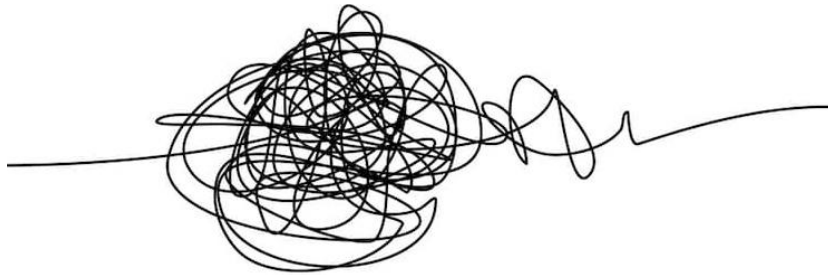


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HOW TO STUDY HISTORIANS:
HISTORIOLOGY, NOT HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Historian at work:
Scribble, Scribble, Scribble
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‘Always scribble, scribble, scribble! Eh, Mr Gibbon?’ This kindly put-down from the Duke of Gloucester to Edward Gibbon in 1781 has become a classic from a lackadaisical onlooker, who had just been presented with a new volume of *Decline and Fall* by its industrious author. And Gibbon, historian-scribbler *par excellence*, has had the last laugh. His works are still in print. And the noble Duke, the younger brother of George III, is today unknown, except for this exchange.

His remark may stand proxy for the bafflement which is often the public response to the hard work behind the historian’s scribbles. Readers primarily study History to learn about the immense stock of past human experience. But it’s always wise to check the sources behind any given interpretation. In these days when the public is rightly being re-alerted to the risk of fake news (NOT a recent invention), people should be similarly aware of the dangers of unduly biased histories as well as fake documentation on-line and fake information on social media.

With such thoughts in mind, the historian E.H. Carr, a canny expert on Soviet Russia, offered famously brisk advice: ‘Study the historian before you begin to study the facts’.¹ In practice, however, such a leisurely two-step procedure is not really feasible. (Quite apart from the challenges in demarcating ‘facts’ from interpretations). History readers are generally not greatly interested in the lives of historians, which are rarely (if ever) as exciting as the History which they study.

In practice, therefore, the public tends to rely upon book reviewers to highlight particularly notable points in an individual historian’s approach – and upon book publishers to vet the general standard. (And, yes: there is a rigorous process of assessment behind the scenes). At degree level, however, History students need to know about the formation of their discipline and how to apply best practice. Thus every advanced thesis or dissertation is expected to start with a critical review of the main debates surrounding the chosen subject, with measured reflections upon the viewpoints of all the leading protagonists.

So how can students best be trained in this art? It’s often done via old-hat courses labelled Historiography. These courses introduce famous historians in roughly chronological order, replete with details of who wrote what when, and with what basic approach. There are some helpful overview guides.² Yet fellow historians tend to find such studies far more interesting as a genre than do students. Instead, undergraduates often complain that old-style Historiography courses are boring, hard to assimilate, and unclear in their overall pedagogic message.

Moreover, today the biographical/historiographical approach has been rendered impracticable by the twentieth-century burgeoning of professional History. Once, students could be frogmarched through Gibbon, Macaulay, Lord Acton, and, with a nod to internationalism, Leopold von Ranke. With academic expansion, however, the terms of trade have altered. Globally, there are thousands of practicing historians. Students are habitually given reading lists of up to 20

books and articles for each separate essay which they are required to write. Clearly, they cannot give equal attention to every author. Nor should they try.

Academics in Britain today are regularly assessed, in a national regime of utilitarian scrutiny which verges on the oppressive. There is less scope for individual idiosyncrasy, let alone real eccentricity. Thus, while there are significant interpretational differences, the major variations are between schools of thought.

Hence courses on Historiography should mutate into parallel courses on Historiology. (The name's abstruse but the practice is not). Such courses introduce the rich matrix of concepts and approaches which coalesce and jostle together to create the discipline of History as practised today. As a result, students are alerted to the different schools of thought, emerging trends of scholarship, and great debates within and about the subject.³

Individual historians may still appear in the narrative, to exemplify relevant trends. For example, any assessment of the Marxist contribution to British history-writing will include the role of E.P. Thompson (1924-90), author of *The Making of the English Working Class* (1st pub. 1963; and still in print). Yet he was no orthodox follower of Karl Marx. (Indeed, Thompson in his later days sometimes called himself a post-Marxist). Instead, his approach was infused by the practice of empathy, as derived from thinkers like Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and adopted in the new discipline of anthropology.⁴ Hence E.P. Thompson appears in Historiology courses under more than one heading. He is also an exemplar of the impact of cultural anthropology upon historical studies. In other words, his own 'making' was complex – and students are invited to assess how Thompson fused two different intellectual traditions into his version of cultural Marxism.⁵

A good foundational course in Historiology should thus provide a broad overview of the growth and diversity of the discipline. Its organisation should be thematic, not biographical. Relevant topics include: (1) the pioneering of source

citation and footnoting; (2) the nineteenth-century development of professional research standards and the move into the archives; (3) the contribution of Whig-liberal views of progress; (4) countervailing theories of decline and fall; (5) the impact of Lewis Namier and the first iteration of structuralism; (6) the input from Marxism; (7) the role of ‘empathy’ and input from cultural anthropology; (8) the impact of feminism(s); (9) the focus upon ‘identity’, whether social, sexual, ethnic, imperial, colonial, post-colonial, religious, or any other; (10) structuralism and its refinement into Foucauldian poststructuralism; (11) the postmodernist challenge, peaking in the 1990s, and the historians’ answers to the same; and (12) the current quest for re-synthesis: from micro-history to Big History, big data, global history, and public history. (With other specialist themes to be added into related courses tailored for sub-specialisms such as art history, economic history, and so forth).

It’s crucial, meanwhile, that the teaching of historical skills and methodologies is fully incorporated into Historiology. Theories and praxis are best understood and taught together. There has been much recent pressure, chiefly coming from outside the discipline, to teach ‘Skills’ separately. It looks suitably utilitarian in brochures. But it makes for poor teaching. Courses that jump from one skill to another – today, empathy; next week, databases; the week after, using archives – are very hard for students to assimilate. To repeat my words from 2010: ‘People cannot learn properly from skills taught in a vacuum. At best they have a half-knowledge of what to do – and at worst they have forgotten – which means that later they have to learn the same skills all over again.’⁶

Lastly, the name of ‘Historiology’ needs a user-friendly makeover. If nothing else emerges, call it simply History’s ‘Core’ or ‘Foundation’ course. Ideally, however, it needs a ‘big’ compendious name. It takes ‘Big-History-Skills-Concepts’ all taught together to illuminate the eclectic operational framework of today’s ever-busy and ever-argumentative historians.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (1961; in second edn. 1964), p. 23.
- ² See e.g. C. Parker, *The English Historical Tradition since 1850* (1990).
- ³ Four exemplary studies are reviewed in P.J. Corfield, 'How Historiology Defines History' (2008), in PJC website www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk/Pdf4.
- ⁴ I.N. Bulhof, *Wilhelm Dilthey: A Hermeneutic Approach to the Study of History and Culture* (1980), esp. pp. 1-23.
- ⁵ See B.D. Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism and History* (1981); H.J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis* (1984), esp. pp. 167-220; P.J. Corfield, 'E.P. Thompson: An Appreciation', *New Left Review*, no 201 (Sept/Oct 1993), pp. 10-17, repr. in PJC website www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk/Pdf45; and C. Efstathiou, *E.P. Thompson: A Twentieth-Century Romantic* (2015).
- ⁶ PJC, 'What should a New Government do about the Skills Agenda in Education Policy?' (BLOG/1, Oct. 2010), in PJC, <https://www.penelopejcorfield.com/monthly-blogs/>.