

inter-relationship between religious, economic and political factors in the origins of the English Civil War.⁴⁰ That local history enjoys such high standing among present-day historians probably offers the best assurance that the traditional boundaries between specialisms will not be permitted to stand in the way of a thematically integrated view of the past.

John Tosh To Pursuit of History (3rd Ed. 2006)

Writing and interpretation

The previous chapter was intended to indicate the main categories of enquiry which confine the task of original research to manageable proportions; but inevitably it strayed into a consideration of the contribution that each approach has made to historical knowledge, and in so doing glanced over a vital intervening stage in the historian's work – the ordering of the material in written form. The application of critical method to the primary sources along the lines described in Chapter 4 generally results in the validation of a large number of facts about the past with a bearing on one particular issue, or a group of related issues, but the significance of this material can only be fully grasped when the individual items are related to each other in a coherent exposition. There is nothing obvious or predetermined about the way in which the pieces fit together, and the feat is usually accomplished only as a result of much trial and error. Many historians who have a flair for working on primary sources find the process of composition excruciatingly laborious and frustrating. The temptation is to continue amassing material so that the time of reckoning can be put off indefinitely.

I

One school of opinion maintains that historical writing is of no real significance anyway. The intense excitement that such historians experience in contemplating the original documents has led them to the position that the only historical education worth the name is the study of primary sources – preferably in their original state, but failing that in reliable editions. One of the austerest proponents of this view was V.H. Galbraith, a distinguished Medievalist who was Regius Professor at Oxford in the 1950s. Almost all his published work was devoted to elucidating particular documents and placing them in their historical context – notably Domesday Book and the chronicles of St Albans Abbey; he never wrote the broad interpretative work on the history of the period.

What really matters in the long run is not so much what we write about history now, or what others have written, as the original sources themselves. . . . The power of unlimited inspiration to successive generations lies in the original sources.¹

There is a certain logic about this purist position. It will evoke a sympathetic response in all those historians whose research is source-oriented rather than problem-oriented (see above pp. 55–6), many of whom find it extraordinarily difficult to determine when, if ever, the time for synthesis has arrived. In history, more than most other disciplines, undirected immersion in the raw materials has an intellectual justification. Exposure to original sources ought to feature in any programme of historical study, and it is entirely proper that scholarly reputations should continue to be founded on the editing of these materials. But as a general prescription Galbraith's rejection of conventional historical writing is completely misplaced. It would of course entail an abdication from all history's claims to social relevance, which require that historians communicate what they have learned to a wider audience. But it would be hardly less disastrous even supposing that these claims to relevance could be refuted. For it is in the act of writing that historians make sense of their research experience and bring into focus whatever insights into the past they have gained. Much scientific writing takes the form of a report expressing findings which are entirely clear in the scientist's mind before he or she puts pen to paper. It is highly doubtful whether any historical writing proceeds in the same way. The reality of any historical conjuncture as revealed in the sources is so complex, and sometimes so contradictory, that only the discipline of seeking to express it in continuous prose with a beginning and an end enables the researcher to grasp the connections between one area of historical experience and another. Many historians have remarked on this creative aspect of historical writing, which is what can make it no less exhilarating than the detective-work in the archives.² Historical writing is essential to historical understanding, and those who shrink from undertaking it are something less than historians.

II

Historical writing is characterized by a wide range of literary forms. The three basic techniques of description, narrative and analysis can be combined in many different ways, and every project poses afresh the problem of how they should be deployed. This lack of clear guidelines is partly a reflection of the great diversity of the historian's subject-matter: there could not possibly be one literary form suited to the presentation of every aspect of the human past. But it is much more the result of the different and sometimes contradictory purposes

behind historical writing, and above all of the tension which lies at the heart of all historical enquiry between the desire to *re-create* the past and the urge to *interpret* it. A rough and ready explanation for the variety of historical writing is that narrative and description address the first requirement, while analysis attempts to grapple with the second.

That the re-creation of the past – 'the reconstruction of the historical moment in all its fulness, concreteness and complexity'³ – is more than a purely intellectual task is plain to see from its most characteristic literary form: *description*. Here historians are striving to create in their readers the illusion of direct experience, by evoking an atmosphere or setting a scene. A great many run-of-the-mill historical works testify to the fact that this effect is not achieved by mastery of the sources alone. It requires imaginative powers and an eye for detail not unlike those of the novelist or poet. This analogy would have been taken for granted by the great nineteenth-century masters of historical description such as Macaulay and Carlyle, who were much influenced by contemporary creative writers and took immense pains with their style. Modern historians are less self-consciously 'literary', but they too are capable of remarkably evocative descriptive writing – witness Braudel's panorama of the Mediterranean environment in the sixteenth century.⁴ Whatever else they may be, such historians are artists, and there are too few of them.

Braudel's work is unusual today for the prominence which it accords to description. For effective – indeed indispensable – as such writing is, it cannot express the historian's primary concern with the passage of time. Its role has therefore always been subordinated to the main technique of the re-creative historian: *narrative*. In most European languages the word for 'history' is the same as that used for 'story' (French, *histoire*; Italian, *storia*; German, *Geschichte*). Narrative too is a form the historian shares with the creative writer – especially the novelist and the epic poet – and it explains much of the appeal that history has traditionally enjoyed with the reading public. Like other forms of storytelling, historical narrative can entertain through its ability to create suspense and arouse powerful emotions. But narrative is also the historian's basic technique for conveying what it felt like to observe or participate in past events. The forms of narrative which achieve the effect of re-creation most successfully are those that approximate most nearly to the sense of time that we experience in our own lives: whether from hour to hour, as in an account of a battle, or from day to day, as in an account of a political crisis, or over a natural lifespan, as in a biography. The great exponents of re-creative history have always been masters of dramatic and vividly evocative narrative. Modern classics of narrative history include Steven Runciman's *History of the Crusades* (3 volumes, 1951–54) and C.V. Wedgwood's two books on the reign of Charles I, *The King's Peace* (1955) and *The King's War* (1958). In works of this quality we can see the virtues of historical narrative fully exemplified: exact chronology, the role of chance and contingency, the play of irony, and perhaps most of all the true complexity

1. V.H. Galbraith, *An Introduction to the Study of History*, C. Watts, 1964, p. 80.

3. H. Butterfield, *History and Empire*, p. 100.

of events in which the participants so often foundered. In a phrase that sums up the aspirations of the historicist tradition, Wedgwood defined her obligation to the people of the past as being 'to restore their immediacy of experience'.⁵ Simon Schama's highly readable best-seller, *Citizens* (1989), aimed to achieve a similar effect with regard to the French Revolution.

III

But the historian is of course engaged in very much more than an exercise in resurrection. It would be entirely consistent with this objective to treat events in the past as isolated and arbitrary, but the historian does not in fact treat them in this way. Historical writing is based on the presupposition that particular events are connected with what happened before, with contemporary developments in other fields, and with what came afterwards; they are conceived, in short, as part of a historical process. Those events which in retrospect appear to have been phases in a continuing sequence are deemed specially significant by the historian. The questions 'What happened?' and 'What were conditions like at such-and-such a time?' are preliminary – if indispensable – to asking 'Why did it happen?' and 'What were its results?' Historical writing based on these priorities may be said to have begun with the 'philosophic' historians of the Enlightenment. During the nineteenth century it drew further impetus from the great historical sociologists – De Tocqueville, Marx and Weber – who sought to explain the origins of the economic and political transformations of their own day. Questions of cause and consequence have been at the heart of many of the most heated historical controversies in recent times.

Asking the question 'Why?' may simply mean asking why an individual took a particular decision. Historians have always given close attention to the study of motive, both because of the traditional prominence of biography in historical studies and because the motives of the great are at least partially reflected in their surviving papers. Diplomatic history is particularly prone to dwell on the intentions and tactics of ministers and diplomats. But even in this limited setting the question 'Why?' is less simple than it looks. However honest and coherent statements of intention may be, they are unlikely to tell the whole story. Every culture and every social grouping has its unspoken assumptions – those nostrums and values that 'go without saying' and yet may deeply affect behaviour. In order to take account of this dimension, the historian must be well versed in the intellectual and cultural context of the period studied, and quick to pick up tell-tale hints of this context in the documents. With regard to the origins of the First World War, for instance, James Joll has called attention to the morbid fear of revolution and the fashionable doctrine of the survival of the fittest as underlying features of the European political mind; and

he points out that in moments of crisis such as July 1914 policy-makers were most likely to fall back on their unspoken assumptions, acting in too great a panic to make a considered appraisal of their predicament.⁶

However, the really significant questions in history do not turn on the conduct of individuals but concern major events and collective transitions that cannot possibly be explained by the sum total of human intentions. This is because underneath the *manifest* history of stated intention and conscious (if unspoken) preoccupation there lies a *latent* history of processes which contemporaries were only dimly aware of, such as changes in demography, economic structure or deep values.⁷ The Victorians saw in the abolition of slavery in the 1830s a famous victory for humanitarianism, as exemplified in the campaigning zeal of men such as William Wilberforce. In retrospect we can see how the legislation of 1833 was also brought about by the declining fortunes of the Caribbean slave economy and the shift towards an industrialized society in Britain itself.⁸ Because historians can look at a society in motion through time, they can register the influence of such factors. But the historical actors themselves could not possibly have a full grasp of all the structural constraints under which they were operating.

Nor could they anticipate the *outcome* of their actions. Like causes, consequences cannot simply be read off from the stated motives of the main protagonists, for the simple reason that latent or structural factors so often come between intention and outcome. As E.H. Carr pointed out, our notion of the facts of history must be broad enough to include 'the social forces which produce from the actions of individuals results often at variance with, and sometimes opposite to, the results which they themselves intended'.⁹ To revert to the issue of slavery, the intention of the British abolitionists was certainly to confer liberty on the slaves and to improve their material conditions. But the extent of the improvement in practice varied greatly from one part of the Caribbean to another, in ways which the humanitarians had not foreseen. Moreover, other consequences unfolded which lay beyond their terms of reference altogether, notably the impact of the anti-slavery crusade on the propaganda techniques of other moral campaigns, such as those for temperance and social purity.¹⁰ There is a sense in which, from the viewpoint of posterity, consequences are *more* significant than causes, since they usually determine the importance we accord to a given event. It is a curious fact that vastly more has been written on the causes of the English Revolution, for instance, than on its consequences: the extent to which it established a new political culture, or paved the way for more efficient forms of capitalism, is far

6. James Joll, 'The unspoken assumptions', in H.W. Koch (ed.), *The Origins of the First World War*, Macmillan, 1972.

7. For an excellent discussion of this notion, see Bernard Bailyn, 'The challenge of modern historiography', *American Historical Review*, LXXXVII, 1982, pp. 1–24.

8. The classic statement of this viewpoint is Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, University of North Carolina Press, 1944.

9. Carr, *What is History?*, p. 52.

less widely known than, say, the rise of Puritanism or the financial crises of the early Stuart monarchy.

The treatment of cause and consequence makes just as heavy demands on the skill of the writer as historical re-creation does, but of a rather different kind. To convey the immediacy of lived experience calls for intricate narrative and evocative description on several different levels. To approximate to an adequate explanation of past events, on the other hand, requires analytical complexity. Causation in particular is always multiple and many-layered, owing to the manner in which different areas of human experience constantly obtrude on one another. At the very least, some distinction needs to be made between background causes and direct causes: the former operate over the long term and place the event in question on the agenda of history, so to speak; the latter put the outcome into effect, often in a distinctive shape that no one could have foreseen. Lawrence Stone has provided an effective example of a slightly more sophisticated version of this model. In his hundred-page essay, 'The causes of the English Revolution', he considers in turn the 'preconditions' which came into being in the century before 1629, the 'precipitants' (1629-39) and the 'triggers' (1640-42), and thus shows the interaction of long-term factors, such as the spread of Puritanism and the Crown's failure to acquire the instruments of autocracy, with the role of individual personalities and fortuitous events.¹¹

Another way of understanding the task of historical explanation is to see any given conjuncture in the past as lying in a field where two planes intersect. One plane is vertical (or diachronic), comprising a sequence through time of earlier manifestations of this activity; in the case of the abolition of slavery this plane would be represented by the fifty years of campaigning for abolition before 1833, and by the ebb and flow of plantation profits over the same period. The other plane is the horizontal (or synchronic): that is, the impinging of quite different features of the contemporary world on the matter in hand. In the present example these might include the political momentum for reform around 1830 and the new nostrums of political economy. Carl Schorske likens the historian to a weaver whose craft is to produce a strong fabric of interpretation out of the warp of sequence and the woof of contemporaneity.¹²

This analytical complexity means that narrative is most unlikely to be the best vehicle for historical explanation. It was certainly the characteristic mode of Ranke and the great academic historians of the nineteenth century who in practice were interested in much more than 'how things actually were'. And one of the most widely read (and readable) professional historians in Britain today - A.J.P. Taylor - hardly wrote anything else. But this traditional literary technique in fact imposes severe limitations on any systematic attempt at historical explanation. The placing of events in their correct temporal sequence does not settle the relationship between them. As Tawney put it:

Time, and the order of occurrences in time, is a clue, but no more; part of the historian's business is to substitute more significant connections for those of chronology.¹³

The problem is twofold: in the first place, narrative can take the reader up a blind alley. Because B came after A does not mean that A caused B, but the flow of the narrative may easily convey the impression that it did. (Logicians call this the *post hoc propter hoc* fallacy.) Secondly, and much more importantly, narrative imposes a drastic simplification on the treatment of cause. The historical understanding of a particular occurrence proceeds by enlarging the inventory of causes, while at the same time trying to place them in some sort of pecking order. Narrative is entirely inimical to this pattern of enquiry. It can keep no more than two or three threads going at once, so that only a few causes or results will be made apparent. Moreover, these are not likely to be the most significant ones, being associated with the sequence of day-to-day events rather than long-term structural factors. This is true of the political sphere which appears to lend itself so well to narrative and has always been the principal theme of the great narrative historians. In the case of revolutions or wars, for example, narrative historians emphasize the precipitating causes of conflict at the expense of those factors which predisposed the societies concerned to conflict.

The historiography of the First World War illustrates this point well. Taylor, the narrative historian *par excellence*, took a characteristically extreme view. 'It is the fashion nowadays', he wrote in 1969,

to seek profound causes for great events. But perhaps the war which broke out in 1914 had no profound causes. For thirty years past, international diplomacy, the balance of power, the alliances, and the accumulation of armed might produced peace. Suddenly the situation was turned round, and the very forces which had produced the long peace now produced a great war. In much the same way, a motorist who for thirty years has been doing the right thing to avoid accidents makes a mistake one day and has a crash. In July 1914 things went wrong. The only safe explanation is that things happen because they happen.¹⁴

In putting forward what might be termed the minimalist position, Taylor doubtless intended to provoke, but his outlook is more prevalent than one might suppose. It is implicated in any attempt to encompass any of the great transformations in history by narrative means. Neither C.V. Wedgwood nor Simon Schama, for instance, was much interested in the structural factors predisposing England or France to revolution; they wanted to place the role of human agency and the flux of events in the foreground. Both of them were reacting against the Marxist approach to revolution, and traditional narrative suited a perspective which was fully formed before they embarked on their

11. Lawrence Stone, *The Causes of the English Revolution 1529-1642*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, ch. 3.

13. R.H. Tawney, *History and Society*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 54.

14. A.J.P. Taylor, *War by Time-table: How the First World War Began*, Macdonald, 1969, p. 45.

books. The choice of narrative must be recognized for what it is: an interpretative act, rather than an innocent attempt at story-telling.

The limitations of narrative apply still more to institutional and economic change, where there may be no identifiable protagonists whose actions and reflections can be treated as a story. No one has succeeded in representing the causes of the Industrial Revolution in narrative form. The problems are clearest of all in the case of the 'silent changes' in history¹⁵ – those gradual transformations in mental and social experience which were reflected on the surface of events in only the most oblique manner. As the scope of historical studies has broadened in the twentieth century to include these topics, so the hold of narrative on historical writing has weakened. Few intellectual rallying-cries have proved more effective than the attack by the *Annales* school on *l'histoire événementielle*.

The result is that historical writing is now very much more analytical than it was a hundred years ago. In historical analysis the main outline of events tends to be taken for granted; what is at issue is their significance and their relationship with each other. The multiple nature of causation in history demands that the narrative be suspended and that each of the relevant factors be weighed in turn, without losing sight of their connectedness and the likelihood that the configuration of each factor shifted over time.

This is certainly not the only function of analytical writing. Analysis can serve to elucidate the connectedness of events and processes occurring at the same time, and especially to lay bare the workings of an institution or a specific area of historical experience. In British historiography the classic instance is Namier's *Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (1929), a sequence of analytical essays on the various influences which determined the composition and working of the House of Commons around 1760. Structural studies of this kind are most prevalent in social and economic history, where some grasp of the totality of the social or economic system is required if the significance of particular changes is to be fairly assessed. Then there is the critical evaluation of the evidence itself, which may require a discussion about textual authenticity and the validity of factual inference, as well as a weighing up of the pros and cons of alternative interpretations. It has been said of Ranke that his careful evaluation of contemporary records was seldom allowed to ruffle the surface of his stately narrative;¹⁶ few historians would be allowed to get away with that kind of reticence today. But it is in the handling of the big explanatory issues in history that analysis most comes into its own. As historical writing becomes more geared to problem-solving, so the emphasis on analysis has increased, as a glance at any of the academic journals will show.

However, this does not mean that narrative is completely at a discount. For undiluted analytical writing raises its own problems. What it gains in intellectual clarity, it loses in historical immediacy. There is an inescapably static quality

15. R.W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, Hutchinson, 1953, pp. 14–15.

16. Another example, 'The World of Ranke' in John Cannon (ed.), *The Historian at Work*, Allen & Unwin

about historical analysis as if, in E.P. Thompson's much-cited metaphor, the time-machine has been stopped in order to allow a more searching inspection of the engine-room.¹⁷ Namier's studies of eighteenth-century politics lay themselves open to criticism for this very reason.¹⁸ Furthermore, explanations that seem convincing at an analytical level may prove unworkable when measured against the flux of events. The truth is that historians need to write in ways that do justice to both the manifest and the latent, both profound forces and surface events. And in practice this requires a flexible use of both analytical and narrative modes: sometimes in alternating sections, sometimes more completely fused throughout the text. This in fact is the way in which most academic historical writing is carried out today.

Today's historians are learning new ways of deploying narrative. Whereas in the nineteenth century it was often treated, without much reflection, as *the* mode of historical exposition, narrative is now the subject of critical scrutiny by scholars *au fait* with literary studies. Hayden White, for example, has emphasized the rhetorical choices made by every historian who resorts to narrative, and has identified some of the principal rhetorical stratagems found in their work (see below, p. 125).¹⁹ Historians tend to be much more self-conscious and critical in their use of narrative than they used to be. In particular, the traditional association with political events is now much less evident. Social historians, in a reversal of their practice a generation ago, now favour narrative as a means of conveying how the social structures, life cycles and cultural values that they analyse in abstract terms were experienced by actual people. But instead of constructing a narrative for society as a whole, they compose exemplary or illustrative stories, perhaps best termed 'micronarratives'.²⁰ Richard J. Evans has written a study of crime and punishment in nineteenth-century Germany, in which each chapter begins with an individual story as a way into the theme that follows; appropriately he calls his book *Tales from the German Underworld* (1998). In a classic of this new genre, Natalie Zemon Davis recounts the tale of a peasant in the French Basque country who lived as the husband of an abandoned wife for three years during the 1550s, until the real husband turned up and the impostor was exposed and executed. *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983) is an absorbing story, also made into a film, but for Davis the case 'leads us into the hidden world of peasant sentiment and aspiration', shedding light for example on whether people 'cared as much about truth as about property'.²¹ Lawrence Stone was somewhat premature when he spoke in 1979 of a 'revival of narrative', but the last two decades have confirmed that historians are indeed breathing new life into the most traditional form of historical writing.²²

17. E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, Merlin Press, 1978, p. 85.

18. H. Butterfield, *George III and the Historians*, Collins, 1957.

19. Hayden White, *Metahistory*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.

20. Peter Burke, 'History of events and the revival of narrative', in P. Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Polity, 1991, p. 241.

21. Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Penguin, 1985, pp. 4, viii.

22. Lawrence Stone, 1979.

