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What is History Now?

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I SHOULD LIKE TO BEGIN THIS LECTURE with a brief answer to the question that is posed in the title,¹ for it is an answer which describes and justifies history, in its two most resonant guises, both as an academic discipline and as an essential component of the national culture. By agreeable coincidence, it is provided by a one-time President of the British Academy and, although couched in rather mandarin language, it seems wholly valid and appropriate in this, the Academy's centenary year. 'Our age', the author of these comments notes, with evident approval, has seen 'an immense expansion' in historical studies and a correspondingly unprecedented specialisation in 'the various branches of historical inquiry.' So much so, indeed, that all 'the main lines of human activity' are now recognised as coming well within the bounds of those scholarly endeavours being directed towards the past. 'This widening of our field', the President goes on, 'may be primarily due to a larger conception of history, which we have now come to regard as a record of every form of human effort and achievement'—efforts and achievements which he sees as being no longer exclusively restricted to the political activities of a privileged elite, but also as encompassing the deeds and doings of the majority of ordinary people.²

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¹ For three earlier attempts to address this question, see J. Gardiner (ed.), *What Is History Today?* (London, 1988); B. Southgate, *History: What and Why? Ancient, Modern and Post-Modern Perspectives* (2nd edn., London, 2001); D. Cannadine (ed.), *What Is History Now?* (London, 2002).

² Viscount Bryce, 'Presidential Address', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 6 (1913–14), pp. 121–2.

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Most of us today would surely endorse this definition of historical research, writing and teaching (and broadcasting?) as currently practised: by turns (to borrow some of the catch-phrases of our time) wide-ranging, democratic, egalitarian, inclusive. Indeed, in a subsequent lecture, the same President of the Academy went on to assert that traditional political history now constituted ‘a comparatively small’ part of what contemporaries understood as ‘the past’, and that more effort was being devoted to studying the history of religion, industry, culture, nature, scientific discovery and the human mind.³ How comfortingly familiar and up-to-the-minute all this seems: history in our time and for our time. Yet these words were not spoken recently, since the advent of New Labour to power, but just before and just after the First World War, and the author was not the British Academy’s current President, Viscount Runciman, but his illustrious predecessor, Viscount Bryce, by turns a lawyer, historian, public moralist, Liberal politician, and British Ambassador to the United States, who had also, by agreeable coincidence, been one of the founding Fellows of the Academy one hundred years ago.⁴

In the present context, Bryce’s words are worth pondering for two good reasons. First, because they remind us that since it received its Royal Charter in August 1902 as ‘the British Academy for the promotion of historical, philosophical and philological studies’ (and the prioritisation here is as revealing as the categorisation), history has always been at the heart of its identity and endeavours.⁵ Ten of the Academy’s twenty six Presidents have been historians, among them such luminaries as H. A. L. Fisher, Sir John Clapham, Sir Charles Webster, Sir George Clark, Owen Chadwick, Sir Keith Thomas and Sir Tony Wrigley. Since 1919 the Academy has hosted the annual Raleigh Lecture in History, the first of which was given by Bryce himself, on the subject, as appropriate for him as for Sir Walter, of ‘world history’.⁶ And even today, when the Academy’s interests have become much more broadly concerned with the humanities as a whole, and have also come to embrace the social sciences, three of its Sections are specifically devoted to history, and historians are addition-

³ J. Bryce, ‘World History’ *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 9 (1919–20), pp. 189–92.

⁴ W. R. Brock, ‘James Bryce and the Future’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 115 (2002), *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows*, 1, pp. 3–30. For a recent reappraisal of Bryce, see J. Seaman, ‘James Bryce: A Study in Victorian Public Life’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2001).

⁵ Anon, ‘A Brief Account of the Foundation of the Academy’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1 (1903–4), p. ix; S. Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 21–7.

⁶ See note 3 above.

ally to be found in many other Sections, from Classical Antiquity to African and Oriental Studies, and from Archaeology to the History of Art. It is, then, entirely appropriate that one of the Academy's nine centenary lectures should be concerned with history, and I am delighted and honoured to be giving it here in Sheffield where, by agreeable coincidence, H. A. L. Fisher was Vice-Chancellor of this university from 1912 to 1916, and subsequently a Member of Parliament for this city.

My second reason for beginning with Bryce's words is that they also remind us that when thinking about what history is, and about what historians do, we need to pay very careful and often sceptical attention to the statements that practising scholars make—about themselves, about their work, and about their subject. For many of them make claims concerning the novelty or importance of their preferred type of history which, however well intended, are at best over-stated, at worst incorrect. And this in turn means that we need to assess their statements and manifestos about history with that same sort of critical acumen and contextual scrutiny that we bring to bear on other forms of evidence from and about the past.⁷ So let us return to Bryce who, in calling for a wide-ranging approach to the past when he did, was not alone. Indeed, the first book advocating something called the 'new' history was published (in America) as long ago as 1912, at almost the same time that Bryce was delivering the Presidential address from which I have quoted. Yet many later historians, preoccupied with what they see as the exciting and belated creation of their own version of the 'new' history since the Second World War, persist in regarding the first half of the twentieth century as a scholarly dark age, and pay scant attention to what their predecessors hoped to achieve, or realistically might have expected to accomplish—matters to which I shall later return.⁸

But claims to novelty and significance are not the only statements historians make about themselves and their sub-fields which should be treated with healthy scepticism. Consider the view, widespread in many quarters, that history today is in a crisis so deep and so divisive that it may prove terminal.⁹ According to Gertrude Himmelfarb, it has been ruined twice-over, by the sixties generation in thrall to Marx and the social sciences, and

⁷ L. Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London, 2000), p. 203.

⁸ L. Stone, *The Present and the Past Revisited* (London, 1987), pp. 4–8; J. H. Robinson, *The New History* (New York, 1912); T. K. Rabb and R. I. Rotberg (eds.), *The New History: The 1980s and Beyond* (Princeton, 1982).

⁹ R. J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York, 1999), pp. 1–8; J. W. Scott, 'History in Crisis? The Others' Side of the Story', *American Historical Review*, 94 (1989), 680–92.

by the post-modernists no less in thrall to Foucault and Derrida: but this is little more than ignorant and paranoid ranting, not least because political history remains alive and well. According to Peter Novick, ‘the discipline of history’ as ‘a community of scholars, united by common aims, common standards, and common purposes’ has ‘ceased to exist’: but this exaggerates both an earlier (and largely mythical) golden age of consent and consensus, and also the true extent of present day divisions and discontents.¹⁰ According to Francis Fukuyama, history had come to an end with the global triumph of liberalism and democracy: but even before 11 September 2001, this was an implausibly parochial and naively optimistic view of human nature and world affairs. And according to Christopher Andrew, ‘no period in recorded history has been so persuaded of the irrelevance of the past experience of the human race’: but this is a generalisation of such cosmic scope that it is impossible to see how it could be either verified or disproven.¹¹

Indeed, it would be fair to say that during virtually every decade of the last one hundred years, some historians have been urging that history must be made completely anew, while others have insisted that such modish and ephemeral fashionability threatens everything that is good and noble and decent and traditional about the discipline. But it should scarcely be a surprise that both these progressive and paranoid modes have persisted. For in scholarship, as in politics, they feed off (and need?) each other: one historian’s great leap forward is another historian’s crisis, and what is presented as an improvement and enhancement by some is represented as a threat and a disaster by others.¹² Depending on who you read, history now (as throughout the whole of the twentieth century) is either doing very badly, or it is doing very well—a Manichean description of its circumstances which is only one of several such formulations I shall be discussing (and criticising). But that is to anticipate. For I want to begin by surveying how the study of history evolved in Britain during the last one hundred years, and by suggesting that this tells us more about what history has been—and about what history is now—than we are

¹⁰ G. Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987); ead., *On Looking into the Abyss* (New York, 1994); S. Pedersen, ‘What is Political History Now?’, in Cannadine, *What Is History Now?*, pp. 36–55; P. Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 628.

¹¹ F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London, 1992); A. Ryan et al., *After the End of History* (London, 1992); C. M. Andrew, ‘Foreword’ in A. G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History* (London, 2002), p. vii.

¹² F. Stern, ‘A Note to the Second Edition’, in id. (ed.), *The Varieties of History* (New York, 1973 edn.), pp. 9–10.

generally inclined to allow. Then, I shall turn to consider how it was that so much discussion of history during that same period was indeed structured around deep and often bitter polarities, which turn out on close investigation to be at best exaggerated and at worst fundamentally misleading. Finally, and in the light of these remarks about the practice of history and the polemics of historians during the twentieth century, I shall comment on the tasks which face us today, and the challenges which will face us tomorrow.

I

When the British Academy was founded in 1902, history occupied a very equivocal niche in the nation's life and culture. There was a powerful Victorian legacy of great writers such as Macaulay, Froude, Carlyle, J. R. Green and S. R. Gardiner, who wrote national, narrative histories, which reached a broad and general audience; and that reading public became yet broader after Forster's Education Act of 1870, and the expansion in public schools and grammar schools during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, which ensured that history became an essential part of what we would now call the national curriculum. At the same time, degree courses in history were being established at Oxford and Cambridge, in the Scottish universities, and on the new civic campuses of Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and Sheffield.¹³ Here was a new, young, mass audience for history, avidly devouring the new, multi-authored series of textbooks published by Methuen, Longmans and Macmillan; and here also was a new professional activity, exemplified by the setting up of the *Royal Historical Society* and the *English Historical Review*, and by the presence of Stubbs and Freeman in Oxford, and Seeley and Acton in Cambridge. The result was that, by the time the Academy was founded, a knowledge of history (as the first President, Lord Reay explained in 1905) was deemed to be essential, not only for exercising British citizenship, but also for practising British statesmanship.¹⁴

¹³ J. P. Kenyon, *The History Men: The Historical Profession in England since the Renaissance* (London, 1983), pp. 145, 164; D. Cannadine, 'British History as a "New Subject": Politics, Perspectives and Prospects', in A. Grant and K. J. Stringer (eds.), *Uniting the Kingdom? The Making of British History* (London, 1995), pp. 14–15; P. Mandler, *History and National Life* (London, 2002), pp. 11–45.

¹⁴ Lord Reay, 'Address by the President', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 2 (1905–6), p. 5; Collini, *Public Moralists*, pp. 216–20.

In all these ways, and at all these levels, history was an institutionalised element in Britain's early twentieth-century national culture to a greater extent than had been true before. But this was only one side of the picture. For in other ways, Britain in the 1900s was seen by many (including the founding Fellows of the Academy) to be a worryingly ahistorical nation, with little deeply rooted or seriously developed sense of the past at all. According to one Fellow, Professor C. H. Firth, the teaching of history in primary schools was carried on by staff with virtually no training in the subject, while at secondary level, instruction was 'neither thorough nor systematic'—anxieties and criticisms which, across a hundred-year chasm, still retain a curiously contemporary resonance.¹⁵ This, in turn, meant that as the twentieth century opened, most Britons seemed indifferent to the past, and it was in a (largely vain) effort to counter this pervasive ignorance of history that a whole variety of preservationist societies and proselytising enterprises were established, most of them within a decade, either side, of the founding of the Academy itself. Among them were the National Trust, the *Victoria Histories of the Counties of England*, the *Survey of London*, the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, and the Historical Association. Here were some first, faltering steps towards what we would now call public history: but they were undertaken with limited membership and precarious finances, and they were not so much a sign that history was thriving in Britain, but rather an indication that it needed a helping hand.¹⁶

Nor was serious, academic, university-based history exactly flourishing. In 1900, only two hundred graduates from Oxford and Cambridge had taken their degrees in the subject, and the total number of graduating historians in Britain can barely have been in four figures. Across the whole of the national university system, there were scarcely one hundred people teaching history, and most of them were lowly tutors and instructors, with no first-hand experience of research, scholarship or writing. (Indeed, the main reason why the same handful of names keep cropping up—Tout, Firth, Stubbs, Maitland—is that there were so few scholars of any real distinction.)¹⁷ How, indeed, could it have been otherwise,

¹⁵ C. H. Firth, 'The Study of Modern History in Great Britain', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 6 (1913–14), p. 139.

¹⁶ Mandler, *History and National Life*, pp. 56–60; D. Cannadine, *The Pleasures of the Past* (London, 1989), pp. 92–3, 275–8; id., *In Churchill's Shadow: Confronting the Past in Modern Britain* (London, 2002), pp. 225–9.

¹⁷ Firth, 'Study of Modern History', p. 142; T. F. Tout, 'The Present State of Medieval Studies in Great Britain', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 6 (1913–14), p. 156; Kenyon, *History Men*, p. 165.

given that there was very little systematic training available in historical research? There was Tout in Manchester, and Pollard in London, and there were pockets of activity in Oxbridge. But there was no national research culture or structure: of seminars, of training in source criticism, of graduate programmes or research degrees. Compared to the position in France, in Germany, or on the eastern seaboard of the United States, professional history, as those contemporaries understood it, scarcely existed in Britain. Accordingly, when Lord Bryce urged that the whole of past human experience was a fit subject for historical inquiry, he was more expressing a hope than describing a reality. For in practice, there were insufficient trained and university-based scholars to carry out so broadly defined and labour-intensive an agenda. Indeed, when some British historians urged that their subject must be recognised as a branch of scientific inquiry, they were seeking to gain for it an academic recognition and professional legitimacy which it then conspicuously lacked.¹⁸

Thus history in Britain in the year of the foundation of the British Academy, and in the years before the First World War: compared with what had gone before, it was unprecedentedly flourishing; compared with what would come after, it was not doing especially well.¹⁹ How, then, do we get from history as it was practised and perceived in Britain in 1902 to history as it is practised and perceived in Britain one hundred years later? Historians these days are very wary of their capacity to explain things, but on any hierarchy of causation, the expansion of higher education must surely be given pride of place, resulting from unprecedented commitment by successive governments to supporting a national, university-based intellectual class in both the sciences and the humanities. One sign of this has been the successful establishment of graduate research in history, the absence of which was so much lamented before 1914. Most universities, beginning with Oxford, Cambridge and London, introduced the Ph.D. between the wars, but even in 1940, there were scarcely three hundred graduate students registered for research degrees in history at all levels. Since then, the number of research students in history has shot up: to 1200 in 1960, to 2400 in 1970, and to 3000 in 1975 where, with slight variations, it has since remained.²⁰

¹⁸ Collini, *Public Moralists*, pp. 216–21; Kenyon, *History Men*, pp. 174–6.

¹⁹ P. Mandler, 'Against "Englishness": English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 7 (1997), pp. 155–75; P. Readman, 'Landscape Preservation, "Advertising Disfigurement", and English National Identity, c.1890–1914', *Rural History*, 12 (2001), 61–83.

²⁰ Kenyon, *History Men*, pp. 175, 180; J. H. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2000), p. 56.

Here, then, was an extraordinary transformation, which could not have been foreseen in 1902, or even in 1952: the appearance during the last four decades of the twentieth century of thousands of qualified history Ph.D.s, and thus of potential authors and university teachers, where very few had existed before. Tout and Firth and their friends would surely have been delighted, not only at this development which they had so devoutly desired (though little expected), but also at the corresponding rise in the number of scholarly articles and academic monographs which these professional historians produced, thereby further (and fundamentally) transforming the scholarly landscape after 1945. Part cause, part consequence of this was a corresponding (and a correspondingly recent) explosion in the numbers of people paid and employed to teach history in British universities. Even as late as 1949 there were only 548 of them. But thereafter, an expansion began which has been virtually exponential: in 1960, 800; in 1970, 1500; in 1980, 2000; in 1990, 2100; in 2000, 3000. Never have there been so many people teaching history in universities in this country: indeed, the number now may be greater than the sum total of all their predecessors put together, and it cannot be too strongly emphasised just how recent and how unprecedented this change has been.²¹

For it has been transformative in many ways beyond the merely numerical. To begin with, it has resulted in the full-scale professionalisation of the subject, following closely the model already established by the experimental sciences: with a career ladder going from post-doctoral fellow to professor; with journals, meetings, conferences and specialist societies; and with major grants, funding councils and large-scale research projects. A second sign of change has been the growing diversity, in the sociological sense, of those studying and teaching history in British universities: initially their backgrounds were overwhelmingly public school and Oxbridge (as recounted by Noel Annan in *Our Age*); they were followed, after the Butler Education Act of 1944, by the 'scholarship boys' who won places at Oxford, Cambridge and London (and it is that generation, which is my generation, which is now in charge); and we in turn are training and recruiting a yet more diverse cohort, many of whom have been educated at comprehensive schools and at universities far

²¹ J. H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past* (London, 1969), p. 108, made this point over thirty years ago: it is even more true today. For the figures in this and the preceding paragraph, I am much indebted to Dr Jane Winters of the Institute of Historical Research, who has derived them from two of the IHR's long-running annual publications: *Historical Research for Higher Degrees in the UK*, and *Teachers of History in the Universities of the UK*.

beyond the golden triangle (and of whom an unprecedented number are women).²² Moreover, the combined effects of increased numbers, growing professionalism, and widening access help explain why history has evolved and expanded into that more varied and diverse subject that Bryce and his contemporaries had (in retrospect) prematurely anticipated; and also why, since the 1960s, there has been in existence a ready and growing market for books explaining and justifying academic history, of which those by E. H. Carr and G. R. Elton were the first and remain the most famous.²³

These are some of the broader consequences of the numerical expansion and institutional growth of history in British universities during the twentieth century, and especially since the Second World War. But we should also see that efflorescence in terms of generational dynamics and shifts in fashion, as successive cohorts of historians, often influenced by contemporary events, and with their own intellectual (and political?) agendas, have sought to assert the primacy and novelty of their own particular approach to the past: the political history of the nation state during the 1900s; diplomatic and economic history during the inter-war years; social and women's history during the 1960s and 1970s; and cultural and global history since then. Time and again, the young turks have insisted that their hidebound forebears did history narrowly and badly; that their own new and original approach provided the one essential key that unlocked the whole of the past; that conferences, journals and societies were necessary to proclaim this good news; and that all future appointments must help further this exciting new agenda. Yet each such new approach has gone the way of its predecessors, being in its turn superseded, downgraded and marginalised, from all-powerful, unifying insight to one additional sub-specialism. Depending on your point of view, the cumulative effect of these successive 'new' versions of the past, piled one on top of the other, has been either a growing enrichment of the subject, as ever more sub-specialisms proliferated, or its fatal fragmentation.²⁴

But what, meanwhile, of the broader world of popular (or, as we would now say, public) history that had also seemed in such a parlous (if

²² N. Annan, *Our Age: Intellectuals Between the Wars: A Group Portrait* (New York, 1990), pp. 3–18.

²³ E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (London, 1961); G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (Sydney, 1967). Both works have been well discussed by R. J. Evans, in his introduction to the (London, 2001) edition of Carr, and in his afterword to the (Oxford, 2002) edition of Elton.

²⁴ Evans, *In Defense of History*, pp. 173–5.

potentially promising) state at the beginning of the twentieth century? Across the inter-war years, there was some growth in preservationist activity, as the National Trust and the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments were joined by the Council for the Preservation of Rural England and the Georgian Group; and during the same period, writers such as G. M. Trevelyan, Lytton Strachey, John Buchan and Winston Churchill reached a large public audience. But once again, it was in the post war era that popular history took off as never before. The wireless, film and (especially) television, brought history alive in new, vivid ways, from Kenneth Clark and Alastair Cooke to Simon Schama and David Starkey. Conserving what now became widely known as the national heritage became a secular religion, thanks to (among others) the Victorian Society and English Heritage, and the new procedures for listing and preserving historic buildings. For a time, and thanks to the National Trust and Mark Girouard, the cult of the English country house became almost a national obsession.²⁵ Museums expanded, not only in London but in the provinces, and were given over to new subjects, from the Industrial Revolution to rock and pop. And the fashion for memorials, for anniversaries and commemoration, as well as for local history and family history, shows that the popular desire to remember things past is both powerful and insatiable.²⁶

This necessarily abridged account of the rise and rise of public history in Britain closely parallels the rise and rise of academic history in British universities, and makes it difficult to share the pessimism of those authorities quoted earlier, who insist that the subject is in terminal decline. Today, there are 15,000 sixth-formers taking A Level history, 30,000 undergraduates reading history, 3,000 research students studying for higher degrees, and a similar number of university teachers. Today, history is described as the 'new gardening', the Public Record Office cannot cope with popular interest in the 1901 census, and politicians remain obsessed with what they believe to be the 'verdict of history'.²⁷ Today, more history than ever before is being taught, researched, written and read, and (in

²⁵ Cannadine, *Pleasures of the Past*, pp. 99–109, 256–71; id., *In Churchill's Shadow*, pp. 233–7; id. 'The Historical Background', in J. Jenkins (ed.), *Re-Making the Landscape: The Changing Face of Britain* (London, 2002), pp. 36–46; Mandler, *History and National Life*, pp. 3–9, 97–100.

²⁶ Jordanova, *History in Practice*, pp. 141–71; D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985); R. Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London, 1994).

²⁷ Arnold, *History*, p. 118; Mandler, *History and National Life*, pp. 1–10. For Tony Blair's recent insistence that 'history' will 'forgive' him for invading Iraq, see: *The Guardian*, 18 July 2003; *Financial Times*, 19 July 2003; L. J. Colley, 'What Blair Can Learn From History', *The Guardian*, G2, 29 July 2003, p. 8.

belated corroboration of Bryce) it is concerned with a larger part of human experience, and embraces a wider spread of the globe, than ever before. But it bears repeating that this is a wholly unusual and unprecedented state of affairs, and that most of this explosion has happened very recently, in the fifty years since the end of the Second World War.

II

So far, I have been stressing evolution, development, expansion: the many ways in which the doing of history in Britain, both within universities and far beyond, have changed during the century since the British Academy was founded in 1902—so much so, indeed, that most of the (in retrospect) seemingly vain hopes of its founders, both for rigorous training in graduate work, and for a broad conception of the subject, are now accepted and widespread commonplaces. Much that has happened to the discipline of history during the second half of the twentieth century, especially the widening of its scope and the proliferation of its sub-fields, may best be explained in terms of the unprecedented amounts of funding available, and the unprecedented numbers of people involved, and none of this could have been foreseen in 1902—or even in 1952. But while there is much transformation to report, there is also considerable continuity, for many of the issues about the nature and purpose of history, over which historians disagree now and have disagreed during the intervening hundred years, remain essentially the same, despite the changes that have taken place elsewhere in the scale and substance of the subject. ‘Professors’ quarrels’, G. M. Trevelyan once observed, are ‘always ridiculous and unedifying’. Maybe so: but that has not prevented them from happening; and they have often polarised around very similar issues.²⁸

During the first decade of the twentieth century, British historians were particularly exercised as to whether their subject was a science or an art. Indeed, one of the reasons for establishing the British Academy was to encourage ‘the exercise of scientific acumen’ in the humanities, so they might take their rightful place by the ‘sister sciences’. And in 1903, in his famous inaugural lecture at Cambridge, J. B. Bury pronounced history to be ‘not a branch of literature’, but ‘a science no less and no more.’²⁹ Those

²⁸ D. Cannadine, *G. M. Trevelyan: A Life in History* (Harmondsworth, 1997), p. 219.

²⁹ Lord Reay, ‘Address by the President’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1 (1903–4), pp. 1, 12; Kenyon, *History Men*, pp. 174–6; Collini, *Public Moralists*, pp. 216–21.

claims have been regularly restated by historians of Rankean persuasion and pretensions, they were reasserted by the founders of *Past & Present*, who insisted (at least to begin with) that theirs was a journal of “scientific history”, and they have been repeated more recently by the quantifiers, who urged they were bringing unprecedented statistical rigour to the subject. But there has also been the alternative tradition, harking back to Macaulay, and represented across the twentieth century by (among others) Trevelyan, Plumb and Schama, that has rejected what they see as archival fetishism, and stressed instead the literary and imaginative side of the historian’s art. These are venerable disagreements, still unresolved; yet on closer inspection, they turn out to be nothing of the kind. For most historians readily concede that history is *both* a science *and* an art. There was, as even Trevelyan himself long ago admitted, no point in them ‘forever abusing each other as Dry-as-Dusts on the one hand, and shallow featherheads on the other’. ‘Let us guard’, agreed Marc Bloch, ‘against stripping our science of its share of poetry.’³⁰

There are similar, over-stated disputes between those who favour analytical history, which stresses structure, and those who prefer narrative, which tells a story—alternatives exemplified and polarised by Sir Lewis Namier and A. J. P. Taylor. Namier excelled at structural investigation, as in his studies of English politics in the 1750s and 1760s, and in his analysis of the European revolutions of 1848; but he was constitutionally incapable of writing an animated, mobile story of past events. Taylor, by contrast, was the most fluent writer of his generation, who produced scintillating chronicles of the nation state and international relations, but had little feel for the deeper forces of historical change.³¹ Throughout the twentieth century, the battle between these two ways of doing history ebbed and flowed; but once again, these extreme positions were exaggeratedly opposed. This was partly because, as most historians recognise, analysis without narrative loses any sense of the sequencing (and unpredictability) of events through time, while narrative without analysis fails to convey the structural constraints within which events actually take place. And it is partly because, as Peter Burke has recently reminded us, there is in practice a long continuum extending from ‘pure’ narrative to ‘pure’ analysis, and most of the best history is situated somewhere

³⁰ Arnold, *History*, p. 114; Cannadine, *Trevelyan*, pp. 214–17; M. Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (Manchester, 1992 edn.), p. 7.

³¹ L. B. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, 1929); id., *1848: The Revolution of the Intellectuals* (London, 1946); A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History* (London, 1945); id., *English History, 1914–1945* (Oxford, 1965).

between these extremes, seeking simultaneously to animate structure and contextualise narrative, as well exemplified in Garrett Mattingly's *Defeat of the Spanish Armada* (London, 1959), or Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971).³²

This excessive polarisation between the narrative and analytical modes has also fed into another long-standing debate, between those scholars who prefer to stress transformations and those who lay greater emphasis on continuity. 'If history is not concerned with change', Lawrence Stone once observed, 'it is nothing.' But much of what seemed like change was, according to Fernand Braudel, no more than the ephemeral trivia of political events, while at the more fundamental level of geography, climate, resources and demography, things moved very slowly, if at all: '*histoire événementielle*' was far less important than this '*histoire immobile*'.³³ Both approaches have their advocates. For some historians of seventeenth-century England, for instance, it was a time of fundamental, revolutionary upheaval; for others, it was a period when very little changed. And while some scholars see the eighteenth century as a time of progress, modernity, self-made entrepreneurs and secular enlightenment, others insist that it was an old regime, sustained by monarchy, aristocracy and established religion.³⁴ All of which merely reminds us that historians are better employed trying to strike a balance between continuity and change, rather than insisting on the importance of one to the exclusion of the other. Striking that balance is not easy, and it no doubt differs from period to period: indeed, since 1986, an entire journal, named *Continuity and Change*, has been devoted to the subject.³⁵

Yet striking a balance, like recognising a continuum, is something which many perennially disputatious historians seem extremely reluctant to do. Consider, in this regard, the further distinction which is often drawn between those allegedly described by LeRoi Ladurie as parachutists and those he has called truffle hunters: the former survey the broad historical landscape from a great height, the latter grub around in

³² P. Burke, 'History of Events and the Revival of Narrative', in id. (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 233–48.

³³ L. Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 3–4; F. Braudel, *On History* (Chicago, 1980), pp. 3–4, 27–30.

³⁴ C. Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603–1714* (London, 1961); C. Russell, *Unrevolutionary England, 1603–42* (London, 1990); R. Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1982); J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge, 1985).

³⁵ 'Editorial Introduction', *Continuity and Change*, 1 (1986), 5–6.

thickets of local detail.³⁶ This distinction, too, endured for the whole of the twentieth century: at the beginning, between those who wrote general surveys and those who were antiquarian scholars; in the middle between admirers of the *Annales* school and adherents to traditional English empiricism; and at the end between such practitioners of micro history as Robert Darnton, Carlo Ginsburg and Natalie Davis, and such advocates of global history as William McNeill, John Roberts and Felipe Fernandez-Armesto.³⁷ But once again, these are excessively polarised positions. Micro history only works if there is a sense of the broader context which specific events illuminate, and are themselves illuminated by; global history loses its edge without concrete detail and local specificity. Now, as always, one of the most important tasks of the historian is to make connections, as Ranke long ago urged, between the particular and the general. Of course, there are many different ways of doing this: but again, the matter is best resolved by envisaging a continuum of expositional strategies, rather than by launching offensives from hostile and opposing camps.³⁸

The same conclusion suggests itself if we examine another familiar Manichean formulation, that between high and low, elite and popular, be it in politics, society, culture or anything else. Those who concern themselves with the doings of the elite rightly insist that we cannot understand the past if we ignore those people who were in power, made the rules, and set the tone. Those who wish to rescue humbler figures from what Edward Thompson memorably described as ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’ reply that it is more important to recover the lives of those ordinary people who were the victims of history rather than those in charge who were the makers of it.³⁹ And it is also sometimes (though not always) the case, that those on the right prefer to study those in authority, within the confines of the nation state, while those on the left are more interested in people lower down the social and political scale, and have a more internationalist outlook. But for all the admirable work which these two approaches have generated, they pay inadequate attention to the interconnectedness of things: partly by failing to explore how elites are invari-

³⁶ Stone, *Present and the Past*, p. 8.

³⁷ R. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (London, 1983); N. Z. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983); C. Ginsburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (Baltimore, 1980); W. McNeill, *A World History* (Oxford, 1979); J. M. Roberts, *The Hutchinson History of the World* (London, 1976); F. Fernandez-Armesto, *Millennium* (London, 1995).

³⁸ Stern, *Varieties of History*, pp. 59–61; G. Levi, ‘On Microhistory’, in Burke, *New Perspectives*, pp. 93–113.

³⁹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), p. 12.

ably circumscribed in the exercise of power; partly by giving insufficient attention to the framework of law and authority by which the humbler folk were constrained; and all too often (and from both perspectives) by giving insufficient attention to the complexities of social structures and social interactions. For all its alliterative appeal, few societies in practice have ever been polarised—politically, economically, socially or culturally—between the ‘patricians’ and the ‘plebs’.⁴⁰

Yet despite these counsels of compromise and consensus, the same entrenched positions have often been taken up when historians have turned from their activities and their approaches to their audience. Those of a ‘scientific’ persuasion, often invoking Maitland as well as Ranke, insist that their work is of considerable technical complexity, requiring specialised language, concepts and calculations, which is only intended for fellow scholars. But for those brought up in the tradition of Macaulay and Trevelyan, the prime purpose of history is not to write for an exclusive coterie, but to reach as broad a public audience as possible. Here is the distinction, famously formulated by Hugh Trevor-Roper, between history for the professionals and the laity.⁴¹ Again, this is a long-running dispute, between those who assert the primacy of scholarly learning, and those who fear that scientific history will be lost to the general public. But it is also another exaggerated disagreement. For in practice, there is a continuum of historical writing, extending all the way from arcane technical works to best-sellers, and our most distinguished historians have invariably spanned it. Trevor-Roper himself wrote articles in the *Economic History Review*, which were read by very few, as well as *The Last Days of Hitler* (London, 1947), which was read by very many. And while Geoffrey Elton wrote scores of detailed studies of sixteenth-century politics, he also published *England Under the Tudors* (London, 1955), and *Reformation Europe, 1517–1559* (London, 1963), general surveys which sold in their hundreds of thousands.

If time permitted, I could go on at greater length exploring other excessively adversarial formulations of the practice and purpose of history. Is the past a foreign country, where they do things differently, or a familiar country, where they do things the same?⁴² Are historical developments inevitable, the outcome of long term forces over which men and

⁴⁰ P. Burke, ‘Overture: The New History’, in id., *New Perspectives*, p. 19; E. P. Thompson, ‘Patrician Society, Plebian Culture’, *Journal of Social History*, 7 (1974), 382–405; id., ‘Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?’, *Social History*, 3 (1978), 133–65.

⁴¹ H. R. Trevor-Roper, *History: Professional and Lay* (Oxford, 1957).

⁴² Arnold, *History*, p. 6; Lowenthal, *Past is a Foreign Country*, pp. xvi, 191.

women have no control, or are they accidental, the result of caprice and contingency? Is history fiction by another name, in which the author makes it all up, or is it about fact, truth and certainty? And so on. Like the controversies I have discussed in more detail, these scholarly disagreements raged back and forth across the twentieth century. And like them, again, the polarisation is both appealing yet misguided. In defiance of the first of these formulations, Jacques Barzun long ago observed that the task of the historian was to discover ‘the familiar within the strange, without losing sense of either’. In answer to the second, Marx famously observed that men and women do indeed make their own history, but they do not do so under circumstances of their own choosing. And in answer to the third, Trevelyan rightly noted that the very essence of history was not ‘the imagination roaming at large, but pursuing the fact and fastening upon it’.⁴³ All of which leads me to conclude that throughout the twentieth century, too much discussion of history by historians has been dogmatically polarised, and insufficient attention has been given to exploring the gradations, continuums and common ground where most of the best history writing has in practice always been found. And I wholly agree with Stefan Collini when he deplores ‘the baneful consequences’ of this incorrigibly adversarial approach.⁴⁴

III

Let me try to summarise the arguments thus far. First, in what might be termed narrative mode, I have suggested that the second half of the twentieth century was unique in seeing the unprecedented state sponsorship of (and public enthusiasm for) the study of history. This vast proliferation of interest in the past, and of the study of the past, is something wholly extraordinary and unprecedented in Britain as, indeed, it is elsewhere in the west. Those of us who have benefited from these developments, by having been able to sustain lifelong academic careers as a result, are naturally inclined to think they are right, and good and should therefore be permanent. But at the same time, we ought also to recognise that there is absolutely no guarantee that this relatively recent state of affairs will endure indefinitely. Second, and in more analytical mode, I have sug-

⁴³ Stern, ‘Introduction’, in id., *Varieties of History*, p. 27; Evans, *In Defense of History*, p. 162; Arnold, *History*, p. 85; Cannadine, *Trevelyan*, p. 196.

⁴⁴ S. Collini, *English Pasts: Essays in History and Culture* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 2, 320.

gested that when historians have described how they do what they do, and when they have written about what history is about, they have often taken up extreme and entrenched adversarial positions, when in practice there is more agreement and common ground between many of them than this might suggest. Perhaps, then, we ought to think about what history is, and about where history is going, in this more positive and nuanced way, and in the remainder of this lecture, I shall attempt to do just that.

But in seeking to survey the present scene, and to offer some speculations as to possible future developments, some caution and circumspection are both in order. To begin with, we need to beware the present-minded parochialism which assumes that we live in the best of all possible worlds: for, as Blair Worden has recently reminded us, ‘the certainties of one age, *in historical interpretations as in other walks of life*’, often have a disconcerting habit of ‘becoming follies to the next’.⁴⁵ Our present approaches to the past may seem self-evidently good and right and true: but it is highly unlikely that historians writing fifty years from now, let alone a hundred, will share that view. If nothing else, that should engender some healthy and humble scepticism about the claims we make on behalf of ourselves and of what we are doing. In the aftermath of post-modernity, we historians constantly assert that we are more self-aware and self-reflexive than ever before, and that self-scrutiny and self-examination are the prevailing modes. But before we congratulate ourselves on being so much more sophisticated than our scholarly forebears, we should also recognise the accompanying dangers of self-absorption and self-importance. Moreover, and as Joyce Appleby has reminded us, ‘it is the conceit of all contemporaries to think that theirs is a time of particularly momentous changes’, an option which she strongly urges us to decline. And no historian should set out to engage with the future without being reminded that it never unfolds in ways that can be predicted.⁴⁶

Having sought to head off all possible criticisms of the predictions I am about to make, I shall now, nevertheless, proceed to make them anyway. And in so doing, I shall be taking up some, but not all, of the points I have made thus far. To begin with, it is high time we historians emancipated ourselves from the spurious thralldom of dichotomised modes of thinking, both about ourselves, and about the way we approach the past.

⁴⁵ B. Worden, *Roundhead Reputations: The English Civil War and the Passions of Posterity* (London, 2001), p. 344. My italics.

⁴⁶ J. Appleby, ‘The Power of History’, *American Historical Review*, 103 (1998), 1; J. R. Vincent, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to History* (London, 2001 edn.), p. 47; Worden, *Roundhead Reputations*, p. 339; E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (London, 1987), p. 340.

If we are to think more creatively and constructively about what we are doing, we should be more concerned with gradations, continuums and nuances than with postulating mutually-exclusive alternatives. For example, instead of seeing our audience as being either professional or lay, we might consider what Stefan Collini calls the 'academic public sphere' which is neither exclusively academic, nor inclusively generalist, but something in between.⁴⁷ And when we look at the past, perhaps we should consider more critically those beguiling binaries of religion, nation, class, gender, race and civilisation, built around the notions of collective categories eternally in conflict. They are, to be sure, part of the human story. But only a part. Throughout history, Christian and Infidel, Briton and German, us and them, men and women, black and white, 'the west' and 'Islam' have also got by, rubbed along, and embraced a sort of common humanity, and we urgently need to find a way of writing about the past from this important but neglected perspective.⁴⁸

But if we are to do so, then a related issue that we are going to have to address is what we think our chief (though not sole) concern, namely humanity, actually was and is. In writing about humanity, most of us, I suspect, follow David Hume: 'Mankind are so much the same in all times and places, that history informs of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature.' But are the principles of human nature constant and universal?⁴⁹ Thanks to psycho history, we know a great deal more about the importance of the unconscious in human behaviour and motivation: but most history writing disregards it. Thanks to cultural history, we know that people in past times saw both their world, and themselves, differently from how we see our world and ourselves: but we understand very little about how human outlooks and human nature actually change.⁵⁰ And historians have not yet even begun to engage with the work now being done by geneticists, neuroscientists, evolutionary biologists

⁴⁷ Collini, *English Past*, pp. 318–22.

⁴⁸ For two recent examples of the 'collectivities in conflict' view of the past, see S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Re-Making of the World Order* (London, 1997); A. Wheatcroft, *Infidels: The Conflict between Christendom and Islam, 638–2002* (London, 2003). For the alternative approach, stressing individual cooperation rather than collective conflict, see M. R. Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (London, 2002); W. Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* (London, 2002), esp. pp. xl–xliii, 494–501. See also W. H. McNeill, 'Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History and Historians', *American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), 7.

⁴⁹ Arnold, *History*, p. 51; N. Orme, *Medieval Children* (London, 2001), p. 10.

⁵⁰ M. Rubin, 'What is Cultural History Now?', in Cannadine, *What Is History Now?*, pp. 80–94.

and evolutionary psychologists, which insists that human minds, human behaviour, human artefacts and human culture, in short everything we understand by human nature, and everything we write about as human history, are all biologically determined. The cross disciplinary debate about what it means to be human, both in the physical and the social sense, has barely begun, not least because historians have been so unwilling to engage with it. It is time we did: for we can no longer take an unproblematic, Humean notion of humanity and human nature for granted.⁵¹

In addition to rethinking our notions of humanity, we are also going to have to address the vexed question of the changing territorial and political units within which humanity has operated and organised itself. Much of the history that was written during the twentieth century, especially when concerned with high politics and international relations, unthinkingly took for granted the existence of the nation state. But now, in the early twenty-first century, the nation state has become altogether more precarious and problematic, which means that we are going to have to re-think the sort of history that we write and teach—not by disregarding the nation state completely, but certainly by laying more stress on its contingent and constructed nature than we have generally been inclined to do.⁵² And we shall also need to de-parochialise it—partly (in the British case) by addressing international interconnections and reintegrating metropolitan and imperial history, but also by engaging with the issue of globalisation. To be sure, globalisation has been around for a long time, but only in the 1990s did it become a buzz word, and as Tony Hopkins and his Cambridge colleagues have recently urged, historians need urgently to engage with this issue: partly to establish a history of globalisation, and partly to emphasise that globalisation has non-western as well as western origins, aspects and implications.⁵³

One reason why the nation state looks significantly less secure than it did has been because of the transformative and subversive impact of the revolution in IT during the last two decades, and it has had, and is still

⁵¹ The literature on this subject is vast, but I benefited much from the seminar series, 'History and Human Nature', held at the Institute of Historical Research in 2000–1, and I have also been helped by K. Malik, *Man, Beast and Zombie: What Science Can and Cannot Tell Us About Human Nature* (London, 2000).

⁵² Cannadine, 'British History as a "New Subject"', pp. 18–19; Mandler, *History and National Life*, pp. 7–8.

⁵³ A. G. Hopkins, 'Introduction: Globalization—An Agenda for Historians', in id., *Globalization*, p. 5; C. S. Maier, 'Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era', *American Historical Review*, 105 (2000), 807–31.

having, a correspondingly transformative and subversive effect on the way in which history is now being written and taught. Thanks to the net and the web, academic history is a much less exclusive and hierarchical enterprise than it once was: witness the debate, hosted on the IHR website, in response to Richard Evans's book *In Defence of History*.⁵⁴ At the same time, massive data bases are now being assembled which will be widely available, and information about the past can be globally coordinated and globally accessed on a scale and in ways that were literally unthinkable a quarter of a century ago. Of course, it is not only history, but the whole of the humanities, which are being transformed in this way. But the impact on history may well turn out to be the most significant, and it is certainly not over yet. Indeed, it may well be that it has scarcely begun. Within a decade, it seems highly likely that the whole pattern of academic publishing will be altered, certainly as regards journals and monographs. And we are probably only at the beginning of the process whereby unprecedented quantities of information about the past will become electronically (and thus internationally) available. If this is so, then the whole process of historical research and writing may be further and fundamentally transformed in ways that at present it is impossible to foresee.⁵⁵

Nor is this the only way in which IT is transforming history. During the hundred years that the British Academy has existed, the pace of change, at least in the western world, has accelerated almost exponentially, and the IT revolution is merely its latest manifestation. And so, and notwithstanding Joyce Appleby's warning against assuming that ours is a time of uniquely momentous changes, there *is* a case for saying that our world in 2002 has far, far less in common with most of human history than its predecessor did in 1902. The result, as one historian has recently observed, is that 'the gulf between a liberal, democratic, secular, collectivist, feminist present, and a non-liberal, non-democratic, non-secular, non-collectivist, non-feminist past grows more impassible by the year'. Or, as another historian remarked in the 1950s, in words which have even greater resonance today, 'previous generations *knew* much less about the past than we did, but perhaps *felt* a much greater sense of identity and continuity with it'.⁵⁶ Today, indeed, many people feel so distanced from

⁵⁴ At <http://www.history.ac.uk/projects/discourse/index.html>

⁵⁵ On 7 July 2003, the Institute of Historical Research sponsored a conference on 'Examining the Impact of Digitisation Upon Scholarship in the Humanities', and the papers may be found on <http://www.history.ac.uk/conferences/digitisation2003/index.html>

⁵⁶ Vincent, *Intelligent Person's Guide*, p. 53; M. I. Finley, *The Use and Abuse of History* (London, 2000 edn.), p. 33.

the (even relatively recent) past that they find it impossible to ‘deal with’. Hence the blanket condemnations of previous eras as classist, racist, sexist, imperialist, xenophobic, and homophobic; hence the demands for apologies for past events now deemed unacceptable, such as the Irish Potato Famine and the Treaty of Waitangi; hence the agitation for tangible rectifications of historical ‘wrongs’, be it compensation for the slave trade or the restitution of the Elgin Marbles; and hence the increasing involvement of historians in commissions, tribunals and court cases intended to establish ‘the truth’ about ‘the past’.⁵⁷

These are very difficult, complex and sensitive public (and often political) issues, into which historians are now finding themselves drawn, and it is a curious irony that they are increasingly being asked to deliver ‘the truth’ to judges and politicians at the same time that postmodernists continue to insist that they cannot deliver any such thing as ‘truth’ at all.⁵⁸ But then, whoever claimed that being an historian was easy or straightforward? In one guise, we are the handmaids of conventional wisdoms, explaining how we got from there to here; in another, we are the sceptics and the disbelievers, constantly in rebellion against the tyranny of present-day opinion. We make our living by looking into the follies and horrors of the past, but it is also our duty to urge that different centuries, different cultures, different civilisations, saw things and did things very differently from how we see things and do things today. And are we, in Marc Bloch’s words, ‘so sure of ourselves and of our age as to divide the company of our forefathers into the just and the damned’, depending on how far they did, or did not, share our contemporary values?⁵⁹ I don’t think we are, and I don’t think we should be. More than ever, then, the justification for the study of history remains what it has always been: to teach the virtues of perspective and proportion, tolerance and humanity, breadth of vision and generosity of view—in short, to provide what is so often derided as a genuinely liberal education. For as John Carey has recently reminded us, ‘one of history’s most important

⁵⁷ H. Russo, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991); S. Falmer *et al.*, *France at War: Vichy and the Historians* (Oxford, 2000); B. Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past: Unified Germany and the Legacy of the Third Reich* (London, 2002); R. J. Evans, *Telling Lies About Hitler: The Holocaust, History and the David Irving Trial* (London, 2002).

⁵⁸ R. L. Brooks (ed.), *When Sorry Isn’t Enough: The Controversy Over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice* (New York, 1999); A. Boraine, *A Country Unmasked* (Cape Town, 2000), esp. pp. 379–442; T. Hunt, ‘In The Scales of History’, *The Guardian*, 6 Apr. 2002.

⁵⁹ Bloch, *Historian’s Craft*, p. 115.

tasks' is to bring 'home to us how keenly, honestly and painfully past generations pursued aims that now seem to us wrong or disgraceful'.⁶⁰

IV

When this lecture was nearly drafted, I came across the following observation, by three distinguished American historians, which seemed, rather disconcertingly, both to anticipate and to summarise much of what I have been saying and arguing here:

Essays on the state of the discipline [they note] often have a canonical form all their own: first a narrative of the rise of new kinds of history, then a long moment for exploring the problems posed by new kinds of history, followed by either a jeremiad on the evils of new practises, or a celebration of the potential of the overcoming of all obstacles.⁶¹

That I have written a Section I just as they have described it, and a Section II that bears more than a passing resemblance to their formulation, I cannot for one moment deny. But while my third section is certainly concerned with both the problems and the possibilities of history now and in the future, I have at least eschewed the polarities of depression and euphoria, and sought to offer instead a more nuanced (though not necessarily a more accurate) set of predictions. And they are offered in the belief that, 'in good times or bad, critical ones, transitional ones, or normal ones, history can help human beings think better, live more richly, and act more wisely'.⁶² So, indeed, it can; so, indeed, it must: and it is up to us to make sure that it can and does.

In more ways than one, and for the worse as well as for the better, the years 1902 to 2002 were the century of history to an extent that had been true of no earlier era—a time of unprecedented terror and tragedy, horror and holocaust, when history-writing was regularly abused and repeatedly misused; but also a time of unexampled progress and accomplishment, improvement and opportunity, one sign of which was that in some countries history flourished and flowered as never before. From one perspective, the twentieth century was indeed an age of extremes and of anxiety, in which Africa was not alone in being the dark continent; from

⁶⁰ J. Carey, 'The Last Flowering of the British Aristocracy', *The Sunday Times, Culture*, 17 Mar. 2002, p. 38.

⁶¹ J. Appleby, L. Hunt and M. Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York, 1995), p. 228.

⁶² Appleby, 'The Power of History', p. 1.

another it was an age of affluence, abundance and achievement, for more people, in more parts of the world, than ever before.⁶³ Whatever else may be said, both for it and against it, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed the greatest age of history writing the western world has so far seen. We must hope that the twenty-first century will be at least as good. But as the record of the past makes plain, there is no guarantee that it will. As historians should not need reminding, only time will tell.

⁶³ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Anxiety: The Short Twentieth Century* (London, 1994); M. Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London, 1998).

