

A LITTLE BOOK FOR
NEW HISTORIANS

WHY AND
HOW TO
STUDY
HISTORY

ROBERT TRACY MCKENZIE

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*For my colleagues and students
at Wheaton College*



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PART ONE

WHY STUDY HISTORY?

SO WHAT IS HISTORY ANYWAY?

*You keep using that word. I do not think
it means what you think it means.*

INIGO MONTOYA, *THE PRINCESS BRIDE*



OFTEN THE FAMILIAR WORDS mislead us most. When we come across a word that's entirely foreign to us, we hesitate to use it until we're sure what it means. But when it comes to words that we've known since childhood, we get reckless. Why stop to define terms that we've known since third grade? And so we muddle along, using words that we think we understand but haven't thought much about. Sometimes this works, and sometimes it gets us in trouble. *History* is a case in point.

It's not that *history* signifies such a complicated concept. The problem is that it signifies multiple distinct concepts. The editors

The Princess Bride, directed by Rob Reiner (Santa Monica, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, 2000). See www.imsdb.com/scripts/Princess-Bride,-The.html, accessed July 2, 2018.

of the *Oxford English Dictionary* have come up with twelve, believe it or not. We don't have to bother with all the nuanced shades of difference that the OED sets out, but we do have to be alert to one critical distinction that is absolutely foundational to everything that follows in this book.

In popular parlance, when we refer to *history* outside of an academic setting, we almost always mean "the past itself." We debate the best sports teams in history, question the checkered history of a political candidate, or celebrate John and Martha's long history together. No problem or confusion here; we all know what we mean. The danger comes when we carry that habit into the systematic, academic study of history. With apologies to popular culture, academic historians insist that history is *not* the past. They're not even close to the same. Coming to grips with the magnitude of the difference is the first essential step to thinking historically.

We're not just splitting hairs. The difference between the past and our knowledge of the past is so immense that it should stagger and humble us. The best illustration of the difference that I've come across is from one of the lesser known essays of C. S. Lewis. Lewis was a master at making esoteric truths understandable, and in his essay "Historicism" he crafted a marvelous metaphor for the past. Imagine that every single moment of "lived time" is like a drop of water, Lewis writes. If that were true, then it follows that "the past . . . in its reality, was a roaring cataract of billions upon billions of such moments: any one of them too complex to grasp in its entirety, and the aggregate beyond all imagination."

What a word picture! By inviting us to imagine ourselves near the base of a deafening waterfall, Lewis helps us to glimpse the nearly limitless scope of the past. As you read his words, imagine standing by the water's edge with your arm outstretched, a Dixie cup in hand. If that wall of water plummeting downward is analogous to "the past" in its near-infinite totality, then the drops that you capture in your paper cup represent *history*, i.e., all that we can claim to recall and comprehend of those "billions upon billions" of moments. As Lewis recognized, the difference between history and the past "is not a question of [our] failing to know everything; it is a question (at least as regards quantity) of knowing next door to nothing." Try as we may, we can catch but a fraction of that crashing cataract; the rest "falls off the world into total oblivion."¹

If reminding ourselves of the disparity between history and the past is the first step to thinking historically, it is also a crucial part of thinking Christianly while thinking historically. After three decades in the academy, I'm still wrestling with what it means to

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think Christianly as a historian, but here are two things I think it has to include: awe and humility. When it comes to history, thinking Christianly should inspire us with awe when we recall God's omniscient comprehension of the near-infinite past. Our

¹C. S. Lewis, "Historicism," in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 107.

Lord “has numbered the hairs of our heads as well as the days of princes and kings.”²

But thinking Christianly should also lead us to humility when we remind ourselves, following Lewis, that in our human finiteness, our knowledge of the past is, by comparison, “next door to nothing.” When we equate history with the past, we exaggerate our capacity to know, minimize the wonder of divine omniscience, and unwittingly attempt to rob God of a measure of his glory. For the Christian historian, calling to mind the vast difference between history and the past can be a kind of spiritual discipline, a way of promoting humility and awe by reminding ourselves that God is God and we are not.

So *history* is not the entirety of the past and there are important reasons to remember that. Fair enough. But how then are we to define it? (That Dixie cup analogy is a bit unwieldy.) The truth is that academic historians don’t agree on a single, “official” definition, but whatever definition they embrace, it always preserves this fundamental distinction between history and the past. You’ll find some who define *history* as “the *recreation* of the past,” others who speak of it as “the *analysis* or *interpretation* of the past,” or even as “a never-ending *argument* about the past.” Actually, it’s all of these things. The definition I think is best—and the one we’ll build on in the rest of this chapter—is that *history* is “the *remembered* past,” a phrase that I borrow from Christian historian John Lukacs.³

²Arthur S. Link, “The Historian’s Vocation,” *Theology Today* 19 (1962/1963): 86.

³Mark G. Malvasi and Jeffrey O. Nelson, eds., *Remembered Past: John Lukacs on History, Historians, and Historical Knowledge* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2005), 4-5, italics added.

The power of this pithy definition is remarkable. Once we begin to think consciously of historical knowledge as a form of memory, the analogy unlocks all manner of truths about what history is and what historians do.

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Think for a few moments about memory. What function does it serve in our lives? What traits do you associate with it? When I posed these questions to my students last semester, their answers were spot on. On the one hand, they recognized the critical role that memory plays for all of us. “Memory is crucial to our sense of personal identity,” one student commented. “Without it we would be unable to function,” observed another.

But if the function of memory is vital, the traits of memory give us pause. My students observed that we forget most of what happens to us. What we do remember we often remember inaccurately, frequently selectively, sometimes self-servingly. Our memories regularly change over time, furthermore, and it is next to impossible to find two people who remember the same event in precisely the same way.

If history is the remembered past, how might these attributes of memory help us in thinking about history? I can think of at least four related conclusions that follow. First, *history is foundational to our sense of identity*. It’s a truism that our personal memories are vital to our sense of self. In like manner, history can speak both to the question “Who am I?” as well as to the

broader question “Who are we?” We are historical beings and we cannot survive without historical knowledge.

Second, just as we all have memories, it’s equally true that *we all know some history*, even if we think otherwise. We tend to equate historical knowledge with the dates and names in history books—the kind of information that we happily forget once we’ve taken the final exam. But when we think of history as the remembered past, we see how silly it is to claim that we don’t know any. We all have a sense of our personal history, for starters. What Lukacs describes as “the inevitable presence of the past in our lives” is one of the defining attributes of our humanity.⁴

Third, *we are all already historians*, and that’s true whether we’ve ever darkened the door of an archive or worn a tweed jacket with elbow patches. The title of this book suggests that it is pitched for “*new historians*,” but that doesn’t really describe you unless you’ve only just begun to have memories. At the heart of the historian’s pursuit is drawing on knowledge of the past in order to understand the present and act effectively in the future. None of us can survive without doing this daily. This means that “history is something we all do,” as historian Margaret MacMillan observes, “even if, like the man who discovered he was writing prose, we do not always realize it.”⁵

This understanding of history as the remembered past contradicts the common perception of history as an esoteric branch of knowledge belonging exclusively to academic

⁴Malvasi and Nelson, *Remembered Past*, 4.

⁵Margaret MacMillan, *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Modern Library, 2010), ix.

specialists. (That's a perception that we academic historians have too often fostered, by the way.) But if we are all already historians who know some history, *it doesn't follow that we are automatically equipped to remember the past accurately and wisely*. The analogy between history and memory points us toward this final conclusion as well. Remember how faulty memory can be?

There is an old Asian proverb to the effect that the palest ink is more reliable than the strongest memory.⁶ Academic historians insist that the best history is memory corroborated by evidence, and that the astute historian uses every kind of evidence available to remember the past as accurately as possible. There is something of a paradox here, if you'll notice it. *History* may be "something we all do," but sound *historical thinking* is something we have to work at. As one influential work puts it, thinking historically is an "unnatural act."⁷

**THE ASTUTE HISTORIAN
USES EVERY KIND
OF EVIDENCE AVAILABLE
TO REMEMBER THE PAST
AS ACCURATELY
AS POSSIBLE.**

This is why academic historians often use the term history to refer not only to a branch of knowledge but also to an intellectual

⁶"The Palest Ink Is Better Than the Best Memory," Chinese Idioms—Chengyu, Standard Mandarin Chinese Pronunciation, accessed October 5, 2018, www.standardmandarin.com/idiom/the-palest-ink-is-better-than-the-best-memory-idiom.

⁷Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

discipline in which the mind is trained to analyze historical evidence and build sound historical arguments. Much of the second half of this book will explore the habits of mind that sharpen our historical thinking and enhance our capacity to remember the past rightly. But before we get there, we need to remind ourselves why remembering rightly is so important.