

History: Is it the recreated past or a historian's selective personal viewpoint?

This seems such an obvious question to answer and yet so much confusion, so many debates, controversies and differing viewpoints emerge when it is faced. Much of the confusion is caused by two phrases connected with the issue. The first is "the past" usually prefixed by such words as "finding out what happened in the past" "recovering the past" and "recreating the past." Similar in concept is the phrase "the full story" The media continually promise us that "they are going to give us the full story" or that somebody "knows the full story." Actually nobody does and nobody can know the full story. To know the full story they would have to know everything that happened in an event and everything in the past life of the individual or individuals involved which influenced or shaped their actions in the event. They would also have to consider what effects if any that other people, climate, temperature, weather, the environment, noise levels and intelligence levels had during the duration of this event. Even considering the massive advances made by artificial intelligence, being able to do this seems impossible. Even assuming that sometime in the future this could be done, could the most advanced human mind absorb "the full story"? Would those with such advanced minds want to? Apart from being bored to death what would be the point? Historic accounts are rightly focused on the important, the dramatic, the revealing, the puzzling, the interesting and the relevant. While writers might disagree on what evidence fits these categories they all do this by selecting evidence.

If the past cannot be represented in its entirety: historians must shape their histories by selecting, editing and making comprehensible what has happened from a series of events so massive they are impossible to compile. They select some past event or person and limit themselves to it – if they are wise. Several attempts to write histories of the world or even histories of a particular century or decade are usually shallow, contain fallacies, and omit so much that they are simplistic. The most that they achieve is to give an overview.

Despite the internet and the massive retrieval systems of computers, government surveillance, mobiles and the ubiquitous media, only a small fragment of what happens is still recorded in some way. Even in the fairly recent past before computers, before television age (both coming to prominence in 1946) that proportion of recorded past events from what actually happened would have been extraordinarily tiny. Yet those who say that therefore all history is just fiction created by historians have it wrong. They are not creating

by making something out of nothing. Historians do not work with the past: they work with remnants from the past. They are using what already exists to put together information. This could be anything from what is found by archaeologists to myriad and extremely varied forms of evidence. A sampling would include eyewitness accounts in their different forms, surviving architecture, furniture and furnishings, newspapers, encyclopaedias and magazines, websites and e-mails, downloads, film and television, almanacs, memories revealed in interviews, clothing, coins, memoirs, letters, tax documents, propaganda in its many forms, wills, decrees, awarded degrees, medical records, tools and weapons, weather reports, sailing manifests, cargo lists, harbourmasters' reports, enlistment documents, debates, police reports, censuses, parish registers, birth marriage and death certificates, regimental and organisation histories, genealogies, tombstones, sermons, menus, decrees, royal commissions, official government enquiries, court trial transcripts, photographs, maps, psychological profiles, body language assessment reports, speeches, posters, lyrics, orders of battle, courts martial, prison records, school reports, intelligence tests, dendrochronology, carbon 14 reports, graffiti, inscriptions on various locales and secondary sources. Yes, this is a sampling! Even this long list is not the full story, not everything we have from the past. These remnants from the past and many others are almost always selected to make some obvious narrative form.

How they do this varies. Unless they are working like archivists or editors, putting together a chronology, a report or assembling a collected works without their comments, like novelists their imagination, observations and interpretations are vital to form a new creation. Like novelists they usually have a narrative containing characters with personalities and traceable motivations and acts, settings, a sense of place, dramatic tension and a dénouement. However their imaginations, narrative abilities and personal viewpoint can only go so far and should go no further. The evidence marks a line best not crossed – beyond it is fiction. What primary sources reveal should and usually does shape their narratives. Any historian who goes against his evidence over emphasises some evidence or ignores vital information risks losing credibility. Historians can work exclusively with primary sources or secondary sources, but most historians mix both and are careful with how they use either source material.

In 1824 Leopold von Ranke wrote in reaction to romantic and fictionalised history that historians should write to recreate the past as it actually happened, in his German phrase *wie es eigentlich gewesen*.¹ One translator stated that the

¹ Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is History Fiction? 2nd edn*, Sydney, 2012. p. 56.

German word *eseigentlich* could mean either actually or essentially.² Taken literally and going with ‘actually’ over ‘essentially’ this means to recreate the past, but this idea cannot be a reality. As already shown history is not a synonym for the past; it cannot be equated with everything that has ever happened. Spending a long human lifespan studying such a record could only begin to start on a tiny proportion of what had been recorded. Even accepting Ranke’s translation with “essentially” provides a difficult task - deciding what is essential. Historians must select and edit from the past, they can clearly do nothing else, no matter how small or large their chosen topic is. Even the life of a single individual must be an impossibly massive area for replication or complete comprehension: records, memories and even advanced technology cannot replicate what a person always thought or felt.

A salient example of the limitations of supposedly totally comprehensive attempts to reproduce a past life is the attempt to collect every written word and every utterance said by Mahatma Gandhi, dating from the first known examples from 1884 up to his death in 1948.³ Funded by the Indian government, this project started in 1956; at one stage in the 1970s eighty staff were involved and an incomplete biography in three large hagiographic volumes concerning his first thirty-one years of life had been completed.⁴

Yet even this massive group effort demonstrates that a total recreation of the past, even in relation to one person, must be impossible: to say it again in history selectivity becomes unavoidable. For how can the creators of this massive effort guarantee that they have found every utterance, every written word, and every publication? They cannot and they have not. Gandhi’s biographer, Pyarelal Nayar spent twenty-eight years as one of Gandhi’s secretaries, clearly reveals this by stating how with bundles of Gandhi’s communications he is “able to suppress them from history, since by God’s grace I am the only one who knows about them.”⁵

This claim clearly indicates the role of omission in creativity. Implicitly this also shows that where hagiography exists, censorship by omission frequently co-exists. Another problem this example reveals must be bias. It is unlikely that people would dedicate their lives to attempting to recreate the life of someone they despise. Dedicated admirers or people with careers depending on constructing hagiographic accounts are more common. Such people are unlikely

² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³ Ved Mehta, *Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles*, New York, 1976. p. 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵ Mehta, p. 42.

to promote material damaging to their god like heroes and their livelihoods. Such massive, seemingly comprehensive collections concerning Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky which have also been tampered with and omit much have also been proved to be prone to this problem.

To create his *Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles* (1976) Ved Mehta combined different research methods. He interviewed many of those who knew Gandhi as his principal method, supplemented by descriptions of museums and places where Gandhi or his followers lived and assessments of written secondary sources. His methods led not only to recovering information about Gandhi, but to depict how his ideas still existed and were and were not practised in India at the time he wrote. This work gives the impression that the reader will find out more about Gandhi's ideas in Mehta's investigation than wading through the endless and incomplete complete works. They will certainly find the information faster! They will also find out what happened to Gandhi's ideas and to his followers after Gandhi's death in January 1948. This indicates another problem with complete collections of the famous: they stop with the famous one's death, as if time stops with that event.

Another problem is that even the most exhaustive, fair minded work can be made outdated and proved to be incorrect or incomplete by later revelations. When Sybille Bedford published her massive two volume biography of Aldous Huxley in the 1970s it seemed as if everything had been said. Seemingly the past could be recreated – in all its prosaic detail. One reviewer joked that the detail in this biography was so great that he was amazed that we were not told if on one occasion Huxley had or had not used the public on urinal on his way home in London. Bedford's work seemed the last word not only because of its vastness but because Huxley's home, containing his papers many manuscripts letters and other documents was burned in 1961. As often happens in history more information emerged from unexpected places. Letters amongst his associates and from him were found in in the 1990s and interpreted in ways which placed Huxley amongst those 1930s elitists who believed in rule over the commoners by an elite. In the beginning of his biography *Aldous Huxley: An English Intellectual* (2002) Nicholas Murray disagreed with that interpretation and with the general view of how Huxley's personality had frequently been described. With newly found documents available Murray was able to show that Bedford's view of Huxley's first marriage was incorrect; he not only knew his wife was bisexual, but they were in a triad as a regular relationship. Huxley was a sexual libertarian, not the staid, even cold and monogamous husband so often assumed in earlier published recollections. Bedford and other earlier Huxley biographers had not recreated an aspect of the past, they had misunderstood it.

E.H. Carr gives an example of a similar problem. He discusses the uses made of the collection of three hundred boxes containing official, semi-official and private documents of the German foreign minister Gustav Stresemann.⁶ Carr recounts how after Stresemann's death in 1929 his family and friends got his secretary Bernard to edit this collection, parts of which were published in three volumes of six hundred pages each. The massive size of this publication suggests a process of complete replication rather than creativity. However creativity was involved. Bernard's version was really only a highly selective if large fragment shaped by his bias. He emphasised Stresemann's obvious successes in Western Europe, while saying little about what seemed massive amounts on trivial matters concerning the Soviet Union.⁷ Bernard therefore gave a false impression of what Stresemann thought was important and how he used his time. Carr makes the point that Stresemann also gave a false impression by giving his opinions of what happened as the full story. This was said without evaluating the Soviet documents or the viewpoint of Chicherin, Stresemann's opposite number with whom he negotiated.⁸

As the Chicherin –Stresemann dealings and Barnard's editing suggests, no one outlook exists to emphasize how historians view the past or what they emphasise in their creations. In *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in History and Theory* (2016) Anna Green and Kathleen Troup present a wide range of perspectives from different historians, The more ideological historians, Marxists, and feminists, are included, while others are described by their methods. Poststructuralists, empiricists and ethno historians, those writing from sociological, postcolonial or psychoanalytical perspectives and oral historians are all amongst those included. Green and Troup stress and their varied collections show that historians do not have a single outlook shaping how they select material from the past, or how they merge the materials to create their works.

This also becomes evident when examining the differing creative methods of other historians.

On such method involves writing recollections: the historian becomes both writer and their own primary source, being an eyewitness to their described events. Such people can become an invaluable source, either confirming what is in primary sources, explaining them or stressing their importance – or the lack of it. Saladin's secretary and biographer Behâ Ed Din provides an outstanding

⁶ E. H. Carr, *What is History?* 2nd edn, Melbourne, 1961. pp. 16-19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 18-19.

example with *The Life of Saladin 1137-1197*. This has become basic reading for anyone writing academically about Saladin as few other eyewitness accounts survive. As much of what he writes matches primary source documents and other contemporary opinions and not all of what he writes puts Saladin in an admiring light by his standards, he is considered reliable.

Personal recollections can often give a different, disputed and previously unknown perspective. This is recreating history by recreating memory. In 1978 a year after her adoptive mother, the actress Joan Crawford died Christina Crawford's book *Mummy Dearest* was published. In this book she recreates a child's view of a neurotic, abusive and cold parent. One sibling and several Hollywood people agreed with her account; two other siblings and other Hollywood people disagreed. How should such accounts be judged?

Similarly Wendy Lowenstein in *Weevils in the Flour: An Oral Record of the 1930's Depression in Australia* (1978) interviews around two hundred Australian Great Depression survivors to give an impression of what they felt was their reality of going through that time. By selecting people in varied occupations and locales she creates what reads as a nation-wide image, although in her preface she mentions that she did not seek out establishment employers, professionals or political people and she also states that although she hoped to cover the entire continent, the "sheer size of Australia made it impossible."⁹ She goes on to state that even after five years of work large areas of the topic "have hardly been touched" and others unexplored.¹⁰ The massive size of her work, its extraordinary inclusiveness and her comments about the work's limitations show that even massive histories are still selective and cannot be anything else.

In Ronald Fraser's *Blood of Spain: The Experience of Civil War 1936-1939*. (1979) he approaches the Spanish Civil War in a similar way, interviewing over three hundred participants, but there are differences from *Weevils in the Flour*. In his work ideology frequently predominates among the interviewees. Unlike many of those experiencing the Great Depression in Lowenstein's work, many have a very militaristic mentality. The different ideologues have a view of how their nation should be and are in a conflict to make their view predominate. Others do resemble Lowenstein's interviewees in that they have been hit by a disaster they have trouble understanding, cannot change and focus on surviving. Fraser also differs from Lowenstein in several other ways. He introduces stages

⁹ Wendy Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour: An Oral Record of the 1930's Depression in Australia*, Melbourne, 1978. p. xiii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xiii

in the conflict chronologically and places his interviewees in that chronology, giving more detailed explanations. His chapters start with contemporary quotes, usually from the famous participants and leaders of the era. This style of creating history has many imitators; that is no bad thing.

In Harold Holzer's *The Civil War in 50 Objects* (2013) the fifty primary source objects are selected from a New York collection: this in itself is limiting. While some Confederate objects are included, the great majority are Unionist. Only one object comes from the war on the Mississippi and nothing from the west, the blockade or the nautical war. While the collection both fascinates and reveals much about the Civil war that is often overlooked, the title misleads. How could any collection do anything else? How could such a long nationwide event be contained in any collection, history or documentary?

Two books by Walter Lord reveal the problem of historical selectivity even within one event, even when happening in one location and lasting only a few hours. His *A Night to Remember* (1955) recounted the events of the Titanic sinking on April 14th and 15th 1912. His *Day of Infamy* (1957) did the same for the December 7th attack on Pearl Harbour. In both books Lord writes with the imagination of a novelist and creates taut dramas that make these events come alive. It is little wonder that these books sold so well; sixty year on *A Night to Remember* has not gone out of print. *Day of Infamy* covered the three basic groups involved, the Japanese, the Americans and Hawaii's civilians. Lord certainly does thorough research on all three and the event they were embroiled in. For *Day of Infamy* he had a team and many unofficial team helpers. His credited interviewees came to 464. He used the forty volumes of the U.S. Congressional investigation, thirteen books, Hawaii's War Records Depository, the Honolulu Harbor Master's Records, The Honolulu Board of Water Supply report on damage, two Honolulu newspaper files, personally conducted tours and many magazine articles. All this is why he probably does not give source notes: he would have drowned his text. Even so he has been selective and indicates one reason why. With so many of the participants dead by the time he was researching, he cannot tell the full story of the event.

The same applies to *A Night to Remember*; 1517 eyewitnesses died in the *Titanic* tragedy. Only 706 survived the *Titanic* sinking and of those some were toddlers and babies, obviously without memories of the event. Even amongst the survivors many had died by the 1950s when Lord was researching. Then in 1985 the *Titanic* was found and much new evidence meant that Lord felt he had to write again. He was right: vital new evidence had emerged making everything written before 1985 outdated. The ship did break in two as some

witnesses claimed. The cheaper steel near the front of the hull was used as many stated. These facts destroy the supposed fact of the unsinkable ship which featured in so many earlier histories. The way so few survivors came from third class was assumed to be because they were placed in the lower decks and would have had to spend more time to reach the main deck. The 1985 investigations revealed that their entrance had been padlocked; they probably drowned as water poured into the slowly sinking but still above water ship, not after it sank beneath the waves as previously assumed. Marine archaeologists found much to confirm and sometimes reveal how life had been on the ship. All these new facts meant that as fine as *A Night to Remember* was, Lord's book was clearly much less than the full story: newly found remnants had brought history closer to that mirage. Despite both well researched works giving a sense of being there Lord cannot really locate us in the past: nobody can. Well not yet will there ever be a time machine?

In Mortimer Wheeler's *Archaeology From the Earth* (1954) the writer does not set out to write history, but he frequently does. This happens because while he reaches his aim of systematically describing and explaining archaeological methods, in doing so he refers to what should be in a history. He writes of historic finds, the history of a particular dig, archaeologists' lives and the historic developments within archaeological methods. The overall impression of this book is that it encourages readers to get a history of archaeology. Sometimes history comes to us unintentionally from tangents, asides and descriptions.

Many historians write to expose fallacies. The self-explanatory title of Graham Wilson's *Bully Beef and Balderdash: Some Myths of the AIF Examined and Debunked*. (2012) shows just the start of what he does in this work. Giving each legend, myth or fallacy concerning Australian soldiers in World War One a chapter each, he contrasts them with what the primary source documents actually say. He also examines how myths developed and their appeal. His opinions on what really happened to the Anzacs are not a total construction of the Anzac's past, but chapter by chapter he focuses on a fallacy about them and then states he reveals a reality, making him a historian emphatically insisting they know aspects of the past.

Despite wide differences in ideology, outlook and interests, what all these historians are united by is their necessary and essential method: they create narratives by selecting and then assessing material from the past, rather than trying the futile and probably boring task of duplicating it.

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