
In his list of ‘Acknowledgements’, especially with the bracketed question, ‘anyone noticed a pattern yet?’ (9), the author (M hereafter) draws attention to his Cambridge connections and influences. They would certainly have been obvious anyway, for this is a book in the tradition of Moses Finley and Keith Hopkins which takes aim at historians who seek to show ‘how it really was’, and only end up writing dull, unimaginative, subjective books that conform to the artificial rules of the academy but do little to justify the acts of writing (or teaching) ancient history. One feels the heat of Finley’s attack on the ‘tell all you know about X’ book (Ancient History: Evidence and Models [1985] 61), and Hopkins’ broadsides against those who imagine that our sources represent a body of truths which can be extracted, rather than a social construct which requires persuasive interpretation (cf. his review of Fergus Millar’s The Emperor in the Roman World, in JRS 68 [1978] 178-86). M wants us, first of all, to give attention to historical theory. Beyond this, he wants ancient historians to write imaginative books and articles, in full knowledge of their subjectivity, employing perspectives and tools of analysis borrowed from disciplines such as sociology. There is much to what M says, but how bad really is the writing of ancient history at the moment, and how far should one go along with him?

The Introduction (11-17) talks of a general indifference, even hostility, to historical theory among ancient historians. It would be wrong to deny that there is force in this charge, despite its threatening undertones. Writers commonly stake many years of work on the acceptability of a given method; and the imperative to publish appears at times to override the fundamental concern for theory. Yet methodological debate ought to be mandatory. M is right about this.

Chapter 1 (19-52) examines the relationships between history, fiction, myth, propaganda, science, and ‘fringe’ history. Since the time of Thucydides (1.21-2), history has been founded upon a rejection of the fabulous in favour of a true account of past events. M shows, however, that history is merely one way of talking about the past, which bases its claim to precedence upon its supposed monopoly on truth and its superior application to the past in comparison to ‘present-centred’ disciplines like
economics and sociology. The claim to truth begins to disintegrate when one realises just how blurred are the boundaries between history on the one hand, and fiction, myth, propaganda and ‘fringe’ history on the other. Historians do use their imaginations, and some of them seem to emphasize their links with science in order to buy into the persuasive power of scientific language (44-5). M himself hesitates to offer a definition of history, except as ‘a way of talking—and writing and thinking—about the past’, ‘a discourse’, ‘a network of conventions, knowledge and practices’, or ‘a particular way of telling a story about the past which claims to offer a trustworthy account of past events’ (50-2).

Chapter 2 (53-95) deals with the crucial issue of source analysis. M shows scant respect for those who seek to recover the truth of ‘how it really was’ by ‘getting the facts right’, as though the sources are collections of facts and the ‘reality’ of the facts means that the historian’s imagination is to be limited according to the limited quantity of the sources. On the contrary, the ‘problem’ for ancient history ‘is not so much the lack of evidence as the question of how to interpret the evidence we have, and how to decide between different interpretations of the same evidence’ (69). There are such things as facts, but they ‘are established through acts of interpretation’ (57), so that a ‘fact is an interpretation that is so widely accepted that it can be taken for granted—until it is challenged’ (60). Facts are not determined objectively, they do not ‘speak for themselves’, and they do not exist in some pure form that is ‘uncontaminated’ by ‘ideas and concepts from outside ancient history’ (79). M does not think that there is a single, ‘correct’ way to ‘do’ ancient history, but he does think that the connections we make between different facts should be plausible (always a matter of opinion) and interesting (so that we can think about the facts in a new way) (79). The only limits this would set on the historian’s use of imagination would be i) economy, and ii) the requirement to be explicit about what is hypothetical in a reconstruction (84).

The third chapter (97-131) discusses style (a literary matter) rather than (the normally emphasized) content as a major factor in persuading the historian’s audience of the acceptability of the account offered. Much as Peter Wiseman has recently done (Historiography and Imagination [1994]; Remus: A Roman Myth [1995]; Roman History and Roman Drama [1998]; cf. my review of the latter in Scholia n.s. 8 [1999]), M considers
the role of narrative in historical writing, and the possibilities for introducing new techniques of representation into historiography. He rightly points out that the common view of narrative 'as an unsophisticated and inferior form of history' (101) in comparison to analytical argument is unfair, because 'every narrative account of the past is an interpretation' (104). M says that his 'main argument in this chapter is that the traditional forms of historical discourse are not natural or inevitable... there is no reason why they cannot be changed' (115). We usually write in the third person singular or the first person plural instead of the first person singular, but such conventions merely serve to reinforce history's claims to authority, to be giving an account of history 'as it really was' (113-14). Historians view rhetoric, the art of using language so as to persuade others, with suspicion; but 'all historical accounts are rhetorical', employing rhetorical strategies designed to convince readers that this is 'how it really was' (118). Footnotes are 'authority devices' (122) and figurative language, associated with fiction, is supposedly avoided in favour of clarity and accuracy (122-3); but in fact all language is figurative and figurative language is indispensable to understanding (124). The chapter ends with a series of mock footnotes (128-31).

The final chapter (133-61) looks at some arguments which have been advanced to justify the study of history. It teaches people to think critically and analytically, deepens understanding, and enriches society in general (133-4). Knowledge of the past is essential for planning for the future, for understanding the present and making decisions for the future (138). Once again, however, M stresses that there is no 'real' past for us to recover. All that are available to us are 'imaginative reconstructions of the past, ... contestable readings of an unstable, endlessly rewritten past' (140-1). This is a major complication for decision-making in the present and future, but history nonetheless retains importance 'because the past, or rather people's understanding of the past, shapes [attitudes and] actions in the present' (153, cf. 155). It is of enormous importance for people's sense of personal, social and national identity, and thus the critical study of the past is directly relevant to many debates within contemporary society. There is potential for history to take an active role here: 'by changing people's ideas about the past, it affects their view of the present, and above all affects their sense of identity' (155-6). Thus, historians 'have the opportunity to contribute to changing society—or, just as importantly, to help to resist certain changes—by offering alternative
visions of society’s past, and thus affecting our ideas of who we are and who we might become’ (159). For M, history is important, not only as an aid to understanding but as a force for change. It may help us come to terms with change; it certainly shows that the world can be changed (161).

M states (modestly) that he wants only to persuade his readers to take the issues raised by historical theory seriously: ‘I am far less concerned about whether you then accept my position on those issues’ (17). He is perhaps a little more concerned than he lets on but, in general, there is much good sense in these pages, and a wide range of historians should find much of what is said unexceptionable. The sticking points might be uncovered with questions such as, ‘has he been entirely fair to those who have written ancient history before now?’, ‘is what he advocates really so revolutionary?’, ‘what kind of history writing does he admire?’, and ‘isn’t it all reducible to a matter of degree?’

There may not have been the level of theoretical debate that some of us would like to see, but even so there has been a lot of profound thought given to matters such as source analysis, and it is not too hard to see experimentation and different approaches, books of different lengths, books narrative and analytical in character, florid and dry, and so on. Moreover, M has not been quite clear about what some historians judge to be at stake in this debate. Ernst Badian, for example, is one prominent ancient historian who thinks that the historian is better employed writing history than philosophy of history; excellence in the former and in the latter do not necessarily go together. Badian wants ancient historians to exhibit a profound knowledge of the sources above all else; he is concerned that some writers well versed in theory simply do not have a deep familiarity with the sources. Such concerns require explicit reassurance that theory and knowledge of the sources hold equal status as fundamentals. M would probably agree with this.

When it comes down to it M does not want history to reject its claim to a certain ‘truth’ that distinguishes it from fiction, myth, and other forms of writing about the past. In fact, one of the great virtues of history for M is that it has power to undermine myth (especially unfounded and implausible national myths), by offering an account of the past that is consciously critical and founded more securely on the evidence (156-7). There is praise for the work of Hopkins, especially for an article (‘Taxes
and Trade in the Roman Empire', *JRS* 70 [1980] 35-77) 'where he happily admits that his interpretation rests on a series of propositions which cannot be proven individually but which will support one another like a wigwam' (168). This formula, unfortunately, in the hands of a person less skilled than Hopkins could generate a house of cards of the weakest and most useless kind. Certainly objective truth is not possible but we are left with an exercise in boundary-setting where there is tension between those who are more and less cautious. M wants us to throw off some of our shackles, for they are artificial and subjective, but he knows full well that he cannot dictate with any precision how far we should venture into the realms of imagination and assistant disciplines. No one can. It comes down to the persuasiveness of each individual argument in the eyes of a particular reader—something else that M is aware of, to his great credit.

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