

## HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

January 2009

Vol. X No. 1

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Cover image: Frederick Remington, *Cabeza de Vaca in the Desert*. Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

## JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLISHES *HISTORICALLY SPEAKING*

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Starting with Volume X, *Historically Speaking* will appear five times per year: January, April, June, September, and November.

the Editors

## THE PURPOSE OF THE PAST: REFLECTIONS ON THE USES OF HISTORY\*

Gordon S. Wood

**D**uring the past several decades we have experienced the culmination of what began over forty years ago—what one historian has called “a historiographical revolution.” Since the 1960s new people have entered the profession and new subjects have been opened up for research. Instead of writing about statesmen, generals, diplomats, and elite institutions, historians began concentrating on ordinary folk and marginal people: the poor, the oppressed, and the silent. By the 1970s this new social history of hitherto forgotten people had come to dominate academic history writing. Although some historians continued to write political and institutional histories, most began writing about everything else but politics. In fact, there is scarcely an aspect of human behavior that historians over the past generation have not written about—from divorce to dying, from the consumption of goods to child rearing. Historians began delving into the most private, subjective, and least accessible aspects of the past, including marriage, sexual relations, and child abuse. Social science, especially anthropology and ethnography, enabled some historians to reconstruct from riots, rituals, and other kinds of popular nonverbal behavior in the past the

beliefs and attitudes of the masses of ordinary men and women who left no written record. Others used social science to compile quantitative data on economic development, population growth, and rates of marriage and death. The profession turned out more and more complex, technical, and specialized renditions of the past that fewer and fewer people were reading.

By the late 1980s most historians in the United States . . . had begun concentrating almost exclusively on cultural history, focusing especially on issues of race and gender.

Several indices revealed that the American people were becoming less and less interested in the kind of social history academics were teaching and writing. From 1970-71 to 1985-86, years when there was a boom in student enrollments, the number of history

degrees granted by all American colleges and universities declined almost by two-thirds, from 44,663 to 16,413. A drop in membership of the American Historical Association in the 1970s and 1980s was itself a sign of this weakening interest in history. The evidence compiled by Peter Novick in his *That Noble Dream*, published in 1988, reinforced the impression of a decline in academic history writing. Novick argued that the historical profession during the 1970s and 1980s seemed to have lost a unified sense of purpose; without a clear sense any longer of America's role in history, the discipline seemed to be coming apart. “In no other field was there such a widespread sense of disarray; in no other discipline did so many leading figures express dismay and discouragement at the current state of their realm.” Many historians tended to see themselves as simply congeries of specialists solving technical problems and talking mostly to one another.

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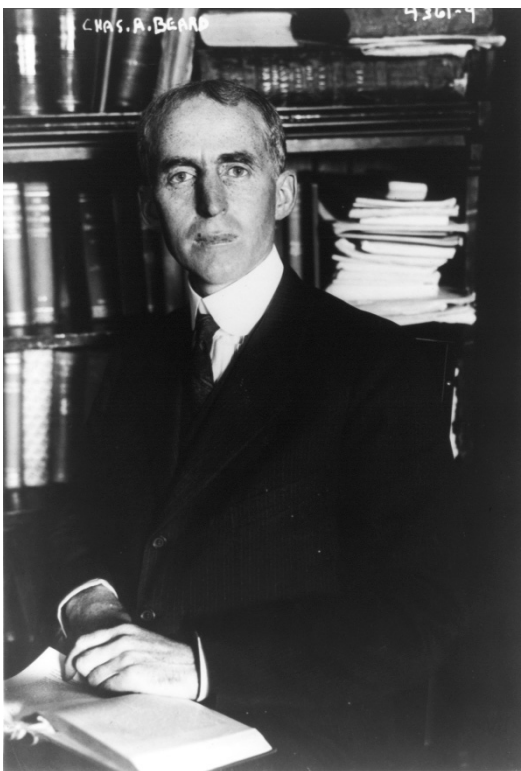
At the same time Novick was reaching his pessimistic conclusions, some historians began reacting against the disarray and calling for a return to narrative, to the kind of storytelling that, presumably, history was always noted for. Still others, however, wanted no part of a return to a traditional grand narrative, which they associated with the sort of history writing that had kept women and minorities out of the national story. They wanted instead to promote multicultural diversity, and discovered they could best do so by transforming social history into cultural history. Social history tended to be structurally descriptive and not ideally suited to the historians' desire to see people in all their variety and distinctiveness. By contrast, cultural history offered a way of penetrating through the large-scale economic and social structures of society into the many different identities and cultures of people in the society. Although the new cultural history tended to increase the fragmentation and disarray, it soon came to dominate the profession.

By the late 1980s most historians in the United States had stopped compiling computer printouts and invoking Pearson correlation coefficients and had begun concentrating almost exclusively on cultural history, focusing especially on issues of race and gender. By now little else seems to matter. In 2006 the Organization of American Historians sponsored the publication of *The Best American History Essays 2006*. This was a collection of the ten best articles in American history as selected by a group of nine historians (of whom I was one) from over 300 learned and popular historical journals published between the summers of 2004 and 2005. Seven of the ten best articles that were chosen dealt with issues of either race or gender; the only article I picked, one on Washington's presidency, managed to slip in. History departments appear to have stopped hiring anyone but cultural historians, the assumption being that cultural history is the only kind of history worth doing.

This new cultural history is undergirded by theory, and theory has become increasingly important to historians. Perhaps theory has always been part of historical reconstruction; certainly many of the new social historians have sought to apply theories from sociology, economics, and psychology with varying degrees of rigor. Marx and Freud, of course, had always been important in this respect. But the shift to cultural history seemed to require even more elaborate theories; and following the lead of literary scholars, historians in the 1980s began importing into their cultural history new theories, especially those of French intellectuals, such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Implicit in many of these theories, which tended to emphasize the textual construction of reality, was an epistemological skepticism that worked to erode established and conventional ways of doing things. Literary scholars first began using these French theories to break down orthodox canons of literature in order to bring in new writers, new works, and new perspectives.

But the epistemological skepticism and blurring of genres that seem to have made sense for some literary scholars had devastating implications for his-

torians. If historians began doubting that there was an objective past reality that they were trying to recover and began thinking that what they did was simply make up the past and write something that was akin to fiction, then they were not just clearing the ground for new kinds of approaches and subjects but were actually undermining the ground for any sort of historical reconstruction at all. Suddenly, it seemed as if Hayden White's contention that historians were actually writing forms of fiction, which he had been making for many years, was at last being vindicated. Although few historians were willing to go as far as White, many were eager to make explicit the use of theory in their history writing. Some professors actually began criticizing the dissertations of their students for being "undertheorized."



Charles A. Beard, ca. 1917. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-36755].

Many feminist historians in particular were keen to import theory into cultural history. I recall listening to a feminist historian in the 1980s talking about using the ideas of Foucault to get rid of all the male-dominated history and clear the way for a new feminist history. When I observed that this seemed tantamount to using a nuclear weapon that could be subsequently used against the new feminist history itself, she replied, "We'll worry about that later."

Most historians have been much less self-conscious about their use of theory. They are not philosophers, and few of them have bothered to read Derrida or Foucault. Most are meat-and-potatoes practitioners of a craft, and, consequently, they have paid no more attention to the epistemological skepticism of the theorists today than their predecessors in the 1930s paid to the calls for an appreciation of European theories of relativism made by Charles Beard and Carl Becker in their addresses to the American Historical Association. Many historians have absorbed from the theories no more than

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*Historically Speaking* (ISSN 1941-4188) is published five times a year for The Historical Society by The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2715 N. Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218-4363

**Postmaster:** Send address changes to *Historically Speaking*, 656 Beacon St., Mezzanine, Boston, MA 02215

*Correspondence:* Please write the Editors, *Historically Speaking*, 656 Beacon St., Mezzanine, Boston, MA 02215

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the desire to write about issues of race and gender. And this desire has led to many stimulating and worthwhile contributions to our understanding of the past. Our knowledge of slavery in America, for example, has been greatly amplified over the past forty years; and no one can deny that our appreciation of women's history has been similarly enhanced. But perhaps one less beneficial effect of the new cultural history has been to widen the gap between academic and popular history.

Perhaps the two kinds of history have never coincided, but in the 1950s academic historians such as Richard Hofstadter, Allan Nevins, Eric Goldman, Daniel Boorstin, and C. Vann Woodward certainly wrote history that appealed to both academic and general readers. That is much less true today. Consequently, popular historians who have no academic appointment, such as David McCullough, Walter Isaacson, Ron Chernow, Thomas Fleming, and Stacy Schiff, have successfully moved in to fill the void left by the academic historians preoccupied by issues of race, gender, and multiculturalism.

The result of all this postmodern history, with its talk of “deconstruction,” “decentering,” “textuality,” and “essentialism,” has been to make academic history writing almost as esoteric and inward-directed as the writing of literary scholars. This is too bad, since history is an endeavor that needs a wide readership to justify itself.

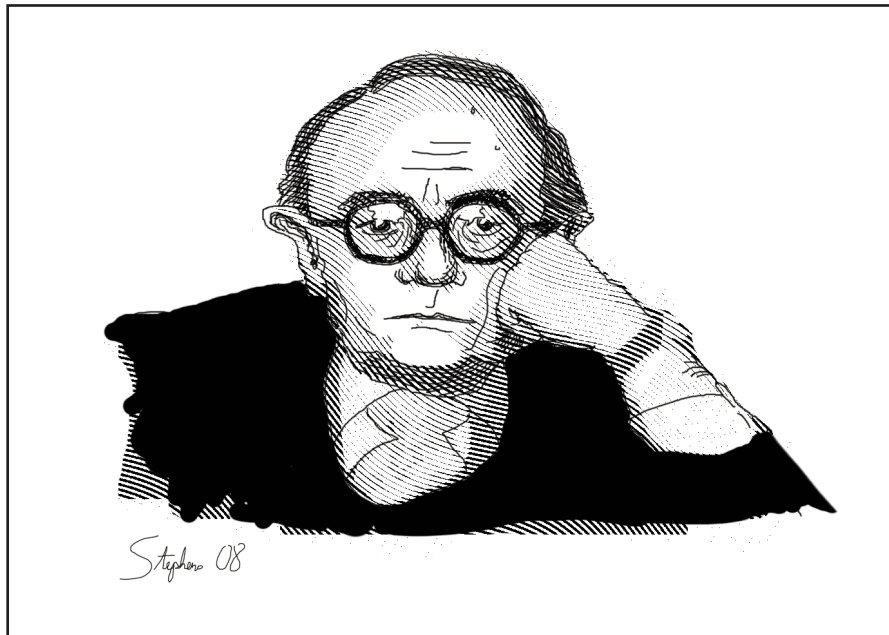
What is the justification of history writing? Why should we study or read history? Some think history teaches lessons, but as I have tried to point out in a review of Barbara Tuchman's *The March of Folly* (1984), I don't believe that history teaches a lot of little lessons to guide us in the present and future. It is not, as the 18th century thought, “philosophy teaching by example.” Yet by disparaging the capacity of history to teach lessons, I don't mean to suggest that studying the past can't teach us anything. If history has nothing to say to us, then it wouldn't make much sense to study or teach it or read about it at all. History is important to us, and knowledge of the past can have a profound effect on our consciousness, on our sense of ourselves. History is a supremely humanistic discipline: it may not teach us particular lessons, but it does tell us how we might live in the world.

Some have said that history for a society is like memory for an individual. Without memory the individual is isolated, cut off from where he has been and who he is. But creating memory for a society is a tricky business; it can have very perverse effects, as some scholars have discovered over the past several decades.

Perhaps there has always been a tension between critical history and memory, between what historians write and what the society chooses to remember. But that tension has become much more conspicuous in recent years. Since the beginning of professional history writing a little over a century ago, critical historians have tried to transform memory, to eliminate its

falsehoods, and to make it more accurate. Critical historians want the public to know that George Washington did not cut down his father's cherry tree, that Sojourner Truth did not utter the famous words “A'n't I a woman?” These were myths that people wanted to believe, and presumably it was the responsibility of historians to destroy these myths and to establish the truth of the past as much as possible.

In 1969 the distinguished English historian J. H.



Sir John Harold Plumb

Plumb wrote a book titled *The Death of the Past*, which has recently been reissued in a new edition. By “the past,” Plumb essentially meant memory or heritage, what he called the “created ideology”—the “mythical, religious, and political interpretations”—with which humans have sought to sanctify their societies, buttress their institutions, and invest their lives and their nations with a sense of destiny. Such memory, such imagined pasts, said Plumb, should never be identified with critical history. “True history,” he wrote, was basically “destructive”; “for by its very nature it dissolves those simple, structural generalizations by which our forefathers interpreted the purpose of life in historical terms.” Its role was to eliminate those simple generalizations and “to cleanse the story of mankind from those deceiving visions of a purposeful past.” During the past generation historical scholarship apparently has fulfilled its destructive role only too well, and not just in America. As the historian Carl Schorske pointed out, “History, conceived as a continuous nourishing tradition,” no longer had the same meaning for society, or at least not for that part of the society that read academic history.

Modern critical history writing in the Western world, says the French historian Pierre Nora, has broken the “ancient bond of identity” with what he calls “memory,” which is what Plumb meant by the “past.” This “critical history,” says Nora, has destroyed what hitherto “we had experienced as self-evident—the equation of memory and history.” History has now clearly become the enemy of memory. “History,” says Nora, “is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its

true mission is to suppress and destroy it.” But of course it cannot; memory, or what David Lowenthal has called “heritage,” is necessary for any society. Heritage may be a worthless sham, its credos fallacious, even perverse; but, writes Lowenthal, “heritage, no less than history, is essential to knowing and acting.” It fosters community, identity, and continuity, and in the end makes possible history itself. “By means of it we tell ourselves who we are, where we came from, and to what we belong.” We thus tamper with our heritage, our memory, at our peril.

This confrontation between history and memory may be less direct and less serious than Plumb, Nora, or Lowenthal suggests. Many of the new cultural historians seem not to want to destroy memory as much as reshape it and make it useful to their particular cause, whatever it may be. Many of them have an instrumentalist view of history and see themselves essentially as cultural critics who wish to manipulate the past for the sake of the present. Rather than trying to understand the past on its own terms, these historians want the past to be immediately relevant and useful; they want to use history to empower people in the present, to help them develop self-identity, or to enable them to break free of that past.

In their well-intentioned but often crude efforts to make the past immediately usable, these scholars undermine the integrity and the pastness of the past. So we have some anthropologists claiming that the Iroquois confederation was an important influence on the framing of the Constitution in 1787. Although there is not a shred of historical evidence for this claim, the fact that it might raise the self-esteem of Native American students is sufficient justification for some scholars that it be taught. Even the distinguished sociologist Nathan Glazer suggests that the myth might be taught to elementary school students, though not to students in junior and senior high schools.

Perhaps we can agree with Glazer that truth is not the only criterion for judging what might be taught in the social sciences, but surely falsehood ought not to be allowed on any grounds. Maybe this sort of useful and presentist approach to the past is inherent in being American. As the perceptive English historian J. R. Pole says, “What one misses [in America] is that sense, inescapable in Europe, of the total, crumbled irrecoverability of the past, of its differentness, of the fact that it is dead.”

Even many of those historians who concede the pastness of the past and investigate “the past as a foreign country” do so primarily as anthropologists or social critics, seeing in the strange ideas and behavior of past peoples either alternatives to or object lessons for a present they find oppressive and objectionable. “Their vision of the past turns them toward the future,” wrote Nietzsche of such sham historians; they “hope that justice will yet come and happiness is be-

hind the mountain they are climbing. . . . They do not know how unhistorical their thought and actions are in spite of all their history.” So these sorts of unhistorical historians ransack the past for examples of harmonious well-knit communities that we today ought to emulate, or they seek out abuses of patriarchal power in the past that we in the present must avoid. Much of the work of these present-minded historians thus does violence to what ought to be the historian’s central concern—the authenticity of the past—and commits what the great French historian Marc Bloch called “the most unpardonable of sins”—anachronism.

I am not suggesting that history has no connection to the present; I am not advocating that history become antiquarianism. Quite the contrary. It is natural for historians to want to relate the past to the needs and problems of the present. Indeed, historical explanation is only possible because we today have different perspectives from those of the historical participants we are writing about. Most new historical investigations begin with an attempt to understand the historical circumstances that lie behind a present-day problem or situation. It is not surprising that our best recent work on the origins and nature of slavery coincided with the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Or that our recent rich investigations into the history of women grew out of the women’s movement of the past three or four decades. This is as it should be: the problems and issues of the present should be the stimulus for our forays into the past. It is natural for us to want to discover the sources, the origins, of our present circumstances.

But the present should not be the criterion for what we find in the past. Our perceptions and explanations of the past should not be directly shaped by the issues and problems of our own time. The best and most serious historians have come to know that, even when their original impulse to write history came from a pressing present problem. The best and most sophisticated histories of slavery and the best and most sophisticated histories of women soon broke loose from the immediate demands of the present and have sought to portray the past in its own context with all its complexity.

The more we study events and situations in the past, the more complicated and complex we find them to be. The impulse of the best historians is always to penetrate ever more deeply into the circumstances of the past and to explain the complicated context of past events. The past in the hands of expert historians becomes a different world, a complicated world that requires considerable historical imagination to recover with any degree of accuracy. The complexity that we find in that different world comes with the realization that the participants were limited by forces that they did not understand or were even aware of—forces such as demographic movements, economic developments, or large-scale cultural patterns. The drama, indeed the tragedy, of history comes from our understanding of the tension that existed between the conscious wills and intentions of the participants in the past and the underlying conditions that con-

strained their actions and shaped their future.

Drew Faust, in her superb book *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*, published in 1996, nicely captures this complicated character of history. What she hoped to do in her book, she says, was “to give a sense of how people are shaped and constrained by the world into which they are born, of how their choices are limited by the ‘taken for grantedness’ of their social universe.” Faust writes that she “wanted to show how hard it is to cope with change, to adjust to a new world, even a world that to us seems unquestionably more morally and socially desirable—and to show how people managed not just to accept, but to justify social arrangements we today find abhorrent.”

## Too often postmodernists think that by demonstrating the cultural construction of reality, they have made it easier for men and women to change that reality at will.

To be able to see the participants of the past in this comprehensive way, to see them in the context of their own time, to describe their blindness and folly with sympathy, to recognize the extent to which they were caught up in changing circumstances over which they had little control, and to realize the degree to which they created results they never intended—to know all this about the past and to be able to relate it without anachronistic distortion to our present is what is meant by having a historical sense.

To possess a historical sense does not mean simply to possess information about the past. It means to have a different consciousness, a historical consciousness, to have incorporated into our minds a mode of understanding that profoundly influences the way we look at the world. History adds another dimension to our view of the world and enriches our experience. Someone with a historical sense sees reality differently: in four dimensions. If it is self-identity that we want, then history deepens and complicates that identity by showing us how it has developed through time. It tells us how we got to be the way we are. And that historically developed being is not something easily manipulated or transformed.

We have heard a lot over the past several decades about the cultural construction of reality: the so-called postmodern sense that the world is made by us. Historians have little quarrel with this notion of the cultural construction of reality—as long as this is understood as the historical construction of reality. Too often postmodernists think that by demonstrating the cultural construction of reality, they have made it easier for men and women to change that reality at will. If culture and society are made by us, they can be remade to suit our present needs, or so it seems. But anyone with a historical sense knows differently, knows that things are more complicated than that. History, experience, custom—developments through time—give whatever strength and solidity the conventions and values

by which we live our lives have. Those conventions and values, however humanly created, are not easily manipulated or transformed. They, of course, have changed and will continue to change, but not necessarily in ways that we intend or want.

Take, for example, our debates over the meaning of the Constitution. Some believe that the Constitution has an absolute original meaning and want us to recover that absolute original meaning in our current interpretation of the Constitution. Others believe that the Constitution means today whatever we want it to mean—that’s what they mean by a “living Constitution.” Neither of these extreme positions is correct. Historians know that the meaning of the Constitution has changed and will continue to change through time.

But they also know that no one is free today to give whatever meaning he or she wants to give to it. In our choice of interpretations we are limited by history: by the conventions, values, and meanings we have inherited from the past. Those who fear that abandoning a timeless absolute standard for interpreting the Constitution will lead to moral and intellectual chaos are wrong. History, experience, and custom are powerful restraints on what we can think and do. We are not as free from the past as we think we are. Knowing this is to have a historical sense.

I don’t want to suggest that this historical sense, this concern for the pastness of the past, implies a lack of interest in the future. In fact, I agree with the historian E. H. Carr that a sense of the future is essential to a sense of the past. In his series of lectures on *What is History?*, published in 1961, Carr pointed out that the writers of classical antiquity had little sense of history because they had little sense of a different future. “Thucydides,” he said, “believed that nothing significant had happened in time before the events which he described, and that nothing significant was likely to happen thereafter.” For the ancients “history was not going anywhere.”

If one believes in a different past, one has to believe in a different future. Without a belief in the future there will be no concern for the past, indeed, no history at all. The writer P. D. James emphasized this point vividly in her curious, dark 1992 novel *The Children of Men*, one of the few deviations from her usual Inspector Dalgliesh mysteries. She posits a time twenty-five years in the future when all human males have become sterile and no child can ever be born again. That is, the youngest person alive is twenty-five, and when all the twenty-five-year-olds finally die off, there will be no more humans. James’s story is set in England, one of the most historically minded of all cultures. Her hero is an Oxford don, a historian, who discovers that without a future there cannot be much interest in the past. “History, which interprets the past to understand the present and confront the future,” he says, “is the least rewarding discipline for a dying species.” The historian-hero tries to imagine a world without a living human being—“the great cathedrals and temples, the palaces and the castles, existing throughout the uninhabited centuries, the British Library . . . with its carefully preserved manuscripts and

books which no one will ever again open or read.” Of course, in this doomed world there are still some people who read books about the past, more out of habit and what a colleague calls “the comfort of culture.” All such readers want to do, his colleague tells the hero, “is to escape temporarily into a more agreeable and permanent world. We all do it, dear boy,” he says, “only you and I call it scholarship.”

I don’t think that’s what historical scholarship is for most historians. History is not just comfort food for an anxious present. Yet it does offer a way of coming to terms with an anxious present and an unpredictable future. Realizing the extent to which people in the past struggled with circumstances that they scarcely understood is perhaps the most important insight flowing from historical study. To understand the past in all its complexity is to acquire historical wisdom and humility and indeed a tragic sense of life. A tragic sense does not mean a sad or pessimistic sense of life; it means a sense of the limitations of life.

Unlike sociology, political science, psychology, and the other social sciences, which try to breed confidence in managing the future, history tends to inculcate skepticism about our ability to manipulate and control purposefully our destinies. Even the eminent scholars Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, who in their book, *Thinking in Time* (1986), have tried to show how history might be used by government decision makers, have had to concede that the most that history can teach governmental leaders is prudence and cautiousness. In today’s world that may not be such a bad thing.

History that reveals the utter differentness and discontinuity of the past tends to undermine that crude instrumental and presentist use of the past that we Americans have been prone to. We Americans resist this kind of historical consciousness. We do not want to hear about the unusability and pastness of the past or about the limitations within which people in the past were obliged to act. We do not want to learn about the blindness of people in the past or about the inescapable boundaries of our actions. Such a history has no immediate utility and is apt to remind us of our own powerlessness, of our own inability to control events and predict the future.

I don’t want to suggest that this kind of historical or tragic sense is necessarily deterministic or fatalistic. We do not have to fall into the pathetic mood of the French historian Fernand Braudel, who sees the individual “imprisoned within a destiny in which he himself has little hand, fixed in a landscape in which the infinite perspectives of the long term stretch into the distances both behind him and before.” A sense of the tragedy of the historical process is not necessarily pessimistic, and it does not deny the individual’s responsibility for his or her actions; indeed, by making people aware of the circumstances impinging on and limiting them, a historical sense makes true freedom and moral choice—and wisdom—possible. All the great tragic novelists of the 19th century—George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Henry James—wrote with this kind of deep historical sense.

Yet this kind of historical consciousness, this emphasis on the complexity of human affairs, does have its dangers for our moral life, as Richard Hofstadter

pointed out forty years ago. “The great fear that animates the most feverishly committed historians,” Hofstadter wrote, “is that our continual rediscovery of the complexity of social interests, the variety of roles and motives of political leaders, the unintended consequences of political actions, the valid interests that have so often been sacrificed in the pursuit of other equally valid interests, may give us not only a keener sense of the structural complexity of our society in the past, but also a sense of the moral complexity of social action that will lead us toward political immobility.” Understanding the complexity of human affairs, seeing clearly both sides of all issues, knowing that few things work out the way we intend, may breed in us caution and indecisiveness. Imbued with a strong historical sense, we are apt to become one of Nietzsche’s historically minded men who could not “shake himself free from the delicate network of his truth and righteousness for a downright act of will or desire.” A sense of history, Neustadt and May admit, can be “an enemy of vision.”

Fortunately, however, there seems to be little dan-

ger of our becoming too historically minded in America today. We Americans have such a thin and meager sense of history that we cannot get too much of it. What we need more than anything is a deeper and fuller sense of the historical process, a sense of where we have come from and how we have become what we are. This kind of historical sense will give us the best guide we’ll ever have for groping our way into an unpredictable future.

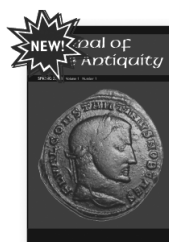
*Gordon Wood is Alva O. Way University Professor and professor of history at Brown University. He is the author of many works, including The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787 (University of North Carolina Press, 1969), which won the Bancroft Prize and the John H. Dunning Prize in 1970, and The Radicalism of the American Revolution (Knopf, 1992), which won the Pulitzer Prize for History and the Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize in 1993. His The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin (Penguin, 2004) was awarded the Julia Ward Howe Prize by the Boston Authors Club in 2005.*

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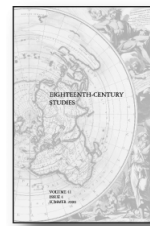
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