

# The Timeless Past: Some Anglo-American Historical Preconceptions

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The focus on memory in this issue of the *Journal of American History* reflects rising interest in a kind of past that historians seldom address explicitly, even though history is mainly grounded in memory. Scrutiny of the ways in which recollection and recall shape images of past and present could help historians to bring their own concerns more visibly in line with those of the public at large. The *Journal's* editor suggests that since "the ways that individuals shape, omit, distort, recall, and reorganize their memories" closely resemble the ways that historians keep, interpret, and transmit social memories, "memory itself offers one possible way to link popular audiences and professional historians."

Individual and collective pasts have much in common, as attested by analogies frequently drawn between personal life histories and national chronicles. But the analogies should not lead us to overlook the profound differences. What we know of the past through memory is largely private and personal. What we know of the past through the study of history is mainly collective and capable of being tested against accessible sources. That is why likening these two routes to the past distresses those historians who "know history to be hard work while recollection seems passive, noninferential, and unverified."<sup>1</sup>

Other factors differentiate the professional study of history from that of memory. Psychologists, psychoanalysts, and other practitioners of memory focus on the processes of recollection and on the motives and biases that reshape memories. Historians and other practitioners of the collective past have traditionally inquired mainly into what may actually have happened, rather than reasons for imagining or pretending that things were otherwise.

The public at large, however, tends to view history through the same distorting lenses that filter their own memories. The collective past is apprehended as a per-

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<sup>1</sup> Louis O. Mink, "Everyman His or Her Own Annalist," in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago, 1981), 233-39, esp. 234; David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985), 210-14.

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sonal and deeply felt extension of the present, and the events and viewpoints of by-gone times are seen and judged in today's perspectives. Historical understanding among the general public, including most of the educated minority, embraces biases more closely akin to popular modes of memory than to procedures customary among historians.

My aim is to consider the perdurable perspectives on the historical past held by public figures, scholars in cognate disciplines, and the media generally in both America and Britain. It is not my intent to find fault with these patently anachronistic viewpoints, but rather to indicate their pervasiveness and their perceived utility. There is no true past out there waiting to be accurately reconstructed; as the editors say of memory, so is history "socially constructed, not an objective record to be retrieved." Everyone uses the past creatively, historians along with the rest. But Everyman does it differently, and if historians are to reach audiences beyond the boundaries of their discipline, they need, as Michael Frisch so effectively shows elsewhere in this issue, to be cognizant of the screens through which historical information and ideas are commonly filtered.

Popular historical preconceptions embrace four often conjoined views. One is the notion of a timeless past until recently devoid of change, save for trivial or cyclic operations. Another is of a past that mirrors the present and that should be read back from it, reflecting eternal and universal causes, virtues, and vices. The third is of an unprogressive past to be disowned as a swamp of stagnant tradition or superstitious error. The fourth comprises perspectives that sharply distinguish one's own national or cultural pasts from those of other societies, enabling one either to extol traditional stasis or to deplore primitives' lack of progress. These perspectives go beyond the "Whig fallacy" immortalized by Herbert Butterfield, that is, history in which a triumphant elite legitimizes the present by using the past as origin, precursor, and anticipation. All of these perspectives are present-centered in a still broader sense; they misinterpret historical sources by viewing them through the categories, even if not the values, of the present.<sup>2</sup>

Access to modern historical materials and insights has scarcely tempered earlier perspectives on the past and its bearing on the present; heightened interest in history has, if anything, augmented these long-held preconceptions. Eschewing modern historical modes of explanation, professionals, policy experts, and public figures iterate ahistorical and unhistorical views. Thus Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May endorse Thucydides' dictum that "human nature remains constant [as do] dilemmas of human governance," and Britain's minister of the environment, time traveling in twentieth-century glasses, concludes that "a million years ago, this

<sup>2</sup> Present-centeredness or presentism goes beyond the present-mindedness implicit in any view we take of the past. See Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931); David L. Hall, "In Defense of Presentism," *History and Theory*, 18 (no. 1, 1979), 1-15; Adrian Wilson and T. G. Ashplant, "Whig History and Present-Centred History," *Historical Journal*, 31 (March 1988), 1-16; Adrian Wilson and T. G. Ashplant, "Present-Centred History and the Problem of Historical Knowledge," *ibid.* (June 1988), 253-74; and P. R. Coss, "Debate: British History: Past, Present—and Future?" *Past and Present* (no. 119, 1988), 171-83.

country was not a place where you would have wanted to live."<sup>3</sup> The past is to be seen and understood, such statements imply, in the same terms as the present.

Custodians of public history, managers of heritage, teachers of schoolchildren, social scientists in general, even some professional historians articulate presentist, pre-historicist, whiggish, and other perspectives quite at odds with sophisticated historical understanding today. Such views are seldom consciously held or clearly articulated. And they often reflect mutually incompatible assumptions about the past, just as one 1950s history text showed the United States both as "perfect and yet making progress all the time."<sup>4</sup> Despite irreconcilable contradictions, these positions coalesce into conjoint tenets of faith.

Most of these perspectives were part and parcel of historians' own thinking a century ago, if not more recently. Dorothy Ross has shown how ranking nineteenth-century American historians grafted the Teutonic seed theory onto an older messianic exceptionalism. Revalidating Puritan millenarianism, they reanimated faith that "original sinlessness" secured Americans alone against time's corrosive influence. Since historians themselves continued well into the twentieth century to view American history as the unfolding of a divine and immutable mission, it is not surprising that many Americans still cleave to their redemptive escape from the toils of history.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, popular politicians as well as the popular media assure us that American values and political institutions have remained constant since revolutionary days, if not before. It is Ronald Reagan's central credo that Americans are now, as always, God's chosen people, and George Bush has saddled the Founding Fathers with a Pledge of Allegiance that was in fact invented a century after their time. It is this supposed constancy that gives the American past its dynamic salience for the present.

Current debate over the meaning of the Constitution exemplifies this bent. Because it is less well known than the Revolution, the Constitution offers an even better template for remaking the past in the image of present ideals. By the late nineteenth-century, as Michael Kammen has shown, the Constitution had become a timeless credo, its framers shorn of their own historical context, much as former attorney general Edwin Meese III recently divested James Madison of eighteenth-century foibles. Finding in the Constitution the unaltered truths of American politics, believers in the doctrine of original intent attribute to it "timeless and universal meaning embodied in the philosophical aims of the Founders and discoverable through textual exegesis," much as Fundamentalist Protestants do with the Bible.

In their view, to treat ideas in the context of the times and places they occurred, as historians usually strive to do, is "obscurantist historicism" that precludes serious engagement with the ideas themselves. Lacking "any feel for history and what history does," such constitutional fundamentalists fail to recognize the *difference* of the eighteenth century, the absence of deliberate consensus in the document that emerged, or the accretive processes that have subsequently transformed the meaning of the Constitution.<sup>6</sup>

But those who reprobate the original intent approach likewise read the present back into the past; their modes of historical explanation differ mainly in assigning credit and debit to different parties. To them the Framers are not saints but sinners, the Constitution itself almost as corrupt as William Lloyd Garrison's "covenant with Death and Agreement with Hell." Thurgood Marshall finds it disgraceful that the Framers proclaimed liberty in the name of a minority—excluding women and blacks. Another black judge assails the Constitution's "devastating ambiguity" and its drafters' "duplicitous high-sounding words about justice [while] maintaining a system of slavery." That Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Patrick Henry "could create a society where a slave would have her child snatched away from her" struck him as a "monstrous contradiction."<sup>7</sup>

Both sides seem unaware that the Founding Fathers did not create their society *de novo*, but were born into it, imbibed its values from childhood, and sought to codify most of them. They were folk of their time, no less than we of ours; for them to see slaves and women as inferior was not hypocritically discordant, but comfortably accordant, with their professions of liberty.

Similar anachronisms are legion. History is routinely modernized to render the past more accessible. The audiovisual show at Minute Man National Historical Park in Massachusetts presents the events of April 19, 1775, in the staccato style of modern newscasting. This achieves an intimacy that brings visitors into the act. But it fails to alert them to a crucial difference: news two centuries ago was spread at a different tempo and understood in ways quite unlike our own. Conned into thinking they are reliving the event exactly as it happened back then, modern audiences gain rapport with the revolutionary past at the cost of any awareness of temporal distance and hindsight.

Many outdoor history museums expressly liken past to present. The staff of the Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer in Grand Island, Nebraska, considers it "im-

<sup>6</sup> Michael Kammen, *A Machine That Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture* (New York, 1986); Gordon S. Wood, "The Fundamentalists and the Constitution," *New York Review of Books*, Feb. 18, 1988, pp. 33-40. Appropriated early on by the conservative establishment, the Constitution bicentennial engendered contempt—and boredom—among much of the intelligentsia, historians included. See Jamie Kitman and Ruth Yodaiken, "Celebrating (Yawn) the Constitution: Bicentennial Bust," *Nation*, July 2/9, 1988, pp. 1, 14-21; Warren Leon, "Some Thoughts on Museums and the Constitution," *Museum News*, 65 (Aug. 1987), 25-26; *New York Times*, Dec. 22, 1987, sec. B, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Kammen, *Machine That Would Go of Itself*, 98. For Thurgood Marshall's views, see *London Times*, May 22, 1987, p. 14. For Judge A. Leon Higginbotham's, see Jacqueline Tasch, "Black Americans and the Constitution: An Alternative Vision," *CAAS Newsletter*, 10 (Spring 1987), 1, 8-10. On the background to black views of the Constitution, see Leon Litwack, "Trouble in Mind: The Bicentennial and the Afro-American Experience," *Journal of American History*, 74 (Sept. 1987), 315-37.

<sup>3</sup> Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York, 1986), 265; Nicholas Ridley, "The Future of the Public Heritage," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 135 (1987), 675.

<sup>4</sup> Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1980), 178.  
<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Ross, "Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Historical Review*, 89 (Oct. 1984), 909-28; David Glassberg, "History and the Public: Legacies of the Progressive Era," *Journal of American History*, 73 (March 1987), 957-80. The term "original sinlessness" is from Garry Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home* (New York, 1987).

portant that the visitors know that the problems of the people in 1880 are still very much the same problems of the people in 1980—that is, farm prices and energy. The evident absurdity of that assertion highlights the reason for making it: erasing the time gap will put the visitor in the pioneers' frame of mind. A 1975 history text exhibits similar time warp empathy: "People in all our communities today have serious problems, just as slaves had problems before the Civil War." The past is made meaningful by being dragged out of context into the present.<sup>8</sup>

Equating history with fragments of popular culture familiar from memory and media replay likewise endears the American past. Famous film representations of historic features and events are more recognizable and convincing than the authentic, original lineaments. Many viewers seem less impressed by Charles Lindbergh's original *Spirit of St. Louis* in the Smithsonian Institution than by the plane Jimmy Stewart flew in the movie, for "this, after all, is the only one they *saw* crossing the ocean on film." The Alamo mural that until recently commemorated the battle there substituted Hollywood faces for those of the actual heroes, with John Wayne playing Davy Crockett. "Catch up on history!" urges a magazine from Connecticut, where "history comes alive in an unborning manner." Connecticut is "justifiably proud [of] the lollipop, the hamburger, the cotton gin, vulcanized rubber, and all-night 'I-love-Lucy' festivals"—all invented there; "the first American pizza was served in Connecticut."<sup>9</sup>

The pizza and the lollipop palliate the ponderous Constitution. The national chronicle is considered too large-scale, too abstract for most people to identify with; the public is led instead to focus on the private, domestic past. The first exhibit visitors see on entering Minute Man Park headquarters features a wooden darning egg, a needle holder, a detachable pocket, and an old comb, with the legend: "Life was a daily thing. Battles only temporary. But both went on while colonists waited out the war." This domesticates the Revolution. But it offers no historical events—only universal processes. At Valley Forge, history becomes timeless human nature. According to the display label, the soldiers encamped there over the winter of 1777–1778 "demonstrated the universal desire of the human spirit in its pursuit for freedom and self-determination." As Daniel Czitrom puts it for comparable Civil War displays, instead of social history we get "*Dynasty* set in the 1860s."<sup>10</sup>

Attributing present modes of thought and action to the past is not exclusive to judges and educators and park curators. Some archaeologists, presumably historically trained, interpret Narragansett Indian remains in a Rhode Island cemetery in much the same fashion. Continuities with earlier skeletal postures and grave goods

<sup>8</sup> Warren Rodgers, educational director, Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, to David Lowenthal, Nov. 19, 1980 (in David Lowenthal's possession); FitzGerald, *America Revised*, 162n.

<sup>9</sup> Wills, *Reagan's America*, 375; Michael Wallace, "Ronald Reagan and the Politics of History," *Tikkun*, 2 (1987), 13–18, 127–31, esp. 128n; "Catch Up on Connecticut," *Connecticut*, 49 (June 1986), 100.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Franco and Millie Rahn, "Who's Teaching History?" *History News*, 42 (Sept.–Oct. 1987), 7–11, esp. 11. On attitudes toward events and processes in history, see François Furet, "Beyond the *Annales*," *Journal of Modern History*, 55 (Sept. 1983), 389–410; Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 16–18.

lead them to claim that seventeenth-century Narragansetts—remarkably like their descendants—maintained tribal identity and actively resisted white assimilation.

That interpretation suits present-day Narragansetts, for pride in identity and federal privileges reward modern continuity with like-minded ancestors. But how do the archaeologists achieve so neat a concurrence with current minority virtues? To legitimate the Narragansett as an autonomous group in the twentieth century and "reproduce social relations in the past as a mirror of social relations in the present," an archaeological critic charges, they "ignor[ed] certain dimensions of the ethno-historic and archaeological database" and denied the known "history of interracial and intercultural synthesis." What moved them to posit "group solidarity and cohesiveness" against European pressures, he suggests, was not simply empathy with deprived native Americans; they needed to provide an explanation congenial to the Indians lest they subsequently be denied access to the site.<sup>11</sup>

Current minority virtues similarly explain past ethnography at the American Indian Archaeological Institute in Washington, Connecticut. Captions declare that "it is necessary to know that there never was oppression and colonization without native resistance"; the "it is necessary" alerts the visitor to the present-day import of the message. The "possible proof" is based on two presentist suppositions about the native American pottery figurines shown: that their "modest postures" reflect efforts to protect Indian culture and that the preponderance of women among them reflects tribal response to assimilation forced on the men (women "were so frequently symbolized in Shantok pottery" because they had become "leaders in a movement to reject the values, desires, and laws of the colonists").<sup>12</sup>

Thus archaeologists too remake the past in the mold they favor for the present. Today's Indianist and feminist values are ascribed to people of earlier times. The past is thereby rendered not only familiar and comprehensible but also accountable and controllable.

Many Americans thus conflate past with present only for particular cultures, notably their own. In this they echo Ross's nineteenth-century historians. The belief that Americans are uniquely exempt from temporal change and decay justifies ahistorical chauvinism of the Reagan variety noted above.

On the other hand, many vouchsafe historical progress to Americans and "advanced" Europeans alone, relegating "traditional," "primitive," and "backward" Orientals and Africans to eternal stagnation. In this exceptionalist vision, science

<sup>11</sup> Paul A. Robinson, Mark A. Kelley, and Patricia E. Rubertone, "Preliminary Biocultural Interpretations from a Seventeenth-Century Narragansett Indian Cemetery in Rhode Island," in *Cultures in Contact: The Impact of European Contacts on Native American Cultural Institutions, A.D. 1000–1800*, ed. William W. Fitzhugh (Washington, 1985), 107–30, esp. 109; Michael S. Nassaney, "An Epistemological Enquiry into Some Archaeological and Historical Interpretations of 17th Century Native American-European Relations," in *Archaeological Approaches to Cultural Identity*, ed. Stephen J. Shennan (London, 1989), 76–93, esp. 84–85.

<sup>12</sup> Exhibit captions, American Indian Archaeological Institute, Washington, Connecticut, July 1987; Russell G. Handsman, "Material Things and Social Relations: Toward an Archaeology of 'Anti-Structures,'" Conference on New England Archaeology Newsletter (Washington, Conn., 1987), 5. By contrast, the Euro-African decor of tobacco pipes from early colonial Virginia and Maryland, formerly thought to be Indian, is now held to "reflect close contact and cooperative craftsmanship between Africans and English on 17th-century plantations"; *International Herald Tribune*, July 14, 1988, p. 7.

and technology guide Americans toward material and moral perfection. Other peoples remain essentially unchanged over centuries, if not millennia. The distinction stems largely from WASPish racial ascription. American concepts of traditional backwardness have the same nineteenth-century roots as British relegation of native races to permanent, childlike dependency. Up to the fifteenth (1950) edition of his standard history of architecture, Sir Banister Fletcher dismissed non-Western buildings as unimportant, because "non-historical." Fletcher's views live on in the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper's imprimatur:

Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present, there is none, or very little. . . . The history of the world, for the last five centuries, in so far as it has significance, has been European history.

In America, the technological advances of the twentieth century are held to "separat[e] modern man once and for all from his primitive ancestors"—and also from still-surviving primitive peoples.<sup>13</sup>

Archetypal images in the *National Geographic* magazine highlight the contrasting stereotypes of progress and stagnation. In images illustrating our own "evolutionary progress . . . by contrast with the evolutionary arrest of Others," American archaeologists are shown next to traditional peoples closely resembling their remote forebears who crafted the treasures (in *National Geographese*, all relics are treasures) that the archaeologists have recovered. The primitive lineal descendants appear unchanged or degenerated from the ancestral type: "Though kingdoms rise and fall, these Kurdish ferrymen carry on"; "Across the gulf of countless generations, the Minoan love of dance still finds expression in Crete." The emphasis is always on the changelessness of backward peoples. Joan Gero and Dolores Root note the reiterated equation "between what is unearthed and [contemporary] native material culture, between the indigenous technology and what was practised millennia before, between a modern physiognomy and physical characteristics depicted in antiquity." It is only *we* who continually evolve—an evolution that ironically enables *us* to unearth *their* past and reveal how timelessly unaltered is *their* present.<sup>14</sup>

Historical progress thus differentiates Americans, in their view, from traditional peoples. But not all Americans applaud such progress. Many consider it chimerical or destructive. Hankering after the preindustrial balance of peoples who supposedly aimed, not to conquer, but to live in harmony with nature, they regard historical change as an infection to be eliminated—once the life-enhancing past is restored. Resentment against, and rejection of, history as false progress is not solely American, of course, but it is most powerfully articulated in wilderness and environmental ethics movements in the United States.

<sup>13</sup> Banister Fletcher, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* (New York, 1950), 888; Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (London, 1965), 11; Arthur P. Moella, "The Museum That Never Was: Anticipations of the Smithsonian's Museum of History and Technology," paper delivered at the conference, "Collections and Culture: Museums and the Development of American Life," Woodrow Wilson Center, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Oct. 1987, p. 15 (in Lowenthal's possession).

<sup>14</sup> Joan Gero and Dolores Root, "Public Presentations and Private Concerns: Archaeology in the Pages of *National Geographic*," in *The Politics of the Past*, ed. Peter Gathercole and David Lowenthal (London, in press).

Such proto-ecological perspectives echo an earlier faith in the ordered stability of nature and society, a pervasive dread of the contingent, the unpredictable, the uncontrollable—what Mircea Eliade termed the "terror of history." Historical change conjures up an unknown future from which many instinctively recoil.

Irreversible human damage to the biosphere—species extinction, the greenhouse effect, ozone depletion, nuclear radiation—now seem especially threatening. But environmental crusaders are not the only enemies of historical change. Following the nineteenth-century dictates of John Ruskin and William Morris, devotees of architectural and artifact preservation also enshrine a stable past never to be permanently altered. Restoration and renovation are allowed only insofar as things can be returned to their prior state; irreversibility is unforgivable.<sup>15</sup> Yet irreversibility is a constant and essential concomitant of life. We continually make decisions that preclude some prospects and foreclose others. History is by definition irrevocable.

Traditionalist nostalgia pervades social science too. Edwin L. Wade recounts how anthropologists in the 1920s and 1930s sought to erase the injuries of recent change from Hopi Indian folkways. To reverse history and promote the revival of purely traditional crafts, members of the staff at the Museum of Northern Arizona monitored goods at an annual arts and crafts fair to ensure their authenticity. Aniline dyes introduced by earlier traders were banned in favor of traditional vegetable dyes; basket shapes preferred by tourists were scrapped for old-time flat ware. When the reversions proved uneconomic and unenforceable, the museum introduced prehistoric Anasazi and Mimbres pottery motifs among Acoma potters; those thirteenth-century designs were touted as revivals of ancestral art, although the earlier and later cultures were demonstrably unconnected. Those efforts, revivalist and restorative, aimed to buttress tradition against modern change. Historical change in traditional cultures was considered a western taint—to be eradicated by westerners.<sup>16</sup>

When tradition is found, anthropologists are apt to exaggerate it. The old features, and hence the conservatism, of the "San Tomas" pueblo dwellers are emphasized by stressing their traditional hunting and gathering and agriculture, while avoiding any mention of the fact that most of them get their food by driving to Piggly Wiggly; traditional dance performances are closely monitored, but the same Indians' attendance at Anglo discos in Anglo clothes is ignored. The push for tradition came first and foremost from the whites. As an Indian informant put it:

<sup>15</sup> I discuss these views in David Lowenthal, "Awareness of Human Impacts: Changing Attitudes and Emphases," in *The Earth As Transformed by Human Action*, ed. B. L. Turner II et al. (New York, in press). See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* (Princeton, 1954); Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 12–13.

<sup>16</sup> Edwin L. Wade, "The Ethnic Art Market in the American Southwest, 1880–1980," in *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*, ed. George W. Stocking, Jr. (Madison, 1985), 167–91. A recent effort to protect authentic Indian crafts against contamination by outside influences in what remains of Santa Fe's traditional market has come to similar grief. As in the 1930s, so in the 1980s, protection has resulted in restricting the scope and content of Indian crafts and freezing stylistic development. One potter complains she cannot now use a pottery wheel without being chastised as inauthentic. Deirdre Evans-Pritchard, "The Portal Case: Authenticity, Tourism, Traditions, and the Law," *Journal of American Folklore*, 100 (July–Sept. 1987), 287–92.

We have to learn how to be Indian again. First, the whites came and stripped us. Then, they come again and "find" us. Now, we are paid to behave the way we did when they tried to get rid of us.

But when tradition proves nonviable, old *National Geographic* stereotypes are trotted out in praise of American-style progress. "Maybe we made a mistake" in trying to maintain Indian cultures, Reagan confessed to Soviet students in 1988. "Maybe we should not have humored them in that, wanting to stay in that kind of primitive life-style." In Reagan's view, history is an Amtrak express that takes all passengers—but they must really want to travel.<sup>17</sup>

American exceptionalism is simply one variant of a widespread tendency to exempt one's own people (or other favored groups) from history's contingent processes. (It is apparently easier to recognize contingency—to see history as reflecting the play of chance, rather than proceeding from inexorable causes to predetermined ends—in the experience of people for whom one feels neither hatred nor love.) Disclaimers by British historians notwithstanding, the past as perceived and used in Britain exhibits biases and distortions as pronounced, as general as those among educated Americans.

Even British academics—some historians among them—remain attached to timeless or to presentist pasts. Consider the functionalist tradition until recently orthodox in British social anthropology. Following Bronislaw Malinowski, British anthropologists of the 1920s and 1930s studied tribal societies as closed and immutable systems, unchanged until European contact. Malinowski's heirs heeded his injunction to trace the regularities of all that was fixed and permanent in tribal life. Through native memories and mementoes they sought to reconstitute the precontact "ethnographic present"—the "authentic" tribal life held to have existed before European intrusion. In common with American salvage anthropologists, the British took on the duty of saving the relic folkways of holistic and timeless peoples uncontaminated by contact.<sup>18</sup>

Such societies *had* to be static because they operated as functional wholes: Émile Durkheim's concept of organic unity obliged functionalists to ignore historical change. And positing precolonial societies as stable over time enabled ethnographers to view *existing* primitives as survivals from earlier epochs, in line with the evolutionary uniformitarianism of E. B. Tylor. "While *we* had moved on to greater and greater technical, economic and political mastery over the environment," in Edmund Leach's words, "these 'other' people had somehow stood still." We recognize our primitive friends of the *National Geographic*.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> M. Estelle Smith, "The Process of Sociocultural Continuity," *Current Anthropology*, 23 (April 1982), 127–35; *International Herald Tribune*, June 3, 1988, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, "Anthropology and History in the 1980s," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 12 (Autumn 1981), 227–52, esp. 229–32; Robert Borofsky, *Making History: Pukapukan and Anthropological Constructions of Knowledge* (Cambridge, Eng., 1987), 45–46, 53; Marshal Sahlins, *Islands of History* (London, 1987), xviii; Jacob W. Gruber, "Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology," *American Anthropologist*, 72 (Dec. 1970), 1289–99.

<sup>19</sup> Edmund Leach, "Tribal Ethnography: Past, Present, Future," *Association of Social Anthropologists Monograph* 27, ed. Maryon Macdonald et al. (London, in press). (Note continues on following page.)

The ideal of a stable ethnographic present endured well into the 1970s. Even anthropologists who invoked history found it hard to shake off the image of unchanging native cultures; confining their histories mainly *within* tribes and archaic kingdoms, notes Bernard Cohn, "anthropologists still always end their narratives with the coming of the destructive Europeans."<sup>20</sup> And the persistence of the romantic illusion that an untouched primordial tribe might still survive somewhere accounts for the ease with which scholars were duped in 1971 by the "Stone Age" Tasaday of the Philippines.

Turning *National Geographic* perspectives on their head, British anthropologists (like their American counterparts) deplored European perversion of tribal folkways and sought to protect remaining "specimens of antique 'cultures.'" If it was too late to preserve the past, "you could write books about what you . . . imagined it had been like," and Leach adds that anthropologists wrote "as if they believed that the original pre-colonial tribal societies still existed inside a carapace of Western bureaucracy and technology. Chip the colonial shell away and you will get back to the traditional core."<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century administrators tried to do just that. Once the chaos of conquest was tidied away, British imperial officials in Asia and Africa undertook to reinstate previous tribal identities and revalidate age-old customs. Terence Ranger remarks that "what were called customary law, customary land-rights, customary political structures and so on were in fact all invented by colonial codification." Nonetheless, those inventions reflected British imperial faith that tradition was as immemorial among African tribesmen as in the hallowed precincts of English common law. From British officials, missionaries, and texts, for example, Fiji chiefs relearned their "true and ancestral traditions"—including the *Kaunitoni* migration myth tracing their Fijian origins by way of Tanganyika back to Thebes.<sup>22</sup>

It was to their own countrymen that British folklorists, following Tylor, attached the cachet of aboriginal survivals. In many English villages scholars found "ancient and unchanging links with a lost rural past when the folk in organic communities responded simply and directly to the rhythms of nature." Modern folklore observances unknowingly preserved fragments of primordial truths wrapped in later perversions; it was the folklorists' self-imposed duty to make the fragments whole and restore them to contemporary culture.<sup>23</sup>

See Margaret T. Hodgen, *The Doctrine of Survivals: A Chapter in the History of Scientific Method in the Study of Man* (London, 1936), 12–14, 38–53; Margaret T. Hodgen, *Anthropology, History, and Cultural Change* (Tucson, 1974), 21–24; Peter Munz, *Our Knowledge of the Growth of Knowledge: Popper or Wittgenstein?* (London, 1985), 45, 138–40.

<sup>20</sup> Cohn, "Anthropology and History in the 1980s," 252.

<sup>21</sup> Leach, "Tribal Ethnography." In a contrasting stereotype, prehistoric chiefs in Europe and the Aegean are now depicted as egocentric, pushy individualists stirring sluggish peasants toward civilization. See John L. Bindliff, "Structuralism and Myth in Minoan Studies," *Antiquity*, 58 (March 1984), 33–38.

<sup>22</sup> Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, Eng., 1983), 211–62, esp. 247–51; Cohn, "Anthropology and History in the 1980s," 239–40.

<sup>23</sup> Georgina Boyes, "Cultural Survivals Theory and Traditional Customs: An Examination of the Effects of Privileging on the Form and Perception of Some English Calendar Customs," paper delivered at the symposium,

Since folk life was by definition static, the folk were ipso facto conservative and uncreative, "living depositories of ancient history." When folklorists realized that, contrary to this theory, folklore *had* changed and was changing still, they dismissed such alterations and accretions as degenerative. As late as 1968, leading folk song experts were asserting that "folk society and folk art do not accept, reflect, or value change."<sup>24</sup>

Since they considered only the most ancient elements authentic and valid, British folklorists exhorted villagers to strip off subsequent corruptions and replace them with original verities. And though few villagers had heard of the Celtic fertility rituals the professionals exalted, they often deferred to expert judgments and changed things accordingly. Thus the annual souling play at Antrobus adopted Arnold Boyd's theory that characters reincarnated the Halloween ghosts of their ancestors; Violet Alford revived (that is, inaugurated) the Marshfield Mummers' perambulation as an inviolate magic circle; and the current local belief that the Castleton Garland ceremony (which celebrates the restoration of Charles II) goes back to Celtic sacrificial rites stems only from the 1977 visit of a persuasive Celticist. Thus to understand present-day British folklore, one must retrace the recent peregrinations of the folklorists whose purifications these observances now embody. The 1938 president of the Folklore Society who reproached the leader of the Padstow Hobby Horse festival for "spoiling" what should have been an ancient and unchanging fertility ritual might have been mollified to hear a villager, half a century after her own minatory visit, affirm that "it still means the same to us as it did a thousand years ago."<sup>25</sup>

The fetish of folkloric purity is by no means unique to Britain. For example, to strengthen modern continuity with classical roots and to confute the taunt that Greeks are naught but Slavs, Greek nationalists have purged village tales of supposedly extraneous Turkish and Balkan elements; Hellenic folklore and other rural survivals are treasured as repositories of ancient Greek virtues. But the Greek crusade reflects the beleaguered identity of a new nation-state in thrall to nostalgic philhellenism; British folklore revision stemmed from no such immediate political needs. It merely reflected the deep-seated British preference for fixed tradition over the flux of history.<sup>26</sup>

In reanimating certain Cook Islands traditions, British anthropologists in the 1930s behaved much like British folklorists at home. While doing fieldwork on

Pukapuka atoll, Ernest Beaglehole was disappointed to learn that the islanders were about to put on their annual biblical plays.

I . . . visualized us sitting all day in the hot sun . . . and I felt that it needed something more than David and Goliath to keep interest alive. So I put it to Makirai: Why not play for a change old Pukapukan stories, the story of Malotini for example, or the eight men of Ngake, or the Slaughter of the Yayake people? . . . and besides, the acting of them would help us to remember them more vividly when we came to write them down.

So the village elders jettisoned biblical for Pukapukan legends, which are still being performed (now alongside biblical tales) a half century later.<sup>27</sup>

The British nurtured their own preindustrial past as an ideal type of heritage, with the crippling effects on innovation and competitiveness laid bare by Martin J. Wiener. And they continue to celebrate fossilized, antediluvian ways of life. Underlying the British embrace of the past is the assumption that change has been only superficial; the essentials remain untouched by time. Devotion to precedent is unabated. Eighty years after Francis M. Cornford's *Microcosmographia Academica*, all Britain still seems to share his view: "Every public action which is not customary, either is wrong, or if it is right, is a dangerous precedent. It follows that nothing should ever be done for the first time."<sup>28</sup>

A few years ago I wanted to look at the will of Sir Christopher Codrington, seventeenth-century governor of the Leeward Islands; the will is in the Codrington Library of All Souls College, Oxford, Codrington's major legatee. The librarian invited me there to see it. When I came we chatted; he brought papers to my antique table; half an hour later he came back, perturbed. "By the by," he asked, "you've used our library before, haven't you?" "No," I said, "I'm afraid I haven't." "Oh," he said, "then I'm afraid you can't use it now." (It was all right in the end; an All Souls Fellow was hauled away from his tea to identify me.)

Devotion to tradition overrides historical truth in public commemorations. Finding that Francis Drake was to be cut down to size in the 1988 Armada celebrations, city officials in Plymouth assailed the National Maritime Museum for its "prissy" insistence on scrupulous accuracy, a mantle of truth assumed so as not "to offend the Spaniard now that they are in" the European Community. Plymouth was naturally outraged by the museum's determination to "dissolve old myths and prejudices," for "what Robin Hood is to Nottingham and Mickey Mouse to Disneyland, Francis Drake is to Plymouth."<sup>29</sup>

Devotion to precedent extends to the artifactual recovery of the past. Thus the raising of the Tudor flagship the *Mary Rose* resonated with traditions reinvented for

<sup>24</sup> "Making Exhibitions of Ourselves: Limits of Objectivity in Representation of Other Cultures," British Museum, London, Feb. 1986 (in Georgina Boyes's possession). See Hodgen, *Doctrine of Survivals*, 52-53, 105, 141-50; Richard M. Dorson, *The British Folklorists: A History* (Chicago, 1968), 225, 441-42.

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence Gomme and [A. B.] Gomme, *British Folk-Lore, Folk-Songs, and Singing-Games* (London, [1916]), 10; Roger D. Abrahams and George Foss, *Anglo-American Folksong Style* (Englewood Cliffs, 1968), 11.

<sup>26</sup> Boyes, "Cultural Survivals Theory and Traditional Customs"; Georgina Smith [Boyes], "Winster Morris Dance: The Sources of an Oikotype," in *Traditional Dance I*, ed. T. Buckland (Crewe, Eng., 1982), 93-108; M. M. Banks, "The Padstow May Festival," *Folk-Lore*, 49 (Dec. 1938), 392-94; Channel 4 [U.K.], "The Future of the Past," television program, June 22, 1986. Ms. Boyes has kindly shown me a draft chapter, "The Folk and How They Were Constructed," of her forthcoming book on English folk song revival.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Herzfeld, *Ours Once More: Folklore, Ideology, and the Making of Modern Greece* (Austin, 1982); Michael Herzfeld, "Law and 'Custom': Ethnography in Greek National Identity," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 3 (Oct. 1985), 167-85.

<sup>27</sup> Ernest Beaglehole, *Islands of Danger* (Wellington, 1944), 174; Borofsky, *Making History*, 142-43.

<sup>28</sup> Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge, Eng., 1983); Francis M. Cornford, *Microcosmographia Academica: Being a Guide for the Young Academic Politician* (1908; reprint, Cambridge, Eng., 1953), 15.

<sup>29</sup> *London Times*, Sept. 17, 1987, pp. 5, 11; *ibid.*, April 20, 1988, p. 22; *ibid.*, Jan. 30, 1988, p. 13; *London Sunday Times*, May 8, 1988, sec. G, p. 4.

the Falklands campaign. And traditionalism suffuses the heritage establishment, which portrays Britain as a nation with an already achieved historical identity that demands of the present only appropriate reverence and protection.<sup>30</sup>

The British working-class past is as timeless as the Tories'. When Labour leader Neil Kinnock excoriated the Conservative government's scheme for a poll tax as a reversion to the fourteenth century, he conjured up images of Wat Tyler and the Peasants' Revolt with which his party at once identified. Labourites too fancy themselves heirs to a timeless national tradition, a "continuity of struggles—by peasants, artisans, and workers for liberty, equality, and community," as one sympathizer put it. "The image of 'lost rights' which inspired popular movements from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century . . . may appear to be another Whig reading of the past," but at least "it is a Whig history from the bottom up." But Labourite traditionalism, conjuring up the vanished pre-Marxian solidarity of a proletariat spanning the centuries from Robin Hood through the striking Jarrow miners of 1928, has lost its appeal for many. Marxists, for example, now deplore the fact that "the Left remains profoundly wedded to the past."<sup>31</sup>

These examples reveal the chasm that separates "scientifically tested and literally accurate" academic history from the whiggish past deployed in British social science, politics, education, and heritage pursuits. The demise of the Whig interpretation of history is a widely accepted fact. But its arch-destroyer Butterfield himself later resurrected it during the dark days of World War II, for common law and the Whig interpretation "have worked together to tighten the bonds that hold the Englishman to his past—foster our love of precedent, our affection for tradition, our desire for gradualness in change." And David Cannadine finds present-mindedness in the 1980s as prevalent among Whig and Tory as among the earlier gentlemen-scholars "they so zealously disparage for precisely this error."<sup>32</sup>

These British perspectives on the past differ more in style than in substance from those in the United States, though whiggish chauvinism in the former and redemptive exceptionalism in the latter help to account for their distinctive national forms. The British take their heritage more for granted because it is largely indubitable, widely shared, and only slowly altered. Bygone feuds between Norman and Saxon, Celt and English, Protestant and Catholic scarcely disturb the general unanimity with which the past is apprehended, even from class to class. Given a consensuality

<sup>30</sup> Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London, 1985), 161–92; Patrick Wright, "Misguided Tours," *New Socialist* (no. 40, 1986), 32–34; Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London, 1987); Neal Ascherson, "Why 'Heritage' Is Right-Wing," *Observer*, Nov. 8, 1987, p. 13; Neal Ascherson, "'Heritage' as Vulgar English Nationalism," *Observer*, Nov. 29, 1987, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Harvey Kaye, "Our Island Story Retold," *London Guardian*, Aug. 3, 1987; Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, 151–57; "New Times," *Marxism Today*, 32 (Oct. 1988), 3. The Left "past" referred to was that of 1945, the "backward, conservative . . . old social-democratic order."

<sup>32</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *The Englishman and His History* (Cambridge, Eng., 1944), 72, 4; David Cannadine, "Viewpoint—British History: Past, Present—and Future?" *Past and Present* (no. 116, 1987), 169–91, esp. 174–75, 190. See Wilson and Ashplant, "Whig History," 1–2. Many similar points about the history profession in America are made by Theodore S. Hamerow, *Reflections on History and Historians* (Madison, 1987).

so pervasive, it is no surprise that history in Britain engenders few heroes or villains and seldom requires professions of allegiance or gestures of dissociation.<sup>33</sup>

By contrast, American heritage seems a minefield of partisan emotions. Relative brevity, insistence on documentary credos, glaring and enduring disparities between the lot of native and colonist, black and white, WASP and ethnic, North and South leave less room for consensus, occasion more bitter disputes over historical rights and wrongs. Given such polarized views, it is no surprise that history in the United States throws up a profusion of exemplary figures and spurs anachronistic reiterations of long-gone issues.<sup>34</sup>

But those differences scarcely affect my central premise. Common modes of thought about the past on both sides of the Atlantic remain antipathetic to the perspectives of most professional historians. Few nonhistorians conceive history as contingent and unpredictable, or the past as a cluster of realms distinct from the present, each with its own mentalities and sociocultural determinants. Instead, the public tends to see the past—its own or others' or both—as undifferentiated and unchanging. Present-day aims and deeds are regularly imputed to folk of earlier times; history is either denied efficacy or held to be preordained. Progress either leaves us helpless agents of overwhelming historical forces or arms us with a fiercely righteous faith that history is on our side.<sup>35</sup>

For many Anglo-Americans the idea of history does not embody change but excludes it. The dismissive phrase "he's history" implies something over and done with. In praising the Tutankhamen treasures shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York as "so fresh they kind of wipe out time," Thomas Hoving, formerly the museum's director, celebrated the obliteration of time, not its passage. A writer in quest of the quintessential English village required of it "a sense of history—of time standing still."<sup>36</sup>

Ahistorical perspectives flourish among scholars as well as laymen. And archaeologists, anthropologists, folklorists, history museum curators, heritage site managers, even some historians shape the forms such perspectives take in wider public discourse. Adopting ethnologists' focus on "repeated and expected events," *Annales* historians among others have emphasized stability, structural regularity, the local, the common—the stuff of Claude Lévi-Strauss's "cold" societies. And in "hot" societies where change is rapid, cumulative, and transformative, scholars now often focus

<sup>33</sup> Those who contest British history seem to me to share, more than most Americans, a general understanding over what the contest is about. Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, and Hewison, *Heritage Industry*, exemplify this consensus as much as they deplore it. For the view that British history is remote and unimpassioned, see Peter Laslett, "The Way We Think We Were," *Washington Post Book World*, March 30, 1986, pp. 5, 11.

<sup>34</sup> "The comparative lack of shared historical interest in the United States, or the weakness [of] national tradition—as opposed to particular ethnic, or religious, or regional traditions" is noted by Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York, 1978), 3.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Wallace, "The Politics of Public History," in *Past Meets Present: Essays about Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences*, ed. Jo Blatti (Washington, 1987), 37–53, esp. 40; Glassberg, "History and the Public," 970.

<sup>36</sup> Wills, *Reagan's America*, 284. For Thomas Hoving's remark, see Peter Carroll, "It Seemed Like Nothing Happened," *Antioch Review*, 41 (Winter, 1983), 5–19, esp. 10. *London Sunday Times*, Nov. 15, 1987, p. 41.

on supposed remnants of the immobile past: engulfed and marginalized peasants, women mired in domesticity, academics, artists, and bandits.<sup>37</sup>

Historical training and historiographical precepts leave embedded assumptions undisturbed even among those charged with applying and presenting history to the public. To employ the past as a stick with which to beat the present, or to deny it any efficacy whatever, or to exempt one's own past from processes at work in other cultures are entrenched and useful habits. They are unlikely to be displaced by sophisticated historians' perspectives that threaten to abandon claims to truth and relegate historical processes to limbos of uncertainty.<sup>38</sup>

It is no paradox that the growth of paraprofessional historical interests tends to foster, rather than to correct, such apprehensions of the nature of history. To justify and promote their own involvement with genealogy, antiquities, antiques, tourism, or the heritage of minorities and other special interest groups, many in the history business readily adopt unhistorical stances.

Meanwhile the technology and artistry of retrieving the past often fuel popular interest in bygone times to the detriment of historical understanding. And vivid experience gleaned through audiovisual displays, museum visits, heritage sight-seeing, and reenactments has for many enhanced, if not replaced, bookish historical knowledge.

It is currently fashionable, especially within the discipline, to blame historians themselves for this trend. Professionalism, overspecialization, fragmentation, introversion, and the treatment of history as a science are held to have cost history much of its former audience: "more concerned with trivial truth than with fertile error, . . . academic historians [are] writing more and more academic history which fewer and fewer people are actually reading," is Cannadine's transatlantic judgment. "About any new history book . . . written by a professor," say two Harvard professors, "the presumption should be that its intended audience is other professors." As a consequence, Trevor-Roper's prediction that "the layman . . . will turn aside from us, and seek interest and enlightenment elsewhere" is held to have come true; the public has shifted "away from the scholarly and towards the recreational, with all the trivialization that that may imply."<sup>39</sup>

While "textbook authors seem forever doomed . . . to roll their hard little rock of historical dogma up and down the minds of bored students everywhere," Thomas Schlereth finds history museum curators increasingly imaginative and innovative.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Le Goff, "The Historian and the Common Man," in *The Historian between the Ethnologist and the Futurologist*, ed. Jérôme Dumoulin and Dominique Moisi (Paris, 1973), 204-15; Cohn, "Anthropology and History in the 1980s," 252; Lawrence Stone, *The Past and the Present* (Boston, 1981), 91-96; Furet, "Beyond the *Annales*"; Smith, "Process of Sociocultural Continuity"; Marilyn Strathern, "Out of Context: The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology," *Current Anthropology*, 28 (June 1987), 251-81, esp. 258; Sally Falk Moore, "Explaining the Present: Theoretical Dilemmas in Processual Ethnography," *American Ethnologist*, 14 (Nov. 1988), 727-36, esp. 728.

<sup>38</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. William Glen-Doepel (London, 1979), 258-74.

<sup>39</sup> Cannadine, "Viewpoint—British History," 176-79; Neustadt and May, *Thinking in Time*, 264; H. R. Trevor-Roper, *History, Professional and Lay* (Oxford, 1957), 26; Neal Evans, "Debate—British History: Past, Present—and Future?" *Past and Present* (no. 119, 1988), 194-203, esp. 202.

"Just as there are poor history books, there are poor living history museums, events, films, games," confesses a reenactment enthusiast, but at least "there are no *dull* historical simulations." Who would not exchange the ponderous tome for the walkie-talkie that lets you "really . . . imagine that you have been mysteriously transported back through the centuries [where] there's never a dull moment"—a veritable time machine that "will always give you the ringside seat . . . at the greatest events of history—as well as some of history's more intimate moments."<sup>40</sup>

That popular interest in the past has deposed written history seems to me at best a misguided exaggeration, however. Both the past's intimacies and its great events are conveyed to millions by professional historians, whose skillful re-creations are no less absorbing to modern readers than those of the Bancrofts and the Parkmans, the Michelets and the Macaulays were to previous generations. Many modern historians rival the media and the museums in bringing the past to life again; the worlds of *Montaillou* and *Martin Guerre* thrill modern audiences with romance lent added force by historical verisimilitude.

If historians still play a major role before the ringside seats of the past, they also share responsibility for the circus shenanigans. What readers and viewers gain from these exotic forays into remote lives, whether guided by historians or by historical showmen, is not historical actuality; it is voyeuristic empathy. The vivid intimacies promote historical sympathy but attenuate historical understanding, underscoring universal constants of human feeling while obscuring or ignoring the particular social and cultural trends that both link the past with, and differentiate it from, the present.<sup>41</sup>

Modern quasi familiarity with the past, or at least with its simulacra, commingles past with present in novel ways. In vicariously retrieving and reliving earlier modes of everyday life along with the past's momentous events, millions express a concern with historical authenticity, for example, that fundamentally alters how relic artifacts and works of art are perceived, valued, and used. For reenactors, authenticity is the cardinal goal; as the English Civil War Society says, "we hope to be able to justify *everything*." An American reenactment buff feels that "willfully ignoring authenticity is a crime." So much does the public insist on historical authenticity that heritage projects personnel at Oxford "spent weeks calling experts to find out if the figure of Edmund Halley . . . would have one eye closed when gazing through his telescope." To be sure, these scruples have more to do with material minutiae than with historical context.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Schlereth, "Afterword," *Museum News*, 62 (Feb. 1984), 65; Jay Anderson, *The Living History Sourcebook* (Nashville, 1985), 444-48; Christopher Matthew, "Walkie Talkies," *Punch*, April 2, 1986, p. 44; brochure for Time Machine Tours Ltd. cassettes, 1988.

<sup>41</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis felt she had to remake the film, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, into a book. "The film was departing from the historical record, and I found this troubling. . . . These changes may have helped to give the film the powerful simplicity that had allowed the Martin Guette story to become a legend in the first place," but the film softened its contradictions and glossed over the sixteenth-century contexts. Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Harmondsworth, Eng., 1983), p. viii.

<sup>42</sup> English Civil War Society, leaflet at Kenilworth Castle garrisoning, Sept. 3, 1988 (in Lowenthal's possession); Jay Anderson, *Time Machines: The World of Living History* (Nashville, 1984), 192; *New York Times*, March 29,

Those unused to seeing historical processes as contingent and irreversible, yet also shaped by hindsight, can easily become obsessed with the notion that the past is timeless and pervasive, yet also personally accessible. The omnipresence of history in media and marketplace encourages the public to vacillate between nostalgic compulsion and self-protective amnesia.<sup>43</sup>

Nostalgia tempts people to see the past less as precedent than as alternative: not just what has happened but what could happen, an option still open. Characters in films like *Blazing Saddles* and *Blade Runner*, *Star Wars* and *Zelig* reenter the cinematic past as authentic natives; the popularity of *Back to the Future* reflects the prevailing penchant for reliving—and remaking—one's personal past. Until recently the believing time traveler—like Dorothy Eady (Om Seti), who “can't remember whether it's B.C. or A.D.”—was a rare eccentric; today such people seem to swim in the mainstream. An otherwise serious California college student recently confided in her philosophy teacher, “You were once a Cheyenne warrior in a previous existence, and I nursed you back to health after you'd been wounded by an arrow through your heart” (all he could manage to respond was “thank you”). A “medieval kissogram” messenger hauled into court as a drunken rowdy refused to remove his costume on the ground that he was a medieval knight; the court usher had to explain, “This is not a medieval court.”<sup>44</sup>

Seeming familiarity with even the least savory or commendable aspects of the past enhances its verisimilar appeal. Whatever the deficiencies of bygone times, they possess the supreme advantage of lacking the uncertainty of the present, because they are *over*. We can relive the past as a more satisfactory narrative because it is one that is completed. Because historians feel professionally compelled to give history a more rational shape than that of present crude experience, an ordered clarity contrasting with the chaos or imprecision of our own times, they themselves are partly responsible for confirming, if not generating, the illusion that the past has a pattern.<sup>45</sup>

The patterns we find in the past, whether historical or remembered, are patterns we ourselves fabricate on frameworks erected by intervening generations. But to suppose that something as precious as a received past is incapable of objective authenti-

1988, sec. B, pp. 1, 32. For other instances of authenticity, see Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 295–301. On the malign effects of the cult of authenticity among collectors, see Evan S. Connell, *The Connoisseur* (San Francisco, 1987).

<sup>43</sup> The terror of a past that can thus invade the present is conveyed in a fictional interchange: “The past was somehow too much for me. It rose up and overwhelmed me.” “The past would be too much for any of us, if it did not stay in its place.” Ivy Compton-Burnett, *The Present and the Past* (London, 1972), 99.

<sup>44</sup> Allison Graham, “History, Nostalgia, and the Criminality of Popular Culture,” *Georgia Review*, 38 (Summer, 1984), 348–64; Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 18. On these themes, see David Lowenthal, “Nostalgia Tells It Like It Wasn't,” in *The Imagined Past*, ed. Malcolm Chase and Chris Shaw (Manchester, 1989). On the Dorothy Eady story, see Jonathan Cott, *A Search for Omm Seti: A Story of Eternal Love* (New York, 1987); *International Herald Tribune*, Nov. 27, 1987, p. 5; *Harrow & Northwood Informer*, Feb. 19, 1988, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “The Historian as Participant,” *Daedalus*, 100 (Spring 1971), 339–57, esp. 354; W. Walter Menninger, “Say, It Isn't So: When Wishful Thinking Obscures Historical Reality,” *History News*, 40 (Dec. 1985), 10–13; Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 234–35.

cation goes against the grain. Hence we cling tenaciously to the past as a sanctuary for whatever versions of reality, particular or universal, progressive or unchanging, we seek to promote. And these old approaches seem validated not only by the *obiter dicta* of past historians but by uses of history common among today's social scientists, curators, and public historians. When the academic historian is unpersuasive, it is because the public finds his visions of the past not simply aloof, but deeply antithetical to traditional modes of utilizing the past—modes that confirm and celebrate the creatively supportive role of public memory.

# Workers and Managers at Studebaker

Power + Memory in Oral History

John Bodnar

No one who has conducted oral history interviews has escaped the question, "But how do you know it is true?" The issue of veracity remains important for anyone interested in analyzing oral expressions of memory in historical research. Obviously, memories are limited, and a complete reconstruction of the past through memory (or any other means) is not possible. Oral historians have generally combined the memories they recorded with other kinds of records or cross-checked their interview material with data gathered from other interviews. Their work has yielded extremely valuable insights into particular historical questions, but it has not eliminated the need to think carefully about what people actually remember about their past.

An analysis of the memories revealed in oral interviews with men and women who formerly worked at the Studebaker Corporation automobile plant in South Bend, Indiana, offers suggestions about the nature or "truth" of the memories captured in oral interviews. This material, recorded mostly between 1984 and 1985, allows not only a partial reconstruction of the traditional history of labor and management at the plant, but, more importantly for our purposes, a partial reconsideration of the social construction of memory: the interviews can be read not only to discover what people remembered but also to discover how they went about the process of organizing and creating their memories in the first place.

David Lowenthal has written that the "contingent and discontinuous facts of the past become intelligible only when woven together as stories." Indeed, what appears most compelling about the Studebaker memories is not the details of life in the plant, which was much like life in other auto plants, but the "narrative structures" or central plots in which individual memories and discrete bits of evidence were placed. Those plots actually reveal the way in which workers and managers at Studebaker gave meaning to their experiences; they organized the past for both the historical actor and the interviewer who attempted to understand it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985), 218; Edward M. Bruner, "Ethnography as Narrative," in *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (Urbana, 1986), 143-49.

Memories of work and life at Studebaker were neatly arranged by workers and managers into three major plots, all corresponding roughly to the structure of power in a given period. Memory was a cognitive device by which historical actors sought to interpret the reality they had lived—and, it appears, they could never do so alone, without reference to a social context. I mean that the details they recalled were varied, but the themes to which they linked those details often represented the interests of powerful institutions as much as they did the interpretations of ordinary people. The memories of Studebaker workers and managers, in other words, tend to confirm Edward M. Bruner's assertion that narratives are not only structures of meaning but structures of power as well.<sup>2</sup>

In recounting the first plot, which corresponded approximately to the two decades prior to World War II, individuals tended to describe a relatively stable and orderly world where tension and conflict were acknowledged but subjugated. In this story powerful institutions—the company and the union—cooperated to keep Studebaker solvent during the difficult days of the 1930s.

In the second plot, however, which described events and experiences from World War II to the closing of the plant in 1963, the dominant narrative stressed disorder and tension, rather than stability. Almost everyone remembered that period as a direct contrast to the prewar era. In their story, the symbiotic prewar relationship between the company and the union weakened considerably, and workers appeared divided in their loyalties between the two institutions. Disorder was more characteristic of the structure of power and, therefore, the structure of memory.

In recounting a final plot, covering the period from 1963 until the arrival of oral historians in the 1980s, people recalled the coexistence of order and disorder. Unlike the stories of the two earlier eras, which were interlaced by events at the workplace, accounts of the last period revealed more of people's personal lives. In this instance, revealed memory was more layered, more expressive of varied public and private experiences, and less dominated by the fate and viewpoints of powerful institutions.

The discovery that memories from the Studebaker project were tied intimately to structures of power and that individual memory was heavily influenced by positions and interpretations stated in public is crucial to this essay. In the first place, those findings suggest that individuals did not remember alone; they discussed the events of their experience and formulated explanations of what had occurred in their lives with other people. In this paper I refer to that discussion and formulation as *social discourse*. In the second place, the tying of discrete pieces of personal experience and memory to larger plots or narrative structures suggests that in the past powerful forces had attempted to influence, shape, and order the meaning of events, and, by implication, the way in which they would be remembered. Institutions that usually operated at the level of the political entered the personal level and influenced people's thoughts and memories. It is that relationship between the individual experience as encountered and retold and the individual's confrontation

<sup>2</sup> Bruner, "Ethnography as Narrative," 144.

with dominant institutions and perspectives that this essay examines in order to explore the process of creating memory that can enter oral historical accounts.

The possibility that much material transmitted in oral history has been previously discussed and that such recollections contain complex bits of private, collective, and hegemonic perspectives has already been suggested by scholars in other disciplines who use memory as a source. As the anthropologist Judith Modell noted, scholars who rely on field interviews have come to realize that orally transmitted data has been shaped over a long period of time through considerable thought and discussion. In a similar way Samuel Schrager, a folklorist, concluded after interviewing pioneer settlers and lumber workers in Idaho that his subjects were drawing on prior conversations they had with one another. Schrager felt his interviews provided a new context for telling "preexistent narratives."<sup>3</sup>

If oral histories contain mostly stories that have previously been told before or subjected to public discourse, some historical agents may have exerted more influence on the shaping of a given story than others. This point is suggested by a number of scholars who have relied on memory. Jan Vansina, studying oral traditions in Africa, concluded that all "traditions" could be divided into official and private. He believed that dominant groups created official versions of the past, for instance, that were basically canonical and served as obstacles to establishing memories or traditions that could undermine the existing structure of order or authority.<sup>4</sup>

Sociologists who have studied working-class populations in France have also noted the ties between official versions of the past, social and political discourse, and what ordinary individuals remember. "One only ever remembers," Nathan Wachtel wrote, "as a member of a social group." He goes on to say that the "irreducible originality of personal recollections are in fact produced by the criss-crossing of several series of memories" that correspond to groups such as the community or work unit to which one belongs. Wachtel found that in advanced industrial societies official traditions or historical accounts designed to explain the legitimacy of existing institutions and leaders not only kept the accounts of ordinary people off the historical record but apparently infiltrated people's private memories and consciousness as well. He discovered personal and official histories intertwined in oral histories he gathered among French workers.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately the interview material from Studebaker reveals threads or layers of experience. Dominant plots from the earlier eras were heavily infiltrated by versions of experience that served the needs of powerful institutions; personal memories were

more evident when powerful institutions ceased to exert much force on the construction of meaning and memory.

But the interviews were not originally planned to explore the social shaping of memory. They were designed to probe the nature of labor-management relationships in a rather straightforward manner. A questionnaire was designed to guide the narrator through the interviewees' life cycles: childhood, adolescence, and work life before Studebaker, at Studebaker, and after the plant had closed. Clearly, the intended focus was on work at the auto plant, on the line or as a manager, but the hope existed that those interviewed would place their work experiences in the context of their individual lives.

To some extent the resulting interviews produced what had been sought. They contained thousands of bits of information about life and work inside the company and elsewhere as well. But they also produced evidence of structures of memory that were unanticipated and did not seem to be a product of any scholarly planning. The time structure of the questionnaire was based on the individual life course, but the dominant time structure emerging in the interviews was based on changes in the pattern of institutional power and social order that existed in the past. Those changes defined the era of union and company cooperation, the era of union and company disagreement, and the era without a strong union or company. This is not to say that the questions asked made no difference. If we had asked questions about leisure activities, we might have discovered a different structure. But that is not the point. Regardless of the questions, respondents would have produced narrative plots of some kind that had been influenced by agents powerful in the social space under examination.<sup>6</sup>

### The Era of Stability

If one simply listened to Studebaker memories for the period before 1945, it would be easy to conclude that social discourse and individual reflection had produced consensus. Individuals described a past in which the automobile company was a very good place to work, in part because of the vast networks of kin that toiled together within its walls. This theme was repeated in a manner that generally lacked originality and reflected to a great extent the power and the ability of dominant institutions to create an interpretation of reality and reproduce it in the minds of many others. There is no denying the existence of a large number of kin networks within the plant or the fact that some workers derived satisfaction from their employment. At times this positive image, however, superseded all others and was described almost automatically.

The image of Studebaker as a "friendly factory" populated by generations of

<sup>3</sup> Judith Modell, "Stories and Strategies: The Use of Personal Statements," *International Journal of Oral History*, 4 (Feb. 1983), 4-11; Samuel Schrager, "What Is Social in Oral History?" *ibid.* (June 1983), 76-78.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, 1985), 98-99, 120; Dan Ben-Amos, "The Strands of Tradition: Varieties in Its Meaning in American Folklore Studies," *Journal of Folklore Research*, 21 (May-Dec. 1984), 105; Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 327.

<sup>5</sup> Nathan Wachtel, "Memory and History, Introduction," *History and Anthropology*, 2 (Oct. 1986), 2-11; Barbara Allen, "In the Thick of Things: Texture in Orally Communicated History," *International Journal of Oral History*, 6 (June 1985), 93-96.

<sup>6</sup> Copies of most interviews cited in this study are on file at the Indiana University Oral History Research Center in Bloomington. Individuals who worked on the project included Gary Bailey, Robert Thomas King, Naomi Lichtenburg, John Wolford, and Robin Zeff. A few taped recordings concerning Studebaker, made in 1979 by Janet Weaver in a separate project, were consulted in research for this paper. The Weaver interviews are located at Discovery Hall, South Bend, Indiana.

proud and related craftsmen producing cars of incomparable quality existed throughout this century but was crystallized during World War II. Taking fragments of reality, Paul Hoffman, the corporation president, launched a national advertising campaign in 1945 and 1946 lauding the "miracle of American war production" at his company and citing reasons why it was such a "complete success." Central to his explanation was the argument that Studebaker possessed "the finest group in any industry—fathers, sons, and grandsons, saturated with a great tradition." Seeking to gain a large share of postwar consumer spending, Hoffman assured Americans and his own work force that Studebaker was building the "best passenger cars and trucks your money can buy." In those proclamations the company helped to produce a symbolic picture of the workplace and worker-management relations that persisted past the company's demise in 1963. In the 1980s some customers and employees recalled the image of the "friendly factory" producing goods of superior quality in comparison to the mass-produced autos of Detroit. That was exactly the image Hoffman had intended to convey.<sup>7</sup>

Although evidence exists that Studebaker had achieved a reputation as a good place to work and as a company filled with proud families by the 1920s, Harold Churchill, president of the company from 1956 to 1961, explained that systematic advertisement of that image began in the 1930s. According to Churchill, the company nearly went bankrupt in 1933 and attempted to rely on "Madison Avenue advertising" to tell the public and its employees that they could have faith in the firm because of its "strong, underlying father-son heritage." Elmer Danch, who was employed in the corporation's public relations office, recalled working during World War II on advertisements that showed fathers at Studebaker building planes that might be piloted by their sons. Advertisements proclaimed that the company was just waiting for "that boy to get back so he could be with his father." Such symbols were important not only to promote worker morale and patriotism but also to keep Studebaker competitive in a labor market marked by shortages. After the war, even with the infusion of thousands of new workers from outside the South Bend area, company publications such as the *Wheel* still featured family pictures prominently. Histories of the companies published in 1942 and 1952 as well as national periodicals contain numerous photographs of Studebaker fathers and sons.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Paul G. Hoffman, "Why Was Studebaker Chosen for Such Critical War Tasks?" *Life*, Nov. 26, 1945, p. 69. On Hoffman at Studebaker, see Alan Raucher, *Paul G. Hoffman: Architect of Foreign Aid* (Lexington, Ky., 1985), 1-43. A sociologist has found that no longitudinal data on kinship ties in the plant survives. The same study also suggests that, although the company promoted an image of fathers and sons working as skilled craftsmen to build cars, the father-son relationship was not common in the plant and few workers learned skilled tasks at Studebaker. See Elisabeth Klaus, "A Family of Families: When Family Relations Are Work Relations" (Ph.D. diss., Notre Dame University, 1986), 123-24, 250-52, 379-80.

<sup>8</sup> Raucher, *Paul G. Hoffman*, 16-17; Harold Churchill interview by Robert Thomas King, Feb. 28-29, 1980, (Indiana University Oral History Research Center, Bloomington); Elmer Danch interview by John Wolford, Sept. 25, 1984, *ibid.*; George Hupp interview by King, Feb. 19, 1980, *ibid.*; Theodore Zenzinger interview by Wolford, July 24, 1984, *ibid.*; Frederick H. Harbison and Robert Dubin, *Patterns of Union-Management Relations* (Chicago, 1947), emphasized the "father-son" aspect of the Studebaker work force. It was also described in popular histories of the company including Stephen Longstreet, *A Century of Wheels* (New York, 1952), 103; and K. S. Smallried and Dorothy James Roberts, *More Than You Promise: A Business at Work in Society* (New York, 1942), 309.

Actual testimony based on oral interviews with Studebaker workers confirms the existence of widespread kinship networks throughout the plant, although such arrangements did not make Studebaker unique among American factories. Family members were especially important in providing entrée into the plant for young workers, but such associations were also a source of pride and comfort. Memories offered evidence, moreover, that the idealized version of the "friendly factory" was shared by many of the rank and file. Steve Megyesi entered the plant in 1942 because his father and brother were already there. His desire to follow them was so strong that he took "shop courses" in high school to prepare for his eventual arrival at Studebaker. Once in the plant he even requested a transfer to work with a relative. He synthesized his experience in a way that would have made the public relations department proud:

Studebaker used to be known as a father and son team. And it was like working with a family. It really was. . . . There was a job to be done, and there was no animosity among people in different departments. They just helped each other to get the job done. It was a terrific place to work.<sup>9</sup>

Ray Burnett indicated that Studebaker meant a lot to his grandfather because it was "a way of life; it wasn't just an automobile company." Burnett himself, who worked on the final assembly, remembered that he had looked at the water tower near the plant as a child and "kind of felt he would be working there." He distinctly recalled his father talking of the effort that all workers felt they had to exert during the war. For Burnett it was a "kind of togetherness." He claimed that it would not be easy to put into words but "we more or less felt as a team." And Harry Poulin, who began working for the company in 1940, both invoked and defended the positive image.

But Studebaker had just a fantastic family picture. Families worked together to build a car, and there would be so much pride in it. . . . It was advertised in *Life Magazine*, for instance, you would have a whole page of a family of Studebaker workers . . . building automobiles and this was true. And they may have gotten a little lazy during the war but this came back, and when we were building cars again their workmanship showed.<sup>10</sup>

Memories of the period prior to World War II revealed a reality more complex than the image of a "friendly factory" of friends and neighbors building quality cars.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Megyesi and Doris Megyesi interview by Robin Zeff, Aug. 23, 1985 (Indiana University Oral History Research Center).

<sup>10</sup> Ray Burnett interview by Wolford, Sept. 25, 1984, *ibid.*; Dale Wiand and Alice Wiand interview by John Bodnar, May 23, 1984, *ibid.*; Robert Hagenbush interview by Wolford, July 24, 1984, *ibid.*; Harry Poulin interview by Wolford, July 25, 1984, *ibid.* The issue of worker loyalty to the company became divisive in the early 1950s. In 1953 the company suspended nineteen employees for purchasing new model cars from other companies, after workers initiated work stoppages to protest such purchases by their fellow employees. See "Decision and Order before the NLRB," box 23, UAW Local 5 Papers (Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, Mich.); *South Bend Tribune*, Feb. 8, 1954, p. 8; Mary Schoonaert interview by Zeff, July 25, 1985, (Indiana University Oral History Research Center); B. A. Ewing interview by Wolford, Aug. 27, 1984, *ibid.*; Megyesi interview.

Those who had experienced the earlier years described a tough, no-nonsense approach to production. But the crucial point was that there was little disagreement among the workers interviewed. Nearly everyone who remembered the era described the coexistence of tough discipline on the production line and the positive image Studebaker had as a place to work. That alliance was necessary because it was precisely during the pre-World War II era that the other great institution competing for worker loyalty emerged—Local 5 of the United Automobile Workers of America (UAW). Tough discipline could easily be recalled not only because it existed but also because it served as a background that explained why the union local had to come into being in the first place. Tough discipline and the “friendly factory” could coexist in the layered memories of the prewar period because they both served centers of power—the company and the union—in an era when both institutions prided themselves on getting along and taking credit for Studebaker’s survival and success. No doubt such discipline was enforced because workers were often reluctant to meet company production schedules, but when they recalled the workplace Studebaker employees talked about the issue of discipline in a different way.

To the extent that people remembered work relationships in the 1920s and 1930s, they recalled raw authority and discipline on the part of foremen. Individuals worked at an unrelenting pace when they were not laid off, and foremen hired and fired arbitrarily. In reminiscences and discussion afterwards workers had fashioned a fairly uniform view on this point by the time oral interviews were conducted. Dale Wiand began in the early 1930s by sinking holes in crankshafts. He claimed that he had “to work like mad” to keep his drill sharp so it would not “chatter.” “They’d really get mad at you if you left ‘chatter marks’ on the crankshafts,” he recalled. Harry Brodzinski’s father actually left the plant in 1933 and returned to farming near South Bend because work at the plant was difficult and sporadic. Casmer Paskiet complained that foremen were unfair and demoted people they did not like to “penalty jobs.” He elaborated: “See, in the twenties the company had the final word on everything. You was subjugated to do whatever he’d [foreman] tell you and that’s it . . . or else.” George Hupp explained that if you fell behind on the assembly line, two or three foremen “would be right on your neck wanting to know why.”<sup>11</sup>

Interviewees generally discussed discipline in the prewar period before discussing their recollections of the origins of the union. The establishment of an auto workers union local at Studebaker in the 1930s was certainly not an unique event for the times, but the local probably achieved a more secure status than many of its counterparts elsewhere. The formation of Local 5, UAW, took place between 1934 and 1937 in a relatively peaceful fashion, without massive strikes or violent confrontations with management. It was all the more surprising because an important sit-down strike took place at the Bendix Products Corporation plant in South Bend in 1936

<sup>11</sup> Wiand interview; Harry Brodzinski interview by Wolford, Aug. 8, 1984 (Indiana University Oral History Research Center); Casmer Paskiet interview by Wolford, Sept. 24, 1984, *ibid.*; Hupp interview, *ibid.* Similar events are described in Joe Kuminecz interview by Wolford, July 23, 1984, *ibid.*; and Otto Klausmeyer interview by Bodnar, May 22, 1984, *ibid.*

when Local 9, UAW, was established. Indeed, during that sit-down Studebaker workers contributed cash to the Bendix workers and exchanged wage information with their fellow auto workers, but they never moved against their own employer.<sup>12</sup>

The few accounts that discuss unionization at Studebaker during the depression decade emphasize workers’ reluctance to strike against the firm because it had come close to bankruptcy in 1933 and because its officials, including Paul Hoffman, agreed not to resist unionization in return for continued production and labor peace. Some people actually credited Hoffman with launching the union, so powerful was his image as a friend of the average worker. Walter Nowicki claimed that “when he said get organized, we did.”<sup>13</sup>

Hoffman was clearly not that powerful, and unionization at Studebaker, as elsewhere, ultimately originated in the dissatisfaction produced by arbitrary foremen, the growing fear of joblessness, and the national organizing drives of the 1930s. Brodzinski explained that “things were rough” by 1932. “We’d go to work for one hour, and they would send us home,” he complained. It was the rank and file, influenced by men who brought union traditions from midwestern coalfields and who were willing to risk foremen’s retribution for passing union information throughout the plant, not Paul Hoffman, who generated the organizing impulse at Studebaker. The union, moreover, introduced a system of stewards to settle grievances, hear worker disputes, and weaken the authority of the foremen many had come to despise. As Studebaker entered the era of World War II, the union now stood alongside Hoffman and the company as a partner of somewhat equal stature. Both laid claims to worker loyalty and took responsibility for Studebaker’s survival during the 1930s. Hoffman and top management took steps necessary to avoid bankruptcy in the 1930s and facilitated the emergence of the union. The union, for its part, refrained from striking and putting the company in jeopardy and was able to improve conditions in the plant. It all appealed to everyone’s sense of logic and facilitated the development of stable memories of an era that certainly had tensions and appeared stable only when contrasted with the era following World War II.<sup>14</sup>

### An Era of Instability

Memories of Studebaker in the period after World War II described a world that was not nearly so ordered as the prewar world. The major institutions of power—the company and the union—did not get along, and they tended to compete for worker loyalty rather than to create an appearance that everyone cooperated in one large “friendly factory.” The disordered plot dominating recollections of the era was rein-

<sup>12</sup> See “Cash Contributions to Bendix Local 9,” box 2, UAW Local 9 Papers (Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs). Joe Kuminecz recalled a weekly collection for the Bendix workers of “a buck a man”; Kuminecz interview.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Nowicki interview by Janet Weaver, March 2, 1979 (Discovery Hall, South Bend, Ind.).

<sup>14</sup> Nowicki interview; L. R. Richardson interview by Weaver, Sept. 5, 1979, Oct. 31, 1979, (Discovery Hall); Burnett interview; Brodzinski interview; Raucher, *Paul G. Hoffman*, 25–28; J. D. Hill, *A Brief History of the Labor Movement of Studebaker Local No. 5, U.A.W.-C.I.O.* (South Bend, 1953).



Mary Nowicki (middle) with co-workers in the sewing room, 1940s.  
Courtesy Studebaker National Museum, South Bend, Indiana.

forced by the era's negative outcome. This second narrative was not a story of proud workers and company survival, but one of internal strife culminating in the closing of the plant. Expressions of dissent and disagreement were more explicit as workers were unsure of where to place their loyalty. Women workers felt the union betrayed them; their male counterparts resisted the implementation of time study by the company. Disordered social structures and contentious discourse, in other words, produced memories that were more varied and less neatly tied together. Little difference separated the disordered plot from the disordered past.

Memories in this second era did agree on one point: wartime experience had changed the tenor of labor-management relations at Studebaker and, thus, the balance of power. The existence of cost-plus contracts, many felt, had weakened the company's ability to produce in the most efficient manner. The union, moreover, grew large and powerful because of the infusion of thousands of new workers during the war and perhaps because of a weakening of management's drive for economy. Harold Churchill recalled that the company never made the profit the public thought it did with cost-plus contracting. But, he claimed, that system produced a "state of mind" among workers that "the well would never run dry."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Harold Churchill interview by King, Feb. 23, 1980 (Indiana University Oral History Research Center); Hupp interview; Kuminecz interview; Brodzinski interview.

Workers and managers both recalled that after the war the union reigned supreme in the plant. Hoffman was apparently intent on preserving the image of a "friendly factory" where proud craftsmen toiled as a device to attract consumers.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, he and other top company officials were reluctant to impose stern discipline in the plant. Otto Klausmeyer, a middle-level supervisor, bristled at what he perceived to be the lax state of authority. He claimed that management was "soft" and did not care about labor costs as long as they could be added to the price of an automobile. After the war Klausmeyer personally checked on the manpower needs of the plant's sixth floor. He found 896 workers there when only about one-fourth that number was needed. He generalized in language that was somewhat symbolic: "They were throwing parts at each other, hanging out windows. They'd go away for a month's vacation and come back, and somebody would punch their clock in the meanwhile." A fellow supervisor on the final assembly line, Harry Brodzinski, felt that "people" respected the company prior to 1946. Afterward, he became disgusted with men who were sabotaging production. He claimed that union leaders were defending jobs "on the line" that were unnecessary. And he lamented that "top management told you to take it easy" and "don't muddy the water" because they were afraid of work stoppages.<sup>17</sup>

Cliff MacMillan, who eventually became a company vice-president, came to Studebaker for the first time in 1948 as part of a survey team investigating industrial relations. After only two days in the plant, he concluded that Studebaker had a reputation for no (authorized) strikes because formal strike actions were unnecessary, since management always compromised with worker demands. MacMillan provided a glimpse into management's thinking when he recounted a meeting between the company president and a key production official who wanted to conduct time studies. MacMillan explained Studebaker management's view that if the union stewards objected, the program should be stopped. "Don't do anything to get those people upset," the president had cautioned. MacMillan recalled men in the stamping division working from morning until noon to reach their quotas and sitting around, telling stories and reading newspapers the rest of the afternoon.<sup>18</sup>

The situation described by MacMillan and other plant officials probably explains the profile of the Studebaker work force presented in the unpublished study MacMillan and his survey team produced. Compiled in 1949, the report found a relatively satisfied group of workers. When asked how they liked working at Studebaker, 98 percent of the foreman, 95 percent of the stewards, and 98 percent of the rank

<sup>16</sup> Raucher, *Paul G. Hoffman*, 35. For confirmation of union power in the postwar plant, see Robert M. MacDonald, *Collective Bargaining in the Automobile Industry* (New Haven, 1963), 259-84; and Harbison and Dubin, *Patterns of Union-Management Relations*, 206. Local 5 revealed newfound vigor after the war by attempting to build a cooperative housing development for its members and demanding wage increases that workers at General Motors received. It also raised funds to help striking workers at the Oliver Corporation in South Bend in 1946. See *South Bend Tribune*, Jan. 21, 1949, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> At Studebaker the subassembly lines produced component parts of automobiles and fed the final line that assembled the vehicles. It was in final assembly that management later sought to establish efficiency standards for the entire plant, provoking much turmoil. Klausmeyer interview; Brodzinski interview.

<sup>18</sup> Cliff MacMillan interview by Bodnar, May 11, 1984 (Indiana University Oral History Research Center).

and file claimed they were either "well-satisfied" or liked it "very much." The basis for such satisfaction was generally given as either "confidence in management" or "material satisfaction." Some disagreement existed in response, however, to a question that touched on an obvious sore point. When asked, "are men producing the right amount of work?" only 51 percent of the foremen answered affirmatively, whereas about 80 percent of the stewards and workers did. The overwhelming majority, however, felt union and "top management" got along at Studebaker and nearly everyone selected "good times" over "labor trouble" or "over-production" as a summary of what would happen at Studebaker "in the next couple of years."<sup>19</sup>

The view of undisciplined labor relations described by managers was generally shared by the rank and file. In this case memories may have produced a more accurate picture than the contemporary survey, since the 1949 document only hinted at a possible lack of consensus and satisfaction in the plant. George Hupp recalled the era after the war as a time when people came to work drunk and the union forced the company into concessions it should not have made. Odell Newburn's reconstruction of conditions in the foundry where he worked at that time differed widely from the image of a "friendly factory." He described a place where fumes and gases constantly kept men irritable and recalled a high accident rate caused by workers who hurried to meet their quotas, especially when summer heat became oppressive. And John Piechowiak remembered that after the war he saw a lot that was not "right." He told of people "dogging it on the job" and "just putting in their time."<sup>20</sup> Besides prompting disobedience, discontent infiltrated memories. In the tension-filled atmosphere of the postwar factory, women especially seethed under what they recalled as unfair treatment, despite their significant contributions to production during the war. They were very reluctant to return to the household. They recalled considerable resentment in both the plant and the union at their postwar demand for equal seniority rights. They wanted to protect their ability to work by acquiring the right to "bump" into mens' jobs as well as those traditionally held by women if they could perform the tasks. (The bumping system permitted workers who lost their jobs to displace fellow workers in other job classifications who had less seniority.) Women packed the union hall and forced consideration of a motion to abolish separate seniority lists by gender but were defeated by the union's huge male majority.

Women were especially upset because they thought the union played favorites, recalling laid-off male workers sooner than laid-off females after the war. Mary Van Daele claimed that she told Paul Hoffman himself that she deserved to be called back ahead of others who had already returned. Mary Nowicki claimed "you had to fight for your seniority." She claimed that females had worked at sewing upholstery and inspecting engines during the war and were angry at being laid off once the war ended. Insult was added to injury during the bumping or laying-off process

<sup>19</sup> Survey Research Center, University of Michigan, "The Studebaker Study," 1949, pp. 2, 8, 36, 215-17, 270, 311, 371, 377-78 (in John Bodnar's possession).

<sup>20</sup> Hupp interview; Odell Newburn interview by Wolford, July 10, 1984 (Indiana University Oral History Research Center); John Piechowiak interview by Wolford, Oct. 8, 1984, *ibid.*; Mary Nowicki interview by Zeff, July 25, 1985, *ibid.*

itself. Louise Dzierla recalled having to train the person who was going to replace her. In a summary statement of female dissatisfaction with the union Dzierla complained:

There was no separate union for the ladies. And the women would never have a chance to go out on strike and be able to lead the way. So the only time we went on strike [was] when the men voted for it and we'd have to follow. . . . When we had grievances on anything, they'd talk about it but there was never nothing special done for the ladies.<sup>21</sup>

Both men and women were deeply troubled by the issue of bumping during the fifties. The practice appeared to increase, especially after the early 1950s, when management attempted to reduce the size of its huge work force, which had approached twenty thousand in 1948. Workers were not sure who was to blame for bumping, the union that allowed it or the company that caused it. Younger workers more susceptible to bumping came to resent older ones, and disunity in the work force was exacerbated. One employee, Donald Handley, took a job as a utility man who moved around the plant filling in for absent workers because he felt he would be less likely to be bumped from that job.<sup>22</sup>

Workers at Studebaker also had a clear recollection that absenteeism was a persistent problem during the era of uncertainty. Men described workers punching the time clock for buddies who decided to take off work or held other jobs. A number of those interviewed operated auto repair and auto painting businesses on the side and a very large number operated small farms outside South Bend.<sup>23</sup>

No issue dominated the memory of conflict in the plant during the turbulent fifties more than time study. The strong sales record and postwar prosperity that had perpetuated laxity on the part of both labor and management after the war came to an abrupt halt in 1954. During that year Studebaker saw its share of the auto market drop from 3.8 to 2.8 percent. Studebaker laid off many workers and reduced working hours for others. Heightened levels of tension resulted as management initiated bold moves to cut costs and increase productivity. Managers' most controversial move was to end the incentive or quota system, which paid the worker a full day's wage for meeting a daily quota. Company officials now claimed that because production quotas were too low, workers reached them easily each day and spent too much time loafing—a point on which some worker memories agreed.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Van Daele interview by Zeff, July 25, 1985, *ibid.*; Mary Nowicki interview; Schoonaert interview; Louise Dzierla interview by Zeff, July 7, 1985 (Indiana University Oral History Research Center). Women were particularly threatened after the war by men with high seniority in Studebaker's aviation division who bumped into the automotive division. See *South Bend Tribune*, Feb. 4, 1945, p. 1; *ibid.*, June 3, 1945, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Donald Handley interview by Wolford, Oct. 7, 1984 (Indiana University Oral History Research Center); Marion Zielinski interview by Wolford, Oct. 7, 1984, *ibid.* John Piechowiak took a lower paying job because he felt that a less desirable position would not attract workers looking for someone to bump; Piechowiak interview; Klausmeyer interview; Hupp interview; Alice Speeks interview by Zeff, July 28, 1985 (Indiana University Oral History Research Center); Paskiet interview.

<sup>23</sup> Handley interview; Zielinski interview; Paskiet interview; Piechowiak interview; Hagenbush interview; Charles Wolfram interview by Bodnar, May 23, 1984 (Indiana University Oral History Research Center).

Studebaker wanted to move to a straight hourly wage system in order to keep workers busy all day and increase production, although the net result would be a reduction in workers' income. When the union rank and file initially rejected the plan in the summer of 1954 and threatened a walkout, anxious company officials got union leaders to call a mass rally and explain that wages would still be higher than the industry average. Because the company's claim was accurate, workers finally approved the plan. Worker approval was gained in part by strong appeals from the union leadership, but the intensity of the leaders' effort revealed the degree of dissension within the ranks. Competing recollections reflect the discord. Joe Kuminecz recalled that the workers would have been willing to work for scrip if that were needed to save the company, but Robert Hagenbush called the plan a "wage cut" that hurt the incomes of many workers. Dale Wiand recalled that he did not like the idea at all and was reluctant to accept it.<sup>24</sup>

After eliminating the incentive plan and reducing income, the company continued its offensive by increasing time studies on various jobs and establishing minimum levels of output per task. Those efforts evoked additional resentment. Mary Van Daele remembered times when "they would come around with a piece of paper and pencil and they'd want you to work like a robot. You never did enough." Harry Brodzinski recalled that when workers realized that industrial engineers were going to go up and down the line checking jobs "the shit hit the fan."<sup>25</sup>

The rank and file voted to accept the end of the incentive system in 1954, but their memories suggest that they continued to feel and to vent displeasure at its abolition. Determined resistance to time-motion studies increased. Workers recalled sabotage in the "friendly factory," with cushions ripped out of car seats at final assembly, water put in gas tanks, and soda bottles placed in door pockets. Such practices disturbed some workers and further fractured the world of workers at Studebaker. Walkouts proliferated, especially in the final assembly, an area under close company (and time-motion) scrutiny. But even the walkouts divided the work force. Workers who drove long distances to work in South Bend everyday resented them immensely and blamed them on "radical [union] stewards."<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the 1950s, employee memories indicated, the struggle to make sense out of the turmoil and contention at Studebaker continued. The very forms the recollections of these historical actors took provide an account of what it was like

<sup>24</sup> Les Fox interview by Janet Weaver, March 5, 1979 (Discovery Hall). Studebaker wages as a whole averaged thirty-six cents an hour above the industry average. See "Can a Union Have It Too Good?" *U.S. News*, Aug. 20, 1954, p. 9; *South Bend Tribune*, Jan. 11, 1954, sec. 2, p. 1; *ibid.*, Jan. 13, 1954, p. 1; *ibid.*, March 12, 1954, p. 31; and *ibid.*, April 23, 1954, sec. 2, p. 1. Kuminecz interview; Hagenbush interview; Wiand interview.

<sup>25</sup> Van Daele interview; Brodzinski interview. The process of time study of jobs accelerated after 1956 when Studebaker temporarily merged with the Packard Car Company and the labor process came under the influence of Packard officials.

<sup>26</sup> Hagenbush interview; Wolfram interview. Union stewards at Studebaker remained powerful until the company went out of business. Elsewhere in the auto industry they were replaced by union committeemen who serviced larger numbers of workers and became less susceptible to direct influence from plant workers and more to influence from union officials. See Nelson Lichtenstein, "Auto Worker Militancy and the Structure of Factory Life, 1937-1955," *Journal of American History*, 67 (Sept. 1980), 335-53, esp. 350.

to experience those times. They suggest that the actors' loyalties and consciousness were divided not simply because they were involved in a class struggle but also because the traditional sources of authority in the plant, the company and the union, no longer worked in unison to command their loyalty. Real events had tarnished the image and memories of a "friendly factory" and of the earlier alliance between workers and the company. During the four years preceding the closing of the plant in 1963, controversy was continuous. Workers performed tasks more slowly than usual during time studies and walked off their jobs frequently. The "nineteen-day strike" of 1959 was recalled by nearly everyone because of its unprecedented length and because by then workers felt they could make no more concessions to the company. Union and management were so divided by 1963 that Cliff MacMillan, now in charge of industrial relations, told the company president not to make any agreement with "those bastards now because they [the union] don't stay with anything." In a final strike during the year the plant closed, workers prevented the car of the company president—a Mercedes-Benz—from leaving the plant and accused him of "smuggling stuff out." He could not smuggle out anything of consequence, but by that time, he symbolized an insensitive company. Worker resentment had become so strong by the 1960s that Joe Nagy won election as president of the local union by running on a platform that claimed Studebaker was not a "friendly factory," but a "sweatshop" where people worked too hard and work standards were not subject to arbitration.<sup>27</sup>

### The Era of Adjustment

The last few weeks of 1963 remain fixed in the minds of many former Studebaker employees for two reasons. They will never forget the announcement on December 9 of the decision to end automobile production in South Bend and close the plant. Many also vividly recall the fact that the American flag at the plant flew at half-staff in honor of President John F. Kennedy, who had been recently assassinated and who had been considered a friend of the auto workers. To many Studebaker workers, Kennedy apparently represented a hope that the troubled condition of their workplace would be corrected. In a sense Kennedy stood as a new authority symbol that would now solve problems in South Bend that neither the company nor the union appeared capable of solving. Robert Hagenbush, a union steward, stated: "we set our sights highly on Kennedy, you know. They liked what he was doing and that was a blow to the people. And then it wasn't long after that we got the blow of closing the place down."<sup>28</sup>

At Studebaker life was dominated by the interests and influence of the company and the union. When the interests of those two powerful agents coincided,

<sup>27</sup> MacMillan interview; Hagenbush interview; Wolfram interview; MacDonald, *Collective Bargaining in the Automobile Industry*, 284. On the stopping of the president's car, see MacMillan interview; Hagenbush interview; Frank Nemeth interview by Wolford, Oct. 8, 1984 (Indiana University Oral History Research Center).

<sup>28</sup> Hagenbush interview.

# OUTPUT ENDS NEXT WEEK

## Community Looks Past Studebaker Move

**POLICE PRESS SEARCH FOR SINATRA SON**  
 By Ward Woodford  
 From Automobile  
 FBI James Hunt



**SEES MORE PROSPEROUS DAYS AHEAD**  
**Most Employees To Be Laid Off**  
 By Charles

Banner headline announces plant closing, December 10, 1963.

understand the cause of the shutdown. In an effort to interpret something beyond the realm of personal experience and with no dominant institution left to offer explanations of reality, ordinary people forged their own complex set of interpretations. They did not focus so much on the labor strife that everyone recalled vividly and experienced personally as on the complicated nature of the automobile market and the decisions of a board of directors that by the 1960s met in New York City. It was as if the class conflict that Studebaker employees described in their recollections of the fifties had never existed. Some managers, such as Otto Klausmeyer, did blame union excesses for the company's demise, and some workers faulted management's decision not to build a new plant in the 1950s to replace the antiquated six-story structure in downtown South Bend. But such assertions were not dominant in memories. Workers and managers alike talked more of the difficulties of competing with the large auto manufacturers in Detroit, the poor quality of Studebaker's dealership system, and the board of directors' ignorance of auto production—many directors were bankers. Such information had apparently circulated in South Bend and could be found in the memories of ordinary workers, union officials, and former company executives. It seemed, in other words, to emanate

from a communitywide discussion. That process may account for the explanation's tendency to revolve around multiple factors, rather than one simple reason.

When social discourse was heavily influenced by powerful institutions, as in the Studebaker employees' recollections of the period before 1963, formulations of reality such as the "friendly factory" or the competing charges over issues such as time study tended to "assist" individuals in forging interpretations in the present and memories of the past. When communication between South Bend residents became less "distorted," discourse produced more complex and less tidy explanations of what was going on. Thus, most explanations for the closing roughly paralleled Brodzinski's. His answer was complex, and probably grounded in shared discourse, rather than simply personal encounters. He explained: "Well, I would say that we had a lot of reasons. I'm not saying that labor was the number one reason, no way. I think we had some bad engineering and bad dealers."<sup>32</sup>

When individuals were asked to describe their own adjustments after losing their jobs at Studebaker, something they could do only by relying on private experience, they revealed how acutely sensitive they were to their place within a community and a group. They invariably made a distinction between their own historical experience and that of others with whom they had worked. In other words, they were incapable of providing answers that did not draw on both personal experience and shared discourse. To put it another way, the expression of the personal could now be made in clearer terms and was no longer subjugated by the views of dominant institutions. Individual respondents basically survived the transition to new lives in reasonably good terms but recalled real suffering and turmoil in the lives of others. In effect, such memories acknowledged a sense of both individual survival and community devastation in the aftermath of the plant closing. The "others" who suffered were symbolic representations of the devastation that all of them had felt. The reality of some making transitions to other jobs softened the impact over time but did not eliminate the need to convey devastation somehow.

Personal narratives almost always described a reasonably successful transition by the narrators themselves. Wolfram got a job with the Jeep Corporation, which took over an old Studebaker war plant near South Bend. A number of workers were recruited immediately by other auto manufactures. Wiand went to a General Motors plant in Illinois where he did not like having to fix his own machinery. He eventually returned to Bendix because his family did not want to leave South Bend. Megyesi found work in Kalamazoo, Michigan, immediately after Studebaker closed but also returned to South Bend eventually as a purchasing agent. A number of men went to Gary, Indiana, to make windshield wipers. Others got jobs with the state of Indiana as corrections officers or toll collectors on the turnpike.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> On communication and its distortion, see Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (London, 1979), 175-80, Brodzinski interview; Klausmeyer interview; Wolfram interview; Piechowiak interview; Burnett interview; Handley interview; Zielinski interview; James Kowalski interview by Wolford, Sept. 11, 1984 (Indiana University Oral History Research Center).

<sup>33</sup> Wolfram interview, Brodzinski interview; Wiand interview; Megyesi interview; Hagenbush interview; Handley interview; Zielinski interview; Danch interview; MacMillan interview; Kuminecz interview; Eugene