1

Introduction

The American industrialist, Henry Ford, once famously said that history is bunk. Although he fortunately changed his opinion, he was speaking for a number of those who saw the past as irrelevant or at best an antiquarian interest in the silent, if entertaining, dead. This opinion did not die with him. Recently, a financial guru has said that the past can teach us nothing, that everything worthwhile should come from the file 'going forward'. For his highly lucrative profession, then, his advice was to ignore what went before and concentrate on what was to come. I could, of course, provide a great many more quotes and examples. Or, I could counter each and every one with an opposite observation praising the value of studying history made by scholars and politicians of the stature of the ancient Roman statesman Cicero (*d*. 43 BC) or the modern British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill (*d*. 1965). But, to those who see little value in history, this would just be testimony from those same irrelevant, dead advocates of an essentially useless discipline.

So, why study history, if there is a debate as to whether it is of any use in the modern world? And, if it is useful, where exactly is its value to be found? How can we gain significance and guidance from what happened before we were born or in distant lands so different from our own? The answers to these questions and the brief in favour of the study of history are what this book is about. To be sure, the past is a foreign country but one not only worth visiting, but instructive,

The Experience of History, First Edition. Kenneth Bartlett.

insightful, and useful. The experience of the past and what men and women have made of those experiences subsequently constitute the record of human civilization and the platform on which our modern world is built. To ignore or disparage this journey through time, this desire to see the past through modern eyes, is to miss an opportunity to give nuance and explanation to not only what happened before we were born but more urgently to the universe we are inhabiting at this very moment. Also, the trajectory of the past can provide clues to the unfolding of the future. I am not saying that history repeats itself; but it does, if used skilfully, reveal patterns and motives that can inform our own decisions. So, to the financial guru, I would counter that he is simply wrong: he has chosen to ignore one of the most effective guides to success in his profession. Financial markets and the global economy are driven by people. Any deeper insight we can gather into what drives people to make the choices they do, favour one product over another, embrace or reject the foreign and exotic or simply aspire to something different or new is more than useful: it is necessary.

Another argument thrown against studying history is that historians seem unable to agree on anything, that they use the past as ammunition in wars that have not much to do with what might have occurred long ago but have much to say about the current state of our own world. In other words, history is rewritten to justify the failures or ambitions of those who write it and those who read it. Well, I could not agree more: this is exactly what results from the study of historiography (the formal study of written history over time as a discipline). And, it is a good thing. Let me explain.

To have any relevance or validity, the past must speak to the needs and concerns of the present and future. Consequently, as those imperatives change with time, location, ideology or prejudice, the view of the past will change as well. This is what makes history a dynamic, vital, and living discipline. It will always be current and its interpretation accordingly changes with its environment. There is something almost evolutionary in the way in which history adapts to the environment in which it is written. And, as with surviving species, the most adaptable and the strongest – at least in terms of evidence and argument – will endure. These surviving historical interpretations will always be challenged by new, even more adaptable and effective interpretations; and some of the dominant schools of historical thought that had lasted for

generations, even centuries, will eventually be discarded as no longer useful. That is the glory and strength of history: the fact that it is always in a state of flux, changing and alive. The past is not dead because those who study and interpret the past are very much alive.

What then about 'facts', those dates, events, reigns, wars, elections, victories, and defeats that are often the popular definition of historical research? They exist, that I concede. But in themselves they have little utility or value. They are simply records of particular moments on which most students and historians agree, with appropriate evidence to substantiate this belief. But, these 'facts of history' have no purpose and use beyond how they are interpreted, what they meant at the time and afterwards, and what they mean to us. These 'facts' are like pegs on a wall: they are useful for hanging deeper study and analysis. To know these 'facts' is convenient, as they provide a logical chronology and structure for understanding the past. And, they serve as a generally accepted vocabulary in the discourse among historians. What matters, then, is not the 'facts' but how these operate as evidence, as points of agreement or departure, elements of structure and design.

In this book we will talk a great deal about evidence, including 'facts', that is, evidence which is broadly accepted and substantiated by documents or records. But, we will also argue that the interpretation of this evidence matters far more and that even our assessment of 'facts' changes. Let me give you an example: for millennia the study of history was structured according to theological 'facts', evidence that emerged from the revealed texts of faith, such as the Bible or the Koran. No one in the cultures that produced these histories would ever have disputed the fundamental truth of these 'facts'. But, after the Renaissance and Enlightenment in Europe, and certainly today, hardly anyone, whether a professional historian or not, would accept these religious 'facts' as valid evidence of what happened to real men and women eons ago, even if they can indeed offer clues. So, everything can change, including fundamental ideas or structures that have guided historians for centuries.

That is not to say that even such traditional and now outmoded structures have been altogether thrown into the dustbin of history. Just look at how we measure the passage of time itself. In the Christian world, the past is divided by the letters BC or AD, that, is Before Christ and Anno Domini, that is, in Latin, in the year of our Lord. The incarnation, then, becomes the most significant element in

recording time and bisects Christian history. Similarly, Muslims date the past from the Christian year 672 AD, that is, the year of the *Hajira*, when Mohammad fled from Mecca to Medina. Thus, 2015 is the year 1343. Jews record time from the creation of the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, as described in Genesis; and the year begins on that day. So, in the Hebrew calendar, 2015 is the year 5775. I should note, though, that in the secular west there is now an attempt to negate the Christian associations of BC and AD by replacing these religiously structured terms with BCE – or Before Common Era – and CE, or Common Era. The concept of Common Era would, however, be lost on Muslims and Jews who retain their own dating and do not necessarily see the past as 'Common'.

The study of history has often been defined as the study of change over time. And, historians change, too, as does acceptable evidence. Thus, things we completely accept, indeed privilege, had little or no purchase among the historians of the past. Economic History hardly existed at all until quite recently; Social History was either curious antiquarianism or ignored until about the same time. Women's History came into its own as a respected sub-discipline just in the last century and Queer History is now just developing into an effective and recognized genre of its own. The documents, evidence, insights, and texts used by these branches of history were certainly available and known previously, but they were only identified as valid, useful, and in fact necessary when the society of those writing and reading history realized that these perspectives added important aspects to our understanding both of the past and the present. These sub-disciplines became the instruments for illuminating what had been before the dark corners of human experience and they gave a powerful and effective voice to those whose pasts had been ignored or even unjustly vilified. As a result we are all much richer and the experience of being human in a complex and diverse world is greatly expanded.

We are All Part of the Evidence

Later in this book, in the chapter on evidence, I note that documents from what amounts to daily life constitute essential evidence from the past, evidence that the historian might use to fashion a set of carefully

crafted conclusions about the society that created these documents and the individuals and groups who inhabit them. Census records, taxation rolls, property deeds, judicial, and official government files, and so many other tesserae in the mosaic of the lives and communities of those who went before us remain among the most important evidentiary platforms on which history is constructed. Consider our own lives. Think of the documents we sign and file every year, almost every day. There are the important ones that we conserve in a safe or a secure drawer in a desk, often with duplicates kept in lawyers' offices or bank vaults: birth certificates, marriage licences, college or university diplomas, property deeds or rental leases, and wills, just to note the most common. These are the same documents that historians have used to discover the contours of past societies; so, we are saving the evidence for tomorrow's history.

Consider as well the intimate and personal material that every one of us keeps, often in places more secure than those protecting our legal and financial personae. Love letters, diaries, correspondence through a war or unwanted separation, photographs, home movies, cards, newspaper clippings celebrating personal or family achievements, a marriage or birth, or an obituary, or just something that spoke to you in an intimate manner. We keep letters offering employment, personal notes from employers, co-workers, neighbours or friends, or just something that reflects an act of personal connection or kindness. Then, there are the negative categories: letters of rejection – of us or a manuscript – a notice of termination of employment, accusatory correspondence from the local troublemaker, taxation office interrogatories or a warning of legal proceedings. These are kept as well either as protection against future loss or as a record of a clouded time. Here again, we are conserving the evidence that social historians find invaluable, as it records the details of a life in our community at a particular moment.

Finally, go outside the home and think of the enormous body of evidence about our lives that exists in government files at every level, in our place of work, in the clubs we belong to, in the agencies we support and the political parties and candidates we assist through volunteering or financial contributions. Moreover, what letters or documents of ours are our neighbours conserving? Are the love letters or even friendly correspondence we wrote over many years part of another's cache of carefully preserved material? Often, the author of evidence is

not even aware that it is being preserved. When reading biographies or history, how often are we told that only one side of an important exchange of correspondence survives? This happens often enough to suggest perhaps that one of the interlocutors intended that the nature of the exchange remain secret while the other thought it worth preserving.

We are all, then, part of the historical record. Some of us aggressively use this material for personal reasons, such as genealogical research. Indeed, the explosion in the interest in genealogy has turned a great number of curious individuals into quite skilled historians, familiar with census records, passenger ship manifests, birth, death, and military records, newspaper obituaries and notices of births and marriages. Entire websites now exist to assist amateur genealogists, organized by family name, or sometimes determined by place, all rich in shared information based upon reliable evidence. What this growing interest in genealogy reveals is the almost obsessive fascination about where we came from, who our ancestors were and where we sit on this revolving carousel of time. We have a truly anthropological interest in our roots, the back story of our lives. This is how history becomes not an academic discipline but part of a personal narrative, a connection that brings the study of the past home. Most of us have spent hours looking through a grandparent's photograph album, trying to gather insight about an entire *dramatis personae* of times past, inhabited by people we never met or even knew existed. The excitement felt in confronting this reality of our own pasts has created a great many historians, both amateur and professional. We all want to know where **we** are placed in the parade of the ages and how we were assigned that place. It is natural and it is why history sustains a popular fascination that so many other disciplines do not.

A Personal Example

It is not even necessary to recognize those from the past you encounter in daily life. Strangers long dead can exert an attraction born out of some small point of shared experience. Let me give you an example from my own life. Our house is just over a century old but was occupied by two generations of the same family from the 1920s until we acquired

it in 1988. The family line had ended with the death of the last elderly unmarried daughter, who had grown up in the house; and it was from her estate we bought the property. We had heard a great many stories and legends about this rather eccentric, once wealthy but later shabby genteel clan from friends and neighbours in the street: how the previous owner's father had been killed in a famous British train crash in the early twentieth century; how his widow believed she was poor because all widows were poor; and how she raised her three young children as if they were still living in Victorian times, protecting them, she thought, by discouraging marriages and most professions, resulting in the end of what was a very old, distinguished family. We knew that they treated the household staff they maintained until the end very badly. The service staircase was not illuminated at all, leaving it completely dark when the doors at either end were closed. The elderly spinster who became the last scion of this clan boasted that she had never as much as washed a teacup in her life; and this was confirmed by a kitchen that was a time capsule from the 1920s, with only a single overhead bulb for light and appliances that had not been replaced in decades. The service bells throughout the house still worked; sadly, when pressed now, no one comes.

These legends and stories created an almost Faulknerian atmosphere for us, and the physical evidence of the house reinforced it to a very great degree. But was there more? Of course, the former owners of our house were people, with lives and emotions and stories. They were very much unlike us; but they were also interesting representatives of their time, class, and breeding. In fact, the house was an entrée into a more layered past, a society now thankfully passed. Our lives overlapped, but they seemed so much like exiles from that other country which was the past; because their lives were so remote and inflexible they almost succeeded in making time stand still: hence their fascination for me as a historian. Trying to know the last members of this old, extinct family became a subject of desultory and unprofessional but consuming interest. Small pieces of evidence began to emerge that linked the material history of the house and the few objects we found in it with the real human beings who had inhabited it for so long.

At a dinner party, a very old gentleman reminisced how he had long ago in his youth courted the last inhabitant, the never married daughter. He remembered that she had been a wonderful dancing companion in

the 1930s, one who loved a party – hardly what we were told of her when she was in her 80s and living like a semi-recluse attended by an elderly maid and revolving nurses. But, at the very back of an upstairs closet we had discovered a decaying evening dress, beautifully made, with weights in the skirts to maintain modesty when dancing, as well as in strong winds. The dancing story gained more credence, as the material evidence of the dress reinforced the oral history. Then, a very elderly neighbour confessed to having visited the old lady every Friday afternoon for decades, a meeting where they would consume much scotch and gossip about mutual friends: she remarked that the old spinster had a wicked tongue, reactionary values, but a keen mind.

By coincidence, the lawyer who had represented the family, as his father had before him – indeed the lawyer who had arranged the conveyance of the property – was an acquaintance of ours. We learnt of the sad family history, the accidental death of the very successful and distinguished father at a relatively young age and the devastation that resulted, as his widow was left with three young children and the responsibility to care for them, despite her previously never having any control of finances or much knowledge of the world. Our florist had been the family's florist and the very elderly owner remarked often how the widow in trying to protect the children had infantilized them – and so it went. What was discovered in small bits and pieces was the history of a house, the family that occupied it for a great many years and how all of these elements came together as a picture of a society.

More personal information emerged as a result of the kinds of accidents that occur when doing renovations. In the library of the house, the surround of the fireplace had to be removed in order to rewire and repair the walls. Behind the mantle was found a cache of cards that had fallen through a space left after it had become slightly detached from the wall sometime in 1933 but had subsequently been repaired. The cards found in the wall all dated from the winter of 1933 and had obviously been placed on the mantle as reminders. There were notices of dental appointments, several Christmas cards, and birthday greetings. All had been sent to the second son, Philip, who we learnt was universally called 'Pip'. In themselves, these were ephemera only; but in the context of the emerging history of the house and family they were significant because the individuals were very much brought to

life: these were real people with dental appointments, friends, and birthdays; they celebrated Christmas and used the library mantle to display current invitations and greetings – and at least one had a nickname.

A source of melancholy, an emotion which all historians have felt with some regularity, was the loss of the family's photograph albums. Our lawyer acquaintance, whose firm had arranged the emptying of the house, told us that there were dozens of them which traced visually the history of the family in the house. He confessed to a sense of guilt at having thrown them out because no one wanted them; and he admitted that had he known that I, a historian, was buying the house, he would have passed them along. His fleeting memory of what those albums contained was devastating to my desire to recover the past life of our house, as the photos depicted the furniture in place during the previous half century, the few changes made to the décor and fabric of the building, and the aging of the inhabitants, as they were portrayed over that long span in rooms where almost nothing changed. I have no idea what any of these people, whose home and personalities I feel I know so well, looked like.

As a historian, however, I also know that my assumption that I do know them is completely false. I do know things about them, based on evidence which in some instances is reliable – like written documents – and in others very unreliable, like the recollection of neighbours who only knew them as old, difficult, querulous, and demanding people, trying to live like Edwardian gentry with a single octogenarian housemaid in a house that, to quote the lawyer, 'had not heard laughter in a great many years'. What I also know is that my past and present have become linked with those of the previous owners, although I am equally aware, as a professional, that my response is more romantic than scientific. What this personal testament records, then, is evidence for a very obvious conclusion: we are all living in history, contributing to the evidence of the future while being in a constant, and intimate, conversation with the dead around us. It is for this reason that I felt a somewhat comforting sense of closure when I discovered their shared family grave and monument in a downtown cemetery.

What I am describing is that mixture of material culture – that is, the evidence in the house itself and things found inside it – written documentation both of a highly personal and an official nature, and a

rich oral history and local tradition that constitutes the very elements that define much of historical research. Add to it the circumstances of the tragic death of the father, whose end in a dramatic disaster was reported widely in newspapers throughout England, Canada, and the United States from New York to Los Angeles, and a relatively coherent narrative emerges, one with a beginning and an end. These were substantial citizens with property and social standing, as well as the fossilized habits of the colonial gentry; but they were also characters in a history that continues. My wife and I now live in their house, and there are still some elderly neighbours who remember them. The house would be in many ways still recognizable to them, as the fine detailing was preserved, and most of the rooms function as they did then; but, at the same time, the house today would be shocking, with many more bathrooms, a kitchen addition in which we do the work without the benefit of a maid to wash teacups, and with mechanical services expected of a modern house. So, are we living in history? Of course, we all do, regardless where and when we live: history is everywhere and it is the prologue to our own personal and collective narratives. We make history every day and all our records will without doubt be included in some future analysis of North America in the twenty-first century.

History is not a thing apart, about someone else, somewhere else, in another time: it is our daily regime, which has been determined by the decisions and deeds of generations who came before us. And, if at any moment, we feel a twinge of identification with the circumstances of someone from the past, or find ourselves sufficiently curious to want to know more about why things are the way they are – as I did with my house – or just experience a *frisson* of excitement when discovering new information about anything or anyone who is no longer here to witness for it, then we are doing history and we are all historians.

Still, the past is a foreign country and not one easily visited. We need good maps and that universal GPS to guide us through the experience of other men and women, long dead, who can no longer speak for themselves. We need to give these people their voices in a language we can clearly understand so that they can advise us on how we might improve, direct, and even save our own world and leave it better understood for future generations. This book will provide the coordinates of that GPS, offer a guide to how to navigate the challenging terrain of the past. The skills required are the skills of a successful life and career:

the ability to read effectively and write clearly, evaluate evidence, and draw conclusions, build arguments and establish priorities in research. The rewards are naturally great because the student of history will not only acquire and polish these skills but be an active, engaged, and knowledgeable member of his or her society, able to understand the intentions and schemes of others, critique the official sources of information, political platforms, and personal aspirations. And, the study of history will allow each and every one of us to understand why things are the way they are, how the world might be improved, what has worked in the past and what has not, and what the future can be like, if certain decisions are made and conditions apply. History, then, is the study of humanity, of ourselves or our past – our respective pasts – the pasts that made us who we are.