Using the sources

If the historian's business is to construct interpretations of the past from its surviving remains, then the implications of the vast and varied array of documentary sources described in the previous chapter are daunting. Who can hope to become an authority on even one country during a narrowly defined timespan when so much spadework has to be done before the task of synthesis can be attempted? If by 'authority' we mean total mastery of the sources, the short answer is: only the historian of remote and thinly documented epochs. It is, for example, not beyond the capacity of a dedicated scholar to master all the written materials that survive from the early Norman period in England. The vicissitudes of time have drastically reduced their number, and those that survive – especially record sources – tend towards the terse and economical. For any later period, however, the ideal is unattainable. From the High Middle Ages onwards more and more was committed to paper or parchment, with ever-increasing prospects of survival to our own day. Since the beginning of the twentieth century the rate of increase has surged ahead at breakneck speed. Between 1913 and 1938 the number of dispatches and papers received annually by the British Foreign Office increased from some 68,000 to 224,000.[1] Additions to the Public Record Office at present fill approximately 1 mile of shelving a year.[2] Amid this documentary surfeit, where does the historian begin?

I

Ultimately the principles governing the direction of original research can be reduced to two. According to the first, the historian takes one source or group of sources that fall within his or her general area of interest – say the records of a particular court or a body of diplomatic correspondence – and extracts whatever is of value, allowing the content of the source to determine the nature of the enquiry. Recalling his first experience of the French Revolutionary archives, Richard Cobb describes the delights offered by a source-oriented approach:

> More and more I enjoyed the excitement of research and the acquisition of material, often on quite peripheral subjects, as ends in themselves. I allowed myself to be deflected down unexpected channels, by the chance discovery of a bulky *dossier* – it might be the love letters of a *guillotiné*, or intercepted correspondence from London, or the account-books and samples of a commercial traveller in cotton, or the fate of the English colony in Paris, or eyewitness accounts of the September Massacres or of one of the *journées*.[3]

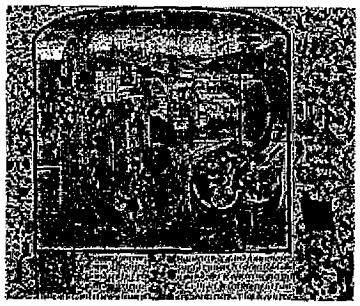
The second, or problem-oriented, approach is the exact opposite. A specific historical question is formulated, usually prompted by a reading of the secondary authorities, and the relevant primary sources are then studied; the bearing that these sources may have on other issues is ignored, the researcher proceeding as directly as possible to the point where he or she can present some conclusions. Each method encounters snags. The source-oriented approach, although appropriate for a newly discovered source, may yield only an incoherent jumble of data. The problem-oriented approach sounds like common sense and probably corresponds to most people's idea of research. But it is often difficult to tell in advance what sources *are* relevant. As will be shown later, the most improbable sources are sometimes found to be illuminating, while the obvious ones may lead the historian into too close an identification with the concerns of the organization that produced them. Moreover, for any topic in Western nineteenth- or twentieth-century history, however circumscribed by time or place, the sources are so unwieldy that further selection can hardly be avoided, and with it the risk of leaving vital evidence untouched.

context and secondary in another: Macaulay's *History of England* (1848–55) is a secondary source whose reputation has been much undermined by modern research; but for anyone studying the political and historical assumptions of the early Victorian élite, Macaulay's book, in its day a best-seller, is a significant primary source. These examples might suggest what is often assumed, that 'historical documents' are the formal, dignified records of the past. It is true that records of this kind are more likely to endure, but the term should carry the widest possible reference. Every day all of us create what are potentially historical documents – financial accounts, private correspondence, even shopping lists. Whether they actually become historical documents depends on whether they survive and whether they are used as primary evidence by scholars of the future.

Whether the historian's main concern is with re-creation or explanation, with the past for its own sake or for the light it can shed on the present, what he or she can actually achieve is determined in the first instance by the extent and character of the surviving sources. Accordingly it is with the sources that any account of the historian's work must begin. This chapter describes the main categories of documentary material, showing how they came into being, how they have survived down to the present, and in what form they are available to the scholar.

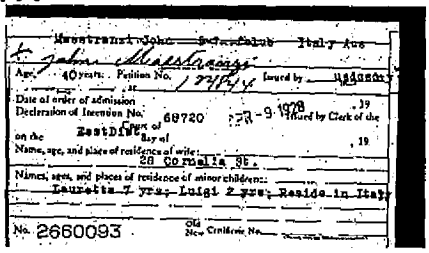
Primary sources written for the benefit of posterity...

Caesar – The Gallic Wars
Tacitus – The Annals of Imperial Rome
The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle
Jean Froissart's Chronicles
Autobiography of Pope Pius II
The Memoirs of Catherine the Great



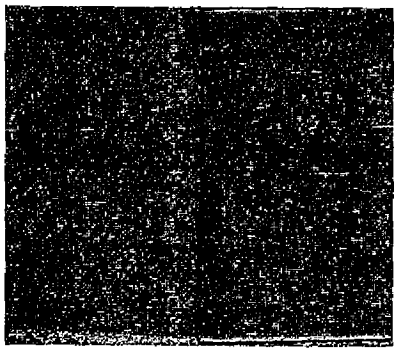
Official Publications...

Church records
Newspapers
Revenue records
Central gov't records
Local gov't records
State letters



Private Correspondence...

Victorian letters
Diaries....



From John Tosh
The Pursuit of
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Historical sources encompass every kind of evidence that human beings have left of their past activities – the written word and the spoken word, the shape of the landscape and the material artefact, the fine arts as well as photography and film. Among the humanities and social sciences history is unique in the variety of its source materials, each calling for specialist expertise.

The use of written materials as the principal historical source is complicated by the fact that historians communicate their findings through the same medium. Both in their choice of research topic and in their finished work, historians are influenced to a greater or lesser extent by what their predecessors have written, accepting much of the evidence they uncovered and, rather more selectively, the interpretations they put upon it. But when we read the work of a historian we stand at one remove from the original sources of the period in question – and further away still if that historian has been content to rely on the writings of other historians. The first test by which any historical work must be judged is how far its interpretation of the past is consistent with all the available evidence; when new sources are discovered or old ones are read in a new light, even the most prestigious book may end on the scrap-heap. In a very real sense the modern discipline of history rests not on what has been handed down by earlier historians, but on a constant reassessment of the original sources. It is for this reason that historians regard the original sources as *primary*. Everything that they and their predecessors have written about the past counts as a *secondary* source. Most of this book is concerned with secondary sources – with how historians formulate problems and reach conclusions, and how we as readers should evaluate their work. But first it is necessary to examine the raw materials a little more closely.

The distinction between primary and secondary sources, fundamental though it is to historical research, is rather less clear-cut than it might appear at first sight, and the precise demarcation varies among different authorities. By 'original sources' is meant evidence contemporary with the event or thought to which it refers. But how far should our definition of 'contemporary' be stretched? No one would quibble about a conversation reported a week or even a month after it took place, but what about the version of the same episode in an autobiography composed twenty years later? And how should we categorize an account of a riot written shortly afterwards, but by someone who was not present and relied entirely on hearsay? Although some purists regard the testimony of anyone who was not an eye-witness as a secondary source,[1] it makes better sense to apply a broad definition, but to recognize at the same time that some sources are more 'primary' than others. The historian will usually prefer those sources that are closest in time and place to the events in question. But sources more remote from the action have their own significance. The historian is often as much interested in what contemporaries *thought* was happening as in what actually happened: British reactions to the French Revolution, for example, had a profound influence on the climate of politics in this country, and from this point of view the often garbled reports of events in Paris which circulated in Britain at the time are an indispensable source. As this example suggests, to speak of a source as 'primary' implies no judgement of its reliability or freedom from bias. Many primary sources are inaccurate, muddled, based on hearsay or intended to mislead, and (as the next chapter will show) it is a vital part of the historian's work to scrutinize the source for distortions of this kind. The distinction between primary and secondary is further complicated by the fact that sometimes primary and secondary material appear in the same work. Medieval chroniclers usually began with an account of world history from the Creation to the life of Christ, based on well-known authorities; but what modern historians value them most for is the entries which they recorded year by year concerning current events. Equally a work can be primary in one

General Reading

Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History,* (New York: Norton, 1994)
This is a long jointly-authored essay on the nature of the (North American) historical profession in the late twentieth century. In order to explore this subject, the authors delve into the foundations of the discipline and discuss how the scientific method on which History was based in the nineteenth century has given way to an altogether more uncertain set of practices. Although rather difficult, it contains a good discussion on the merits, or otherwise, of postmodernism in History.

Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography: an introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999)
A narrative account of the development of historical writing and its intellectual context from the Enlightenment to the present. Challenging, and in some places difficult, this text needs to be read as a whole to get an overview of where the discipline has come from and where it stands today.

Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing,* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991)
This book is a collection of essays which discuss the ways in which the historical profession has changed over the twentieth century and explore the sorts of methods and approaches that have been developed by professional historians in their ever-expanding search for 'total history'. Topics included are social history, women's history, oral history and postmodernism.

John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (3rd edn, Harlow: Longman, 1999)

Level-headed, thematic survey of historical practice and theory. Rather more introductory than those above, but well focused and up to date on current controversies.

John Tosh (ed.), *Historians on History* (Harlow: Longman, 2001)
Anthology of writings on historiography by mostly 20th century authors.

In particular, you are encouraged to locate relevant journal articles and specific chapters in books: you are not being asked unduly to read scores of books from cover to cover. Some journals which may prove useful in this respect include:

American Historical Review
Gender and History
History and Memory
History and Theory
History Workshop Journal
Journal of the History of Ideas
Oral History
Past and Present
Rethinking History
Signs
Social History

Several Historiographical reference books may a be useful (some held at History Ref):

Bentley, M. (ed.), *Companion to historiography* (London: Routledge, 1997)

Burns, R.M. and Rayment-Pickard, H. (eds), *Philosophies of history: from Enlightenment to postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000)

Cannon, J. (ed.), *The Blackwell dictionary of historians* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1988)

Hughes-Warrington, M., *Fifty key thinkers on History* (London: Routledge, 2000)