided view of history. If the past is redesigned as a comfortable refuge, all its negative features must be removed. The past becomes better and simpler than the present. Thus nineteenth-century medievalism took little account of the brevity and squalor of life, or the power of a malign spirit-world. Present-day nostalgia shows a comparable **myopia**. Even a simulation of the London Blitz will prompt regret at the loss of 'wartime spirit' as much as horror at the effects of aerial bombardment. Champions of 'family values' who posit a golden age in the past (before 1939 or 1914, according to taste) overlook the large number of loveless marriages before divorce was made

**myopia**
Short-sightedness.

*Figure 1.3* The image of the dome of St Paul's Cathedral standing intact through the devastating London Blitz of 1940 became a powerful symbol both of British defiance of Nazi Germany and of a particular approach to the distinctiveness of British history. More recent scholarship questions the extent to which the British people were united in the Blitz, but the popular social 'memory' of the 'Blitz spirit' shows no sign of diminishing. © Getty Images/Hulton Archive.

easier, and the high incidence of family breakup through the loss of a spouse or parent from natural causes. In such cases, as Raphael Samuel put it, the past functions less as history than as allegory:

> It is a testimony to the decline in manners and morals, a mirror to our failings, a measure of absence. … By a process of selective amnesia the past becomes a historical equivalent of the dream of primal bliss, or of the enchanted space which memory accords to childhood.[28]

This kind of outlook is not only an unreliable guide to the past, but also a basis for pessimism and rigidity in the present. Nostalgia presents the past as an alternative to the present instead of as a prelude to it. It encourages us to hanker after an unattainable golden age instead of engaging creatively with the world as it is. Whereas historical awareness should enhance our insight into the present, nostalgia indulges a desire to escape from it.

## V

### *Dismissing the past: history as progress*

At the other end of the scale of historical distortion lies the belief in *progress*. If nostalgia reflects a pessimistic view of the world, progress is an optimistic creed, for it asserts not only that change in the past has been for the better, but that improvement will continue into the future. Like process, progress is about change over time, but with the crucial difference that a positive value is placed on the change, endowing it with moral content. The concept of progress is fundamental to modernity, because for 200 years it was the defining myth of the West, a source of cultural self-assurance and of outright superiority in the West's dealings with the rest of the world. In this sense, progress was essentially the invention of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Hitherto a limit on human development had always been assumed, either on account of the mysterious workings of Divine Providence or because the achievements of classical antiquity were regarded as unsurpassable. The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century placed its faith in the power of human reason to transform the world. Writers such as Voltaire, Hume and Adam Smith regarded history as an unfinished record of material and moral improvement. They sought to reveal the shape of history by tracing the growth of human society from primitive barbarism to civilization and refinement. The confidence of these historians may seem naïve and grandiose today, but for 200 years some such structure has underpinned all varieties of progressive thought, including both liberal democracy and Marxism. As recently as the 1960s, representatives of these two traditions – **J.H. Plumb** and E.H. Carr – wrote widely-read manifestos for history informed

**J.H. Plumb (1911–2001)**
Sir John H. Plumb, a leading Cambridge historian specializing in the history of eighteenth-century Britain. Plumb was an influential figure, and many of his students went on to become high-profile historians.

by a passionate belief in progress.[29] That kind of faith is much rarer today, in the light of dire predictions of environmental and economic disaster. But few of us are happy to live in a world of nostalgic regret all the time; the yearning for a lost golden age in one sphere is often balanced by the confident disparagement of 'the bad old days' in another.

That dismissal of the past points to the limitations of progress as a view of history. Whereas 'process' is a neutral term without an implicit value judgement, 'progress' is by definition evaluative and partial; since it is premised on the superiority of the present over the past, it inevitably takes on whatever values happen to be prevalent today, with the consequence that the past seems less admirable and more 'primitive' the further back in time we go. Condescension and incomprehension are the result. If the past exists strictly to validate the achievements of the present, there can be no room for an appreciation of its cultural riches. Proponents of progress have never been good at understanding periods remote from their own age. Voltaire, for example, was notoriously unable to recognize any good in the Middle Ages; his historical writings traced the growth of rationality and tolerance and condemned the rest. So if the desire to demonstrate progress is pressed too far, it quickly comes into conflict with the historian's obligation to recreate the past on its own terms. In fact historicism took shape very much as a reaction against the present-minded devaluation of the past that characterized many writers of the Enlightenment. Ranke regarded every age as being 'next to God', by which he meant that it should not be prejudged by modern standards. Interpreting history as an overarching story of progress involves doing just that.

Tradition, nostalgia and progress provide the basic constituents of social memory. Each answers a deep psychological need for security – through seeming to promise no change, or change for the better or an escape into a more congenial past. The real objection to them is that, as a governing stance, they require the past to conform with a deeply felt and often unacknowledged need. They are about belief, not enquiry. They look for a consistent window on the past, and they end up doing scant justice to anything else.

## VI

### *Challenging the conventional version*

If social need so easily leads to distorted images of the past, it is hardly surprising that historians have on the whole kept their distance from it. At a practical level the stance of the professional historian towards social memory is not always

consistent. Thus **Herbert Butterfield**, who made his name in the 1930s with an attack on present-minded history, wrote an impassioned evocation of the English historical tradition in 1944 which was clearly intended to contribute to wartime morale.[30] Today the newspapers quite often publish articles by leading historians who are tempted by the opportunity to influence popular attitudes towards the past. But the profession as a whole prefers to emphasize how different the purpose and approach of scholarly historical work are. Whereas the starting point for most popular forms of knowledge about the past is the requirements of the present, the starting point of historicism is the aspiration to re-enter or recreate the past.

**Herbert Butterfield (1900–79)**
Cambridge historian specializing in the eighteenth century. His analysis of *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931) attacked the tendency of 'Whig' historians to see history in terms of progress, thereby unjustly (and anachronistically) criticizing earlier ages as 'backward'.

It follows that one important task of historians is to challenge socially motivated misrepresentations of the past. This activity has been likened to 'the eye surgeon, specializing in removing cataracts'.[31] But whereas patients are only too glad to have their sight corrected, society may be deeply attached to its faulty vision of the past, and historians do not make themselves popular in pointing this out. Many of their findings incur the odium of undermining hallowed pieties – as in the case of historians who question the efficacy of Churchill's wartime leadership, or who attempt a **non-sectarian** approach to the history of Northern Ireland. There is probably no official nationalist history in the world that is proof against the deflating effect of academic enquiry. The same is true of the kind of engaged history that underwrites the conflict between Left and Right. Politically motivated labour history in Britain has tended to emphasize political radicalism and the struggle against capital; yet if it is to provide a realistic historical perspective in which political strategies can be planned, labour history cannot afford to ignore the equally long tradition of working-class Toryism, still very much alive today. When Peter Burke told a conference of socialist historians, 'although I consider myself a socialist and a historian, I'm not a socialist historian', he meant that he wanted to study the real complexity of the historical record, not reduce it to an overdramatized confrontation between Us and Them.[32] The same argument can be made with regard to distortion emanating from the Right. During the mid-1980s, Margaret Thatcher tried to make political capital out of a somewhat self-serving image of nineteenth-century England. When she applauded 'Victorian values', she meant that **untrammelled** individualism and a **rolling back of the state** might once again make Britain great. She omitted to say that the essential pre-condition of the Victorian economic miracle had been Britain's global strategic dominance, and she did not dwell on the appalling social costs in terms of destitution and environmental damage. Historians were quick to point out that her vision was both unrealistic and undesirable.[33]

**non-sectarian**
Avoiding allegiance to any particular religious group.

**untrammelled**
Unhindered.

**rolling back of the state**
The role of the state grew enormously in twentieth-century Britain, especially after Clement Attlee's post-war Labour government (1945–51) nationalized heavy industry and the health service. The Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher (1979–90) reversed this policy by returning nationalized industry to private ownership.

### *The overlap between history and social memory*

If this debunking activity would seem to put historians in the opposite camp from the keepers of social memory, it needs to be stressed that the distinction is by no means as hard and fast as I have depicted it up to this point. One strand of opinion (particularly associated with Postmodernism) holds that there is in fact no difference between history and social memory. According to this view, the aspiration to recreate the past is an illusion, and all historical writing bears the indelible impression of the present – indeed tells us more about the present than the past. I will evaluate the merits of this radically subversive position in Chapter 7. Here it is enough to point out that the collapsing of history into social memory appeals to a particular kind of sceptical theorist but commands very little support from historians. However, there are significant areas of overlap. It would be wrong to suppose that accuracy of research is the exclusive property of professional historians. As Raphael Samuel pointed out, there is an army of enthusiastic amateurs in this country, investigating everything from family genealogy to steam locomotives, whose fetish for accuracy is unsurpassed.[34] Academic historians may distance themselves from the distortions of social memory, but many well-established historical specialisms today have their origin in an explicit political need: one thinks of labour history, women's history and African history. It is not always possible to distinguish completely between history and social memory, because historians perform some of the tasks of social memory. Perhaps most important of all, social memory itself is an important topic of historical enquiry. It is central to popular consciousness in all its forms, from democratic politics to social mores and cultural taste, and no comprehensive social history can afford to ignore it; oral history represents in part an attempt to take account of this dimension (see below, Chapter 11). In all these ways history and social memory feed on each other. As Geoffrey Cubitt puts it, 'History and memory are proximate concepts: they inhabit a similar mental territory.'[35]

Yet for all these points of convergence, the distinction that historians like to make between their work and social memory remains important. Whether social memory services a totalitarian regime or the needs of interest groups within a democratic society, its value and its prospects of survival are entirely dependent on its functional effectiveness: the content of the memory will change according to context and priorities. Of course historical scholarship is not immune from calculations of practical utility. Partly this is because we understand more clearly than Ranke did that historians cannot detach themselves completely from their own time. Partly also, as I will argue in the next chapter, the richness of history is positively enhanced by responding to topical agendas. Where most historians will usually part company from

the keepers of social memory is in insisting that their findings should be guided by the historicist principles described in this chapter – that historical awareness should prevail over social need. This is a principle that can be defended on its own merits. But it must also be sustained if we are to have any prospect of learning from history, as distinct from finding there the mirror image of our own immediate concerns. To that possibility I now turn.

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