

# The Historian's Toolbox

## A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO THE THEORY AND CRAFT OF HISTORY

SECOND EDITION

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**History as a Discussion Without End**

You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers you; you answer her; another comes to your defense; another aligns herself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

—Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*

# 1

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## The Past

*The past is never dead; it is not even past.*

—William Faulkner

*The past does speak through the sources and is recoverable through them. There is a qualitative difference between documents written in the past, by living people, for their own purposes, and later interpretations advanced about the past by historians living at a later date.*

—Richard Evans, *In Defense of History*, 1999

In the beginning was the past. There really was a “then.” The past consisted of events, people, natural surroundings, and the landscape. In the distant past, time was measured in seasons and by the cyclic alternation of day and night, light and darkness. In most cultures, time was cyclic and repetitive, rather than linear. There was cosmos but no history. Most humans in the past lived lives of “ceaseless repetition of gestures initiated by others.”<sup>1</sup> Replication, not invention, was the norm. They imitated celestial archetypes in rituals of eternal recurrence, repeating acts of gods or heroes, abolishing history and time. Events were meaningless except as periodic ceremonies of regeneration or repetition of primal events of creation, such as the great battle between the Babylonian god Marduk and the sea monster Tiamat. There was no real sense of history.

The *past* is not *history*. The past may be lost without a trace. Or it may be remembered or continually reinvented or imagined as story. The past may be absent or present in history as a reasonably true account or as useful fiction.

In the case of the Trobriand Islands people of the Pacific, their language had no verb tenses. They simply did not understand the meaning of past, present, and future. While they certainly *had* a history, their understanding of history differed from that of other cultures.

Our senses—smell, taste, hearing, and sight—and our memories remind us of the past. We remember, and sometimes reinvent, the past that we do not forget. We remember things that happened in sequence, before or after, but rarely at any particular time. Material objects in the present remind us of the past: leaking poison gas canisters from the two world wars in France and Germany; the DNA of disinterred bodies; fossils; ancient pollen; old photographs; bones. I once encountered dried bloodstains of the Russian revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky (1879–1940) on top of some of his papers in a Harvard University archive, vivid evidence of the past, if not exactly history. (History reminded me that he was killed by an ice ax blow to the head while hunched over his desk editing his papers in Mexico.) We remember now, but it happened then. The past existed once and is not invalidated by our approximate, incorrect, or disappearing memories of that past now, in the present. Perhaps this is what President Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) meant by our “mystic chords of memory.” There really was a past. We even may remember some of it. We may suppress or forget other parts of it. Or we may simply not know part of the past.

Historians and other people often use the past to sanction present structures of authority, religious or secular. But alternative histories may also justify overthrowing that same authority. Genealogy legitimates monarchy and nobility or provides a guarantee of future salvation (for the Mormons, or Church of Jesus Christ Latter-day Saints). Marxist history legitimates revolution, not capitalist authority, as the final and inevitable product of history. The past may be used to explain the present and predict the future. But however the past is used and altered in the present, it was once there and then.<sup>2</sup> We seek its traces in the evidence we find in the present.

The past is intimately connected with *time*, a mysterious entity that we measure metaphorically in terms of space (a long or a short time). Early on, people developed calendars to help them keep track of past, present, and future time. Calendars are based on the motions of the natural world (sun, moon, stars, earth) and on a beginning of time (birth of a hero, founding of a religion or a nation, creation of the world, etc.). They contain both cyclic (hours, days, weeks, months, years) and linear (sequential years) elements. Cultures keep track of calendar time in many different systems. But calendars are a culturally defined measure of past time. The Mayans measured time in terms of days, years, and *katuns* (7,200 days, or about twenty years). Mayan time was both linear and cyclic, so that knowledge of recurrent patterns of events gave power and authority to the priests and wise men and women who understood the past. One historian of calendar time defines time as “interconnected hoops rolling up a great hill of progress.”<sup>3</sup> Western time (like Chinese time) is linear. But for many different cultures, time was cyclic, a wheel and not an arrow, eternal recurrence and not linear progress.

We all have remembered pasts. I ask my students to give an accurate account of what they ate for breakfast. I then ask them to suggest various ways in which they might obtain *evidence* about that breakfast (eyewitness testimony, receipts, fragments found, etc.) that would prove that their account was true. The results can be messy. But so is history. For human history involves historians and their human subjects in our common fate, that is, in what the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) called the “crooked timber of humanity.” Unlike scientists, historians resemble the objects of their all too human study of the past. We do not need to get bent out of shape by the fact that we are all crooked timber. We understand others in the past precisely because they too, like us, were human beings. We can empathize with their triumphs and tragedies. We can imagine what we might have done in their situation.

The past, then, is not history. The past and its traces provide the raw material of history. History gives an account of the past in the present. We might well have begun with the evidence, those traces of the past that are accessible to us now, in the present. Evidence is the raw material of history, the texts, images, manuscripts, and artifacts that help us tell a story or make an argument. But without the raw material evidence from the past, there would be no surviving evidence in the present to be examined and questioned, no story to tell, and no history

to discover and construct. So we begin with the past and with the root word of history, *story*.

### Notes

1. Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 5.
2. J.H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970).
3. Anthony Aveni, *Empires of Time: Calendars, Clocks and Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 332.

### For Further Reading

On the idea of the past, see especially Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959). The historian J.H. Plumb explores the difference between past and history in *The Death of the Past* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970). On time, see Anthony Aveni, *Empires of Time: Calendars, Clocks and Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1989). See also, from an art history perspective, George Kubler, *The Shape of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), as well as G.J. Whitrow, *Time in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

An interesting recent study of memory in relating past and history is Patrick H. Hutton, *History and the Art of Memory* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993).

## 2

## Story

*The fascinating thing about telling stories is that they start with the end.*

—Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 1994

*In any war story, but especially a true one, it is difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. . . . The angles and vision are skewed.*

—Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 1990

Once upon a time, as we say, human beings maintained their family and community, in part, by telling stories about the past. They still do. Stories were generally oral, not written. Stories often contained as much fiction as fact. The storyteller might also be a healer or a magician. Today, literary critics talk of narratives more than stories. But *story* and *narrative* form the same linked chains of tales about the past. Stories tell of the past in ways that give meaning and coherence to the present.

Story in any culture forms the basis of *myth*, where gods and humans interact in a way that explains the natural world. The Greek poet Homer (c. 8th c. B.C.E.) in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and the Roman poet Virgil (70–19 B.C.E.) in his *Aeneid*, provide memorable examples of the impulse to write down stories from a world of oral folk tales as epic poems. (We are not even certain that Homer was a real person, rather than a compilation of oral accounts.) There are many stories and gods in the polytheist universe of ancient Greece and Rome. Myths keep the collective unconscious alive by telling stories of gods and humans

interacting in love and war. Many Chinese myths and stories claim to predict the future. We often live by such stories, which are told and retold with variations over and over. Stories give meaning to our lives.

One particular Greek story associates history with women. Clio was one of nine daughters of Zeus, god of the heavens, and Mnemosyne, goddess of memory. In time, Clio took on the role of the "proclaimer" of the past, or the muse of history. She ultimately became the patron of all historians. In the West, the story of history as a discipline begins with the Greek goddess Clio.

A story generally exhibits a plot that develops from a beginning through a middle section to an end. Think of this triad as past, present, and future. Good stories may or may not end happily ever after, but they surely do end. The Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament are examples of oral traditions become written stories in which God is the main stage director and narrator of human events, keeping the Hebrews to their covenant and promising salvation to Christians at the end of time, and in eternity beyond death. God speaks and makes promises. God hears and accepts sacrifices.

Stories exist to entertain, to moralize, to teach us about life. The *Iliad* glorifies war and exemplifies the Hellenic code of the hero. The *Aeneid* tells of the genealogy of empire and the transfer of that empire from Troy to Rome. The Florentine poet Dante and his Renaissance townsman, Boccaccio, were great storytellers who drew on the rich traditions of both pagans and Christians to portray the divine and human comedies. The Arthurian legends of late medieval France and England told stories of knights and ladies, magic and the quest for the Holy Grail. The Renaissance writer Christine de Pizan told stories about her imagined and liberated City of Ladies, unhindered by patriarchs. The Grimm brothers collected and reinvented German fairy tales. The British writer Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923) and the Russian Anton Chekhov (1860–1914) helped make the short story a modern art form. Stories persist as part of our culture. They articulate cultural norms of right and wrong, good and evil. Stories reflect our morality—and immorality.

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"I am always at a loss to know how much to believe of my own stories," said American writer Washington Irving (1783–1859) in his *Tales of a Traveler* (1824). Stories normally contain more elements of fiction than are allowed historians.

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History was originally an attempt to tell a true story, then to get the facts straight, to explain and even analyze the past. But in recent years the line between story and explanation, literature and history, has blurred. Some postmodern literary critics consider all the past a text and historians merely tellers of a relatively meaningful (or meaningless) story that they construct from textual fragments found. Texts are not necessarily fictions, of course. But our most important stories, especially stories about ourselves, may also be true or at least grounded in truth. Historians remain doggedly concerned with approximating the truth about the past on the basis of available evidence. Yet historians recognize, as they always have, their own present situation and inclinations. Recognizing their limitations, historians still want to tell true stories, not make up a fictional past. They want to figure out what probably happened, not what we might imagine happened.

Stories are like instructions or blueprints or manuals for the craft of history. They narrate the step-by-step process of construction in sequence. But stories do not give us the raw materials unless they are true, nor the tools for construction. They are a useful beginning, and we should know them before we settle down to work.

We are, to paraphrase Aristotle, storytelling animals. But, as the contemporary writer of Vietnam War stories, Tim O'Brien, reminds us, stories blur the line between truth and fiction. Stories are normally fictional. They do not necessarily intend to tell the truth about the past. Truth and fiction may at times seem indistinguishable. *Story* is the root word for *history*. But stories about the past are not yet history, because they are not necessarily true. Stories imagine what might have been. History seeks to explain and understand a past that actually was. What, then, do we really mean by the word *history*?

### For Further Reading

Story and history are closely related. My favorite analysis of the relationship is Norman Maclean, *Young Men and Fire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Maclean tells his story of trying to discover and reconstruct the history of smoke jumpers killed in a fire that blew up in Montana in August 1949. The writer Tim O'Brien explores

the similarities and differences between story and history regarding the Vietnam War in his *The Things They Carried: A Work of Fiction* (New York: Penguin, 1990). John H. Arnold, in his book *History. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) provides some enthusiastic examples of history as “true stories” about the past.

### 3

## History

*The Register of Knowledge of Fact is called History.*

—Thomas Hobbes, 1651

*History is philosophy teaching by example.*

—Bolingbroke, 1735

*Historical research is a process of discovery and construction.* The historian investigates what happened in the past by *researching the available evidence* in order to establish the facts and the chronology of events. This evidence may include written records, archives, manuscripts, maps, and documents, but also unwritten evidence—photographs, paintings, coins, records, tapes, videos, computer hard drives, and so on. The garbage of the past is everywhere. But from the very beginning, the historian must select and distinguish what is important and significant from what is unimportant and ephemeral. We discover evidence, but we construct a history.

*History aspires to construct and tell true stories about the discovered evidence of the past.* Of course, truth about the past remains elusive and approximate. We can never be certain that we have understood the past correctly. But historians always *seek the truth* about the past insofar as that is possible. Truth is that never quite attainable straight line that is never precisely straight. As craftsmen, historians construct their story on the basis of evidence by selecting and arranging the facts (or ideas, values, or artifacts) in a chronological sequence that has a beginning,

middle, and end. Where the story begins and ends is a matter of interpretation, as well as discovery. In this process, past facts become present statements of fact, narrated after the fact by the historian.

*In addition, history seeks to understand and explain past events by interpreting their meaning.* The historian seeks to *discover* order and structure in the chaos and messiness of the past. The historian also *constructs* order and structure by creating a narrative or an argument, based on verifiable evidence. Historians know they live in a present where bias and interpretation of the past abound. They understand their own bias. Yet they try to be objective. In addition to telling a story, *they develop a persuasive argument* on the basis of the evidence, an argument that they believe is reasonable and accurate. They write about context, as well as text. They identify causes that will help *explain* how or why events happened the way they did. They seek *understanding* and *empathy* with individuals in another time and place. They persist in asking questions about the past: Why and how did events happen? What caused an event? Which individuals play important roles? And *what is the meaning* of the events studied, in terms of both past and present?

*Why have I italicized some selected words and passages above? Because I think they are very important in understanding history.*

Most histories began as *chronicles* or narratives of wars by men who had fought in those wars—the two Greek generals, Herodotus (485–425 B.C.E.) on the Persian Wars and Thucydides (460–400 B.C.E.) on the Peloponnesian Wars, for example. These early historians tried to narrate the story of events that actually happened. They tried to get the *facts* straight. They made explicit the evidence and sources for their statements of fact. They tried to be objective, even when they invented or imagined some of the evidence according to what others told them. They accepted some wild stories on faith and made up speeches they never heard in person. In Thucydides's account of public speeches in ancient Greece, for example, he made up what he "thought the situation demanded."

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"History is the witness that testifies to the passing of times; it illuminates reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life, and brings us tidings of antiquity. The first law for the his-

torian is that he shall never dare utter an untruth. The second is that he shall suppress nothing that is true. Moreover, there shall be no suspicion of partiality in his writings, or of malice."

—Cicero (106–43 B.C.E.)

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The Greeks invented history by trying to tell true stories about the past. They realized that truth was grounded in evidence. But history was often more *cyclic* than *linear*, going nowhere. In contrast to the Greeks, the Hebrews made history meaningful and linear by making it *monotheistic*. The Hebrew Scriptures comprised a series of stories that told of God's covenant with the people of Abraham and Israel, his chosen people who promised to obey God's commandments and laws. God spoke to his people through burning bushes or at sacrifices. Historical time was linear, not cyclical, beginning with the creation of the world (Genesis) and ending with the coming of the Messiah. In between lay nomadic wandering and endless suffering for the Israelites. Prophets predicted the coming Messiah and a river crossing to the land of milk and honey. One God gave *meaning* to the terror, the wandering, and the suffering of history.

Christian history was also monotheistic and linear but added a *central sacred event* between the beginning and end of history, namely, the appearance of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Christians replaced Jews as the chosen people in the New Testament, fulfilling the promise of a coming Messiah. History began with the Garden of Eden and the creation of the world and with Adam and Eve's big mistake, original sin. Free will could be dangerous. At the end of history, Christ would come again to judge the quick and the dead after a final battle between the forces of Christ and Antichrist, God and Satan. History would have a meaningful end in which Christians would find eternal life and salvation from sin in Heaven, or else eternal death in Hell. Likewise, Islam offers the sacred event through the life of the Prophet, Mohammed.

Christian history in the Middle Ages was often a *chronicle*, a listing of wars, kings, queens, baptisms, plagues, and marriages. Chronicle meant *chronology*, a listing in order in time of important events. But monks also wrote and copied down Christian accounts of historical events. Behind events stood only one cause—the will of an omniscient and omnipresent God. History was moral drama, a story of God's judgment and a battle between God and Satan for the control of human souls, a battle between



good and evil. Events conveyed moral meaning and value. Medieval histories are full of the stories of good men and bad, saintly women and wicked hags, chivalry and perfidy. "History records good things of good men," wrote the Venerable Bede (673–735) in the eighth century, and "evil of wicked men." Bede used multiple sources and cross-checked them; he also believed that what a bishop said about saintly bodies that allegedly did not decay simply had to be true because of divine authority.<sup>1</sup> The bishop on God's authority knew right from wrong, and truth from heresy. *Moral judgment* was a crucial element in medieval history, where God was omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent.

Medieval Christian history was above all *dualist*. History was a battle between two forces—God and Satan, light and darkness, body and soul, Heaven and Hell. St. Augustine (354–430) portrayed history as a story of the City of God and the City of Man. But some medieval history after around 1100 was also *triadic*. Purgatory became a third place between Heaven and Hell. The twelfth-century monk Joachim of Fiore developed a scheme of history that divided all time into three ages that reflected the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The scheme sounded a lot like past, present, and future. And Joachite thinking became the archetype for later tripartite schemes of the nineteenth century, including the thesis-antithesis-synthesis logic of the Prussian philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) and the feudalism-capitalism-socialism stages of history described by the radical social thinker Karl Marx (1818–1883). The line between medieval and modern history was more continuous, and less sharp, than the moderns initially pretended.

Medieval history also meant *genealogy*, a family history that justified ruling authority through a line of royalty, or nobility through marriage and descent. Virgil's great account of the genealogy of Rome, how Aeneas fled burning Troy to found Rome (despite an affair with Dido, shipwrecks, and a descent to the underworld), provided a model of a genealogical epic of a founding father. Virgil also hoped to please his contemporary patron, Emperor Caesar Augustus. In the late Middle Ages, an entire profession of genealogists emerged to chart, and sometimes to forge or fake, lines of noble descent. Genealogy was not simply a form of history, but a claim or road to power.

The words *history* and *historian* only appeared in English around 1500. A *historian*, as distinct from a chronicler or annalist, tried to provide a true, written narrative of past events, not simply a year-by-

year listing. Historians began to distinguish between primary (direct) and secondary (secondhand, or indirect) sources. But most historians were simply people who wrote history as a hobby. Griots, shamans, and storytellers were the first professional historians. But historians did not organize themselves professionally as a group until the end of the nineteenth century. Until then, history was the pastime of gentlemen, not the occupation of professionals.

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A *primary source* is a document, image, or artifact that provides us with evidence about the past. A *secondary source* is a book, film, article, or museum that displays primary sources selectively in order to interpret the past.

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The Renaissance and the Enlightenment gradually made human beings and human actions more central to human history. History was not revelation, but reason. History became in part the study of change over time, more accurate, more systematic, more focused on human, rather than divine, activities. In time, the practice of history divided into two varieties—call them *positivist* and *idealist*—which viewed history as science or as art.

Science by the eighteenth century gave history two quite different sets of metaphors to employ in the language of narrative and explanation, *mechanical* and *organic*. Mechanical metaphors involved words like *force*, *mass*, *energy*, *inertia*, *revolution*, *rise*, and *fall*. These words came largely from physics and Newtonian mechanics. (Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky used to talk about the locomotive of history racing down the tracks of time.) Organic metaphors involved words like *birth*, *life*, *death*, *growth*, *culture*, *evolution*, and *decay*. (The German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder [1744–1803], whose ideas on culture and peoples influenced later romantic and nationalist historians, distinguished between mechanical *civilization* and organic *culture*, a distinction of enormous importance to later German and Russian thought.) Historians today employ both mechanical and organic metaphors, often quite unconsciously. Watch out for them in your reading!

After the Enlightenment, some historians claimed to be practicing a kind of science, seeking to sift and weigh evidence critically, to test the validity of sources by cross-examination, and to classify and organize

evidence in the manner of a geologist or paleontologist. Some critics called them *positivists*. They were positive about what they could and could not know, using the tools of reason and science. The German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) epitomized this impulse when he offered seminars to university students in Germany on historical method. Ranke claimed that history sought to explain, to understand, as well as narrate, the past “as it really was.” To do this, historians needed to empathize with people of another time and place, to put themselves in their place, and to get the facts straight. In Native American terms, historians needed to walk in the shoes of their subjects of study. Some claimed that history would “speak for itself.” Others claimed that history, like science, could establish laws of human behavior over time. History, proclaimed the British historian J.B. Bury around 1900, was “herself simply a science, no less and no more.”<sup>2</sup>

Other historians and philosophers of history—notably Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), and Robin G. Collingwood (1889–1943)—became *idealists*. That is, they emphasized that history was really contemporary, here in the present, and autobiographical, about the historian’s mind and ideas in the present as much as about the historian’s topic in the past. They focused on what people thought, felt, and imagined as much as on what they did. They showed that ideas and ideologies were causes of actions in the past. Some became intellectual historians, historians of ideas. Many thought that ideas shaped events—and the interpretation of events.

The idealist historian sought to understand the past by getting imaginatively inside the minds of individuals in the past. Collingwood in his book *The Idea of History* (1943) distinguished between the inside and outside of events. The outside of events meant simply actions, bodies in motions, what people actually did. The inside of events meant the thoughts, values, and ideas of the human actors who made history. The purpose of history was empathy and understanding of others. By studying the mental world of the past, historians sought to inhabit the minds of their subjects, knowing that this requires imagination inspired by evidence. The historian could then reenact past actions the way those who performed them were thought to act.

*Positivist* (“scientific”) historians claim that history provides a scientific explanation of past actions and events. Some philosophers argue that such explanations presume a “covering law.” For example, to

explain the 1917 Russian Revolution in terms of two main causes—the disastrous effects of World War I and the presence of an organized conspiratorial political party, the Bolsheviks, ready to seize power—is to presume a law something like this: “Whenever a society experiences defeat and destruction in war and contains a political party organized to overthrow the government, a revolution will result.” Thus, positivists believe that explanation is equivalent to prediction. The statement “x and y caused z” is equivalent to the statement: “If x and y, then z.” Explanation implies a power of prediction that most historians would reject, but may sometimes imply. Historians generalize, but rarely claim to be discovering a law.

Most historians simply accept that history is part science and part art. They can only try to explain the causes of past events. They work to understand the intentions and motives of historical personages, but can be certain about neither. Both scientific explanation and imaginative reconstruction remain elusive goals. Objectivity in writing history remains a “noble dream,” as one historian put it. The point is simply to try to explain and understand past events by testing a general hypothesis against particular and specific evidence, to try to be as objective and accurate as possible. The result must always be contingent and subject to revision.

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*Historiography* involves the study of the writing of history. It describes historical arguments, theories, and interpretations over time, how schools of thought on particular events change over time—like history.

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For example, historians continually argue about, debate, and revise our understanding of the causes of the American Civil War. They usually distinguish between causes that were necessary and those that were sufficient to cause a civil war. Necessary causes include sectional differences between North and South, the existence of slavery as an institution, the moral and political critique of slavery, and the dispute over the tariff. Given the existence of these necessary causes, then other causes were in the end sufficient to lead to a civil war—the Kansas–Nebraska Act of 1854, the election of Abraham Lincoln as president in 1860, or the federal decision to resupply Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor in 1861, and the southern firing on the fort. Without the necessary causes, the

sufficient causes would probably not have been sufficient. With them, they produced war and endless suffering—and monumental changes—in both North and South. (See the longer example of causation and the Civil War in the toolbox section of this book.) Historians rarely make their causal models explicit. But they often assume them.

*Causation is like an explosion.* Necessary causes are like dynamite, plutonium, or hydrogen—that is, the fuel. Sufficient causes are like the fuse, match, implosion lenses, or atomic trigger—that is, the ignition device. Ignition causes explosion—but only because the fuel is present.

After the middle of the nineteenth century, the idealistic impulse of some historians shifted to a form of history that sought to find the ultimate meaning of historical events within, rather than outside, history, in human action rather than divine intervention, in large patterns and forces operating over time. Recent critics have dubbed this trend *metahistory*. If historians are generally trying to understand the subtleties and complexities of many things, metahistorians are trying to understand THE ONE BIG THING that gives meaning to history.

## Notes

1. Venerable Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 41–43.

2. Fritz J. Stern, *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (New York: William Collins, 1956), 223.

## For Further Reading

A good selection of philosophical writings on history is Fritz J. Stern, *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, (New York: William Collins, 1956). See also Patrick Gardiner, *Theories of History* (New York: Free Press, 1959).

A classic positivist view by a leader of the *Annales* school is Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953). A more recent exposition is Fernand Braudel, *On History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). On the history of the positivist dream about scientific history, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

For the idealist counterpoint, see Robin G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1943). A more specialized, but brilliant, essay on history, free will, and determinism is Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (New York: Mentor, 1957).

On historians as a breed, see J.H. Hexter, *On Historians* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), and *The History Primer* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

A fascinating collection of essays on history as mystery is Robin W. Winks, ed., *The Historian as Detective* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968). In the same vein of historical fun, see David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).