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History: It's about Time

- Living with the past
- Good history gives you hope
- A habit in time

So here you are, facing the prospect of writing some history.

I don't imagine it's an especially comfortable feeling – if it was, you probably wouldn't be reading this book. I am, in any case, here to reassure you: this won't be so bad. Actually, by the time you get your diploma, you have a reasonably good chance of feeling pretty good about your history with History.

I realize that this is not something you regard as a given. That's not to say you find history to be a boring subject; you may have even chosen the course you're taking with enthusiasm. But you're not a professional, and if you don't find the practices of working historians daunting, you might find them mysterious or even annoying. So however you may be feeling at the moment, it's worth posing a question at the outset: Why are you doing this?

The obvious answer, of course, is that someone told you to – a parent, an advisor, or, most directly, the teacher who dispenses your assignments and your grades. You didn't make the rules of the academic game; you're only trying to play by them as honestly as you can. But if that's as far as this goes – you're doing your homework simply because you've been assigned it, no questions asked – then you've got a problem. If you're not

a little curious, restless, or even a little irritated about *why* you're doing it, then you're not paying attention. And you're not getting educated.

Living with the Past

Consider all those history teachers you've had: Why do *they* do it? They no longer need good grades. Chances are it's because they've got mortgages or other bills to pay. But that's almost surely not the original reason they got into this business – there are lots of ways to make money. At some point in their lives, they decided history was fun. Maybe that's still true.

At least initially, it wasn't an active decision. Maybe one of your teachers' mothers got her some books out of the library when she was 7 years old that she liked. Or maybe the uncle of another took him to a museum. Or the teacher of another one of your teachers praised her as a kid in a way she found surprising and pleasing. And so she acquired the habit, the way some people get in the habit of cooking or protecting the environment. Eventually, these people found themselves making a living off that habit, a living that almost certainly includes some writing, along with a lot of reading.

Maybe that idea appeals to you, maybe not. One thing's for sure: If history is nothing more than a paycheck, it's going to be lifeless. Whoever you are, the payoff is going to have to be more satisfying than that if you're going to stay with it.

Plenty of people have decided that History isn't, in fact, worth the trouble. "History is bunk," Henry Ford once reputedly said. Actually, what he really seems to have said, in a 1916 interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, is that "History is more or less bunk. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that's worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today."¹ (Ford's attitude lives on in contemporary lingo, where the phrase "that's history" is meant to connote the irrelevance of the topic in question, like a relationship you consider convenient to forget.) Yet the man whose cars and the assembly line he perfected symbolized modernity a century ago was obsessed by the past. In the

1 For the background and some analysis of this famous quote, see Robert Lacey, *Ford: The Men and the Machine* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1986), 238–9.

1920s, he built an entire town, Greenfield Village, as a museum of American life as he remembered it from his childhood. It was a pretty good re-creation, and remains a model for living history museums. Nevertheless, Ford's memory was somewhat selective: it had no bank, no lawyer's offices, and no bars.² Facts, it's clear, don't always get in the way of history.

When history isn't irrelevant, it can be a crushing burden. "History," says Stephen Dedalus, a character from James Joyce's famous 1922 novel *Ulysses*, "is a nightmare from which I'm trying to awake."³ In the classic socialist anthem "The Internationale," tradition is a something to be overthrown in the quest to usher in a better world. Maybe Henry Ford was right: Some things – most things? – are better forgotten.

Indeed, you really do have to wonder whether learning about the past can make all that much of a positive difference in a person's life. Sure, it might be useful to be aware, for example, that you have a family history of alcoholism. But you don't need a three-credit class for that. Really: Is learning *anything* about, say, the Ming Dynasty likely to make a difference in your future career? For a while, I would open my U.S. history courses by asking my students why, other than to satisfy some tedious distribution requirements, anyone should bother. Invariably, I heard variations on George Santayana's famous dictum, echoing Euripides and Thucydides, that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."⁴ All right, then, I would tell the students wryly, you'll know better than to start a land war in Asia. But of course, virtually nobody is ever in a position to start a land war in Asia. Nor, for that matter, is virtually anybody in a position to stop one once one starts.

I should add that large numbers of people may collectively stop a war they find problematic or wrong, and that a sense of history can shape the

2 Lacey, 248.

3 James Joyce, *Ulysses*, the corrected text (1922; New York: Random House, 1986), 28.

4 In *Phrixus*, a play that now only exists in fragments, Euripides writes, "Whoso neglects learning in his youth/Loses the past and is dead for the future." In the first book of his history the *Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides expresses the hope that his work "will be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it." My source for all three quotes (and translations) is *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, 16th edn., edited by Justin Kaplan (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992), 69, 71, 588.

perceptions that make opposition possible. But the “lessons” of the past are nothing if not slippery. The classic example is the so-called Munich analogy, wherein American policymakers wished to avoid the mistakes of European leaders in appeasing German Chancellor Adolf Hitler, as British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain did at a 1938 meeting, leading to World War II. But the moral they drew from this story, that their opponents (in this case, Communists) must be resisted at all costs, led to quagmires in Korea in the 1950s and Vietnam in the 1960s. By the 1970s it had become common sense that Americans should never start a land war in Asia, proverbial wisdom which policymakers ignored by going to war with Iraq in 1991 and again in 2003 – two wars with very different results. So much for the predictive power of analogies.

Good History Gives You Hope

So: history is irrelevant, history is depressing, history is maddeningly ambiguous. But what may be worst of all is that history is boring. Or, more accurately, History – the professional kind, with teachers and classrooms and assigned reading – is, shall we say, less than incredibly exciting. Movies like *300* and *1917* are okay, but history books are often deadly. Actually, the act of reading *itself* is often deadly. So what’s the point? *Why* is history worth your time? *Why should* it seep into your consciousness?

One answer is hope. Good history gives you hope.

This may strike you as a thin, vague, even foolish, assertion. Actually, some of us look on hope with suspicion. Hope means potential disappointment. It means failure that’s all the more acute when there’s a belief that things could have been otherwise. Hope is risky. It may lead you to commit to things that could hurt you – and it’s painful even before the outcome of whatever it is you’re hopeful about, because it often leads to stress and anxious uncertainty. In many respects, life would be easier without hope.

But even if we grant the desirability and utility of hope, you still have to wonder if *history* is really the best source of it. Remember that James Joyce line, history as “a nightmare from which I’m trying to awake.” Of course, if you’re an Irishman in the early twentieth century, history, particularly that of Ireland in the preceding 350 years or so before Joyce wrote his promethean novel, was for many a particularly dreadful nightmare. American

history isn't so bad – unless, perhaps, you're an African American born before, say, 1950, or a Chinese immigrant born, say, after 1850, or someone with a family history of alcoholism. And yet there have been lots of people and movements in American history, from the Puritan migration of the early seventeenth century to the Civil Rights movement of the mid-twentieth, that have not only made life better for people of the time, but have also given justified hope to succeeding generations that they too can wage and win comparable struggles. Even Ireland is now a sunnier place for many of its people than it has been for centuries, notwithstanding the complications of issues like Brexit. Then again, intolerance, poverty, and racism have not exactly disappeared either. It sort of depends on how you look at it – and explaining just how you *do* look at it, whatever *it* happens to be, is one of the things good history does.

One of the things history also does is allow you to live a more vibrant life in the present. I was 41 years old when Kanye West released “Jesus Walks,” the hit song from his 2004 album *The College Dropout*. I'm the wrong demographic for hip-hop – a (late) baby boomer, a child of rock and roll. But I immediately recognized a number of things going on in that song. In the most immediate sense, it's a commentary on the time of its release – a time of war, terrorism, urban strife, and social division about the role of religion in public life. But it also resonated in a series of concentric circles that included the history of hip-hop (West as a middle-class revisionist to the gangsta rap that dominated the turn-of-the-century charts); the gospel tradition and its place in African American music (West sampled a song by the Arc Choir, whose name is an acronym for the Addicts Recovery Center in Harlem); and the role of the Bible in everyday life (West cites the 23rd Psalm in the song). A sense of history has allowed me to understand and experience life outside my immediate background, to enlarge my sense of experience.

Let's say you're willing to grant that history is helpful, history is hopeful, and history is fun. Does it follow that you would actually want to produce any yourself? The difference between reading history and writing it is like the difference between watching a ballgame from the stands and actually playing on the field. The former has its pleasures, for sure. But the latter is literally where the action is, even if you're not a pro.

Of course, writing history isn't easy – as with playing ball, you can work up quite a sweat. Actually, writing just about anything longer than a shopping list isn't easy – it's about the most intellectually complex

thing you typically undertake in your life. Inexperienced writers sometimes think struggling with an essay is a sign that something is wrong, that they have a defective intelligence, that other people play on laptop keyboards as if they're concert pianists. But if you find writing hard, all I can say is: Welcome to the club.

A Habit in Time

One of the core characteristics of people like historians is that they master habits of thought – *analytic* habits of thought – that have real utility in everyday life. (For more on what I mean by the term “analytic,” see Chapter 7.) These habits help one sort out the various and conflicting messages one gets continuously, from advertisements on television to criticism by a loved one, and assess their significance and credibility. They help one figure out what one really thinks – and feels – when confused, even irritated, by such messages. And they help one persuade someone else to think similarly. This emphasis on fostering analytic skills lies at the heart of this book. There's no better way of doing that than writing.

Of course, fostering analytic skills is the hallmark of any number of disciplines. What history has to offer is not simply knowledge of the past, or an awareness of recurring themes in people and societies, but rather a kind of lens – specifically a consciousness of time – that can heighten and intensify one's experience and desire to express oneself.

People sometimes convey a sense of admiration for a person, place, or thing that they consider “timeless.” They're suggesting that the subject in question never goes out of style, seeming to transcend change. What I'm talking about here, however, is closer to what may be termed “*timeful*,” an understanding that such people, places, and things are intriguing not because they escape history but rather because they are thoroughly saturated in it. Like a sense of place is for an anthropologist. Or a sense of character is for a dramatist. Time isn't the only lens through which to look at the world. It may not be the best lens in any given situation. But it's one that adds a real dimension to life and is worth taking seriously when you're listening to Kanye West – or exploring the history of slavery and its legacy in American life.

Of course, to really understand how a song like “Jesus Walks” ever came to be, you need to know something about hip-hop – its language,

its traditions, its best-known practitioners. You surely know people who are experts in the field. They've immersed themselves in this world, and take understandable pride in their mastery of arcane detail as well as their ability to explain what's going on the first time they hear a song. Becoming a historian is not that different – here too there's a lingo, a set of conventions, some inside knowledge. You don't have to know all of it to be admitted to the party. But knowing a little might help. So come on in, and I'll show you the layout of the room and some of the major players. Then I'll show you a few tricks of the trade to allow you to work the floor on your own.

