

Bernard Bailyn. In The Teaching  
and Writing of History (1994)



To begin quite basically, Professor Bailyn, how would you define "history"?

☺ B. B. ☺ The word "history" has, I think, two meanings. One is simply *what happened*; that is, the events, developments, circumstances, and thoughts of the past, as they actually occurred. The other is history as *knowledge of what happened*, the record or expression of what occurred.

Carl Becker, a leading historian a generation or so ago, gave as good a definition of history—in the second of these two senses, *knowledge of the past*—as I know of. History, he said in an address to the American Historical Association in 1931, is simply "the memory of things said and done." And it functions, he added, as "the artificial extension of the social memory."

"The memory of things said and done" does not pretend to be the recall of all past experience. It is a necessarily imperfect and selective reconstruction. But it serves to extend and to enlarge our own, personal experience and to orient contemporary issues, values, goals, and behavior.

One needs to understand the relationship between the reality of what happened—the totality of past events

and developments, past circumstances and thoughts—and what, in historical writings and compilations, people represent them to have been. That relationship, it seems to me, is crucial to all historical study and knowledge. The accuracy and adequacy of representations of past actualities, the verisimilitude or closeness to fact of what is written about them, remain the measure, in the end, of good history—this despite all the fashionable doubts that are raised about the attainment of absolute or perfect objectivity and accuracy (which no one pretends to, anyway).

*And how would you describe or characterize what a "historian" is?*

☉ B. B. ☉ A historian, I assume, is someone who develops, in one way or another, what Becker called the "artificial extension of social memory"—by recovering, through the evidences of the past, aspects of what happened. But that does not confine historians to people who teach in colleges and universities. One of the interesting things about the practice of history these days is that history, while largely the domain of academicians, is not entirely so.

First of all, you have some well-known historians who are non-academicians, yet people who are professionally trained. Barbara Tuchman was a prime example. She had the credentials of a professional scholar, even

though she practiced, so to speak, as an amateur—in the sense that she was not involved in the critical, systematic development of knowledge in certain areas and was not responsible for passing on to the next generation a large-scale, integrated picture of what our past has been.

Then, too, there are more and more "public historians"; that is, professionally trained historians who do not teach in universities or who do not write as Barbara Tuchman did, but who work in commercial organizations that provide accurate historical studies, on a contract basis. For example, there is the Winthrop Group, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a team of excellent historians who run a commercial organization that serves a variety of historical functions. They work for business corporations that want company histories written or that want their archives put in order or want an accurate historical record kept of an on-going experimental project. They also do historical research for legal briefs, where objective history by impartial scholars can be critical, and they arrange for oral histories.

Third, another group of non-academic historians work in state, regional, and local historical societies, museums, and restorations. They are experts in regional history or masters of specific archives for which they provide valuable guides and from which they publish documentary series. Often they are involved in or help sponsor the editing of the new "Papers" series. Julian Boyd, the first editor of the great *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*

son series, set a standard for technical scholarship in such editing, beyond anything known before in this country, and he established a new style for what are, in effect, massive documentary biographies. His volumes—like the new Adams, Madison, Washington, and other “Partners,” all of them works of excellent historical scholarship—provide basic source material that historians of all kinds will use for generations to come.

It is amusing to contrast Boyd, a meticulous scholar who reproduced every orthographic peculiarity of the original texts and published variant readings of every word that was not perfectly clear in the original, with predecessors like Jared Sparks, the nineteenth-century President of Harvard, who falsified the texts of Washington’s letters, because he thought they were too colloquial—even, indelicate.

Finally, there are historians who are professional journalists. Theodore White, famous for his presidential-campaign histories, established his reputation as a journalist covering China, whose history he had studied extensively with John Fairbank at Harvard; he prided himself on his writing on the history of modern China. Journalists like White or like Theodore Draper (his book on the Iran-Contra affair, *A Very Thin Line*, is a first-class work of history) are important figures in the historical world. They write contemporary history—which has both positive and negative sides. On the one hand, they capture the immediacy of a situation, because

they are almost participants or can talk to the actual participants. What they write has a vividness that no historian dealing with the deeper past can have. On the other hand, they lack the perspective that a historian reaching back a hundred years would have. Their perspective is necessarily shallow. They don’t know, cannot know, all of the circumstances, nor what the eventualities will be—and so, in the end, the costs. But they certainly do convey, as I say, the vividness of events, the peculiar atmospheres and moods and the complex balances of personalities that only participants can truly grasp.

This kind of history attracts some of the best academic historians, too. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote a biography of John Kennedy very soon after the President was assassinated, and since he was a member of the White House staff and knew Kennedy well and admired him, his book, while partisan, has a wonderful immediacy and a sense of the personalities involved that no later historian would be able to capture. But inevitably—necessarily—there was much that he did not know, could not have known, about Kennedy and about the circumstances that shaped his life and brief presidency.

But the preponderance of historical writing does, of course, come from universities.

*Why should one study history?*

☞ B. B. ☞ That seems to divide into two questions:

why history should be studied, and why I—or you or any other individual—should study it in any but the way a normally well-informed person would.

History should be studied because it is an absolutely necessary enlargement of human experience, a way of getting out of the boundaries of one's own life and culture and of seeing more of what human experience has been. And it is the necessary, unique way of orienting the present moment, so that you know where you are and where we have come from and so you don't fantasize about the past and make up myths to justify some immediate purpose—so you can make decisions based to some extent on what has gone before, on knowledge of actual experience.

Accurate historical knowledge is essential for social sanity. Pathological systems—totalitarian regimes of whatever kind, of the left or the right—must systematically distort history in order to survive. Goebbels knew that; Stalin and his lackeys in the Soviet Writers' Guild knew that. So did George Orwell when he assigned the hero of *1984* the task of falsifying the past. Society's need for history, as complete and objective as possible, is obvious.

Why anyone in particular should study history is a different question. My answer to that is that you should study it—beyond what any informed person should know—if it interests you. Somebody's got to study it thoroughly and systematically if our society is to keep its sanity, its sense of reality and self-awareness, but I think

the individuals who study history professionally should do so because it attracts them, because it satisfies them intellectually. If it doesn't interest one, there are many other things to devote oneself to.