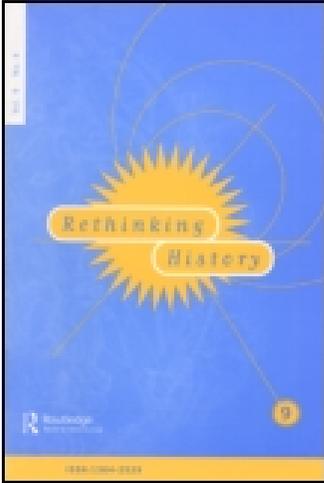


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INTERVIEW

Alun Munslow: in conversation with Keith Jenkins*

A couple of years ago the idea came to me that *Rethinking History* should celebrate (I think that's the word I'd like to use); to celebrate the tremendous work that Alun Munslow has done as founding Editor of the journal for, in 2012, 15 years. And, quite fortuitously, I also happened to be aware that, in 2012, Alun would reach the age of 65. And so to mark this 'double anniversary' I suggested to Alun (as it might be a little presumptuous for the Editor to invite himself to reflect on his career in the 'Invitation to Historians' slot), that I might have a 'conversation' with him that would come out around 2011/12. Well, I've never seen anybody accept an invitation so willingly ... and so the arrangements were made for what you are now about to read.

Keywords: experimental histories; future of history; historying; incongruity; postmodernism; *Rethinking History* journal

A Note on Alun Munslow and Keith Jenkins

After leaving Staffordshire University as Emeritus Professor of History and Historical Theory, Alun Munslow was appointed Visiting Professor in History and Historical Theory at the University of Chichester in 2006. He is UK Editor of *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* and General Editor of the series *History: Concepts, Theories and Practice*, published by Pearson.

He has produced a number of books over the past 20 years which include a reprint of *Our American cousins* (1882) by the Chartist leader W.E. Adams and which he coedited with Owen R. Ashton (1992), and *Henry Demarest Lloyd's critiques of American capitalism, 1881–1903*, a collection of Lloyd's lectures and speeches also coedited with Owen (1995).

However, Alun's other books are all on 'doing and thinking about history' although the first, *Discourse and culture: The creation of America, 1870–1920*, Routledge (1992 and 2009), also doubles as a multi-biography of six 'American cultural figures'. The rest of his books fall within the 'what is and what is not history' genre, and he is perhaps still best known for his *Deconstructing history*, Routledge (1997 and 2006). His others are *The Routledge companion to historical studies*, Routledge (2000 and 2006);

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The new history, Pearson (2003), *The nature of history reader*, Routledge (2004) (with Keith Jenkins); *Experiments in rethinking history*, Routledge (2004) (with Robert A. Rosenstone); *Narrative and history*, Palgrave Macmillan (2007); *Manifestos for historians*, Routledge (2007) (with Keith Jenkins and Sue Morgan), and *The future of history*, Palgrave (2010). He has also published an eclectic range of scholarly articles in a variety of journals, and probably delivered (as he himself puts it) far too many conference papers 'judging by some of the reactions of members of the audience'.

Alun lives quietly in rural Staffordshire with Jane and their dog Rosie, and between whose walks with the latter he is completing a book for Routledge entitled *A history of history*. If he can find a publisher he would also like to write an 'experimental autobiography/biography' of the American political radical Henry Demarest Lloyd (1847–1903). He has, in fact, been fiddling with this now for at least 15 years ...

Keith Jenkins retired from the University of Chichester as Emeritus Professor of Historical Theory in September 2008. Apart from honouring a few writing and speaking commitments, he decided that, on retirement, he would end his 'history career' period. This conversation conducted in October and November 2010, is his last venture into print; it is fitting that he should have 'come out of retirement' for the last time to take part in this conversation with his friend.



Figure 1. Alun Munslow (left) and Keith Jenkins

KJ: Alun, though this may smack too much of linearity, I want to start at least ‘towards’ the beginning. In your writings and in various papers you’ve given at conferences, you often refer to the fact that you began your career as a bog-standard socio-economic historian specialising in American history, that your Ph.D. is a classic empirical work within which there is a heavy statistical element, and that the historian you once were is a very, very different one from the ‘theorist’ you are now. So I wondered if you could fill in the details here; exactly how and why and when did you morph from one sort of historian to another?

AM: I started out as a hard core social science historian reading history and politics (Bradford University, 1967–70). I wanted to read Economics but my maths wasn’t up to it so I switched to History and Politics. My (University of Wales) Ph.D. (1979) was entitled ‘The Urban Political Assimilation of European Immigrants in the United States, 1870–1920’. It was – perhaps unsurprisingly – very much a product of the first major intellectual influence I experienced which was the 1960s/70s vogue for social science history and statistical analysis (cliometrics – in this instance modelling immigrant political behaviour via probability theory supported by correlation analysis, coefficients of elasticity, regression equations ...).

I started teaching at North Staffordshire Polytechnic in 1974 (Liberal Studies to mining engineers and American history on a new history degree) as a Lecturer Grade 2. Thirty-one years later (in 2005) I was made redundant (due to a collapse in recruitment in History – nothing to do with me, of course) from what had by then become Staffordshire University. Along the way I managed to acquire a personal chair in History and Historical Theory. A delightful irony in this is that I owe my ‘conversion to postmodernism’ to the colleague in Literature who became the Dean who eventually sacked me ... It was she who suggested in the mid-to-late 1970s that I should read Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (as we were planning an interdisciplinary History and Literature degree).

After absorbing White on history as a literary artefact I suppose I was ‘intellectually interpellated’ into a completely new way of thinking about the nature of history and historicising. After a decade of teaching on the interdisciplinary history and literature degree (from the late 1970s to the late 1980s), I strayed into the murky intellectual waters of ‘Continental philosophy’. I then became a serious fan of Michel Foucault. I also found myself reading Antonio Gramsci and Althusser *et al.* Now, this heady mix of White, Foucault, Gramsci and Althusser, pushed me to think about writing a book on the nature of American cultural change in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This turned out to be *Discourse and culture: The creation of America, 1870–1920* (1992). This consisted of a series of chapters on key ‘organic intellectuals’ that ranged from Andrew Carnegie to Jane Addams. Unsurprisingly I deployed insights borrowed from White,

Foucault and the others; I connected Whitean tropology to Foucault's analysis of epistemes, Gramsci's notion of hegemony and Althusserian ideas on ideological interpellation.

The second great influence on my thinking about the nature of history was actually your book *Rethinking history* (1991). Your analysis of what doing history in a postmodern world entailed just blew me away. I first met you Keith, at a conference we both attended in the early 1990s – in the car park as I recall – we were both unsure where we should be parking our cars. That note of uncertainty has not, of course remained. Considering we are both epistemic sceptics, I think we are now pretty sure where to park our cars!

I continued my interest in American history in the 1990s but I was now also itching to write a theoretical analysis and defence of 'postmodern history'. This was *Deconstructing history* (1997). I was lucky that the then editor at Routledge (Heather McCallum) saw some value in that book, and she also asked if there was any mileage in a journal dedicated to publishing radical 'postmodern history thinking and practice'. This turned into the journal *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*. Obviously – and as you know – the title was a straight crib of your book.

My next lucky break was in the result of my search for a US co-editor for the journal. This was Robert A. Rosenstone, the leading American 'postmodern historian' and film theorist. He heard on the academic grapevine that I was seeking a US colleague as a co-editor for the journal and he volunteered himself. He became the third major influence on my thinking. His incisive analysis that connects content and form and his dazzling imagination concerning the experimental nature of historicising, especially as film, has been a strong and continuing influence on my work. So, the blame for my morphing into the historian I am today belongs above all to Hayden White, Robert Rosenstone and yourself.

KJ: I wonder if I could push you a little further on this. I mean, quite a lot of people read Hayden White. A lot read Robert Rosenstone and, I suppose, people read me. But more often than not this reading is followed by much qualification or by total rejection; most 'academic historians' who may have dipped into 'theory' still continue to be pretty 'unreconstructed' whatever they may say (just read their books!). But you were different. You actually liked this stuff and, more importantly, acted upon it. But why? What made you so receptive; what did White *et al.* allow you to think and do that your previous ways of thinking prevented you from doing and why did 'newness' seem so important to you at the time?

AM: Good question. A short narrative 'answer' might be that it just seemed to make more sense than all my training and thinking hitherto. Happily, and unlike St Augustine, it didn't take half a lifetime to change my mind – just a few years in the mid-late 1980s. By the same token I did not

just spontaneously become the empirical, epistemic, ontological and semantic sceptic I am now. But I guess there was a bale of hay in the wind when I did a paper on the American historian of the frontier Frederick Jackson Turner in which I argued that the historical text (the famous Turner 'Frontier Thesis') was a literary artefact rather than a 'reflection upon' what actually happened in the opening up of the American frontier and what it means. This 'literary analysis' of Turner's frontier thesis made its debut at the American Studies Association Convention, San Diego, California, in 1985. It eventually appeared as an article coedited with a colleague in *Literature at Staffordshire* (Dick Ellis) in 1986. From then on I regularly touted the idea of history as a literary artefact at conferences of the British Association for American Studies as well as in seminar papers through to the early 1990s. Talking about synecdoche to historians was always an entertaining if largely futile exercise ... and it still is.

But my 'literary turn' was also both armoured and sustained by reading an essay in 1989 by David Harlan in the *American Historical Review* which was crucial intellectual support for my shift. Harlan argued that historians should simply drop the question of what counts as proper history and accept the fact that there are just different kinds of historical writing. As to why I had no intellectual stake in a particular way of doing history, well, this is simply because I was convinced by the logic and sense of what White, Rosenstone, Harlan and yourself were arguing. I was not aware of being prevented from doing history in any particular way. I just did it the way I wanted to do it.

Now, by one of those coincidences that may well change lives, this intellectual freedom also fitted in with the academic situation in which I existed at that time. At the institution in which I worked, in the 1980s and early 1990s there was no drive or need to research and publish and thereby commit oneself to the development of an intellectual inclination and range of publications that was capable of metrication and measurement. I am thinking here of course of the irksome Research Assessment Exercise which has blighted the lives of so many academics and stifled much epistemically radical thinking. And which still does. So I did not have to worry much about establishing a curriculum vitae that demonstrated expertise and publications in an 'acknowledged genre of thinking and practice'. I could basically do what Harlan suggested and think what I wanted about the nature of history. And I soon caught the bug of writing about it.

This desire to write was further and very deeply influenced by what for me was the 'newness' of the early Frank Ankersmit and his theory of narrative substances, as well as a growing array of 'continental theorists' ranging from Carrard and Ricoeur to the other usual suspects like Derrida. The upshot of all this was my second book, *Deconstructing history*, which

appeared in 1997 about the time the journal *Rethinking History* got off the ground. In that book I outlined my simple model of historians as more or less conforming to three mind sets or sets of epistemic choices - the reconstructionist, constructionist and deconstructionist. It was that modest idea that really propelled me into a state of apostasy.

So, as to what this little narrative means, I guess one might deploy White's formalist structure of trope, emplotment, argument and ideological implication and you decide. I have no idea what it 'really' means. I think most of what I have said is empirically accurate even if I have left out a lot of characters and readings that could have made an appearance. I guess like all narratives of this sort this one is also fictive. Anyway, I was never pressured into being a historian of a particular kind and so ended up as a happy apostate.

KJ: The answer you've just given refers pretty much to, if you like, academic influences, including institutional ones. But I suppose that what I was also interested in with regard to your motivation to write 'differently' was whether this had (and has) a political dimension too; that the differences you wanted (and want) to make, not only go beyond history but that it may be the case (as it certainly was and is explicitly the case for me) that 're-thinking history' was a vehicle for, and expression of, your political position. After all, the recognition that history per se functions as an ideological discourse with effects is a commonplace. So was and is politics, however you wish to construe it, somewhere self-consciously in the 'mix' for you and, if so, how would you factor this in as a 'determining desire' behind your work(s); your interventions?

AM: Well, in terms of politics I have never been convinced by the anti-postmodern argument that being an epistemic sceptic neuters you politically and as a consequence you cannot advance a political agenda. As to whether my own politics somehow helped manufacture or influence my epistemic beliefs, well, I have only occasionally considered the question. So now you pose it I should think of a coherent answer. I have never been self-conscious about party political politics when I think about how to 'do history'. I suppose at the most banal level – and usually unconsciously – I think and write from the broad perspective of the economically exploited and dispossessed. I am some sort of lefty. So, I would never want to think that those who put the 'tory' into 'history' would have the last word.

I suppose I learned to be both a humanist and a socialist from my father (who knew little about the realities of the past except through his own lived experience) but I have never subscribed to the judgement that many historians seem to have about history being the vehicle for revealing the true nature of human existence. Sure, the owners of the means of production exploit everyone else but you don't need the *Royal Historical Society's* 'mission statement' defending 'scholarly history' to figure that out. Now, I

think the basis for my historical/political position is twofold. The first is the not-too-difficult-to-grasp notion that the same body of data can produce as many interpretations as you have historians – the process of under-determination. Think of the Elton versus Carr spats. Or you and Perez Zagorin. Same corpse – different autopsy results. And second, who needs a detailed scholarly knowledge of the past to make ethical and ideological decisions in the here and now? In fact, if that were the case, then 99% of the population would be ethically illiterate because they know relatively little about ‘the reality of the past’.

I think another issue that muddies our grasp of the past/present relationship is that we are all subject to ideological interpellation while ‘learning the lessons of history’. As Sande Cohen and Martin Davies brilliantly argue, we are all ‘used’ by history more than we use it. So, I am more than happy to agree with the notion that one can do history from any ideological position one wants – and that all historians do. Those historians who think they can be ‘objective’ just don’t get it – to use a Jenkins phrase. So, to elevate ‘getting the data straight’ to the primary position in ‘doing history’ is putting the cart before the horse. Data and inference of what it most likely means are equally as important as how we chose to emplot, ideologise, figure and argue. But to elevate it to the forefront really is a gross oversimplification of that complex cultural discourse we call ‘doing history’. This can be demonstrated in many different ways but approaching the matter via ‘politics’ is as good a way as any. For me the White model gives us the best start to come to terms with the past–present relationship as historians: ideology, emplotment, argument and trope plus detailed source analysis and smart inference seem to me to be ‘the conditions of possibility’ of every historical work.

So, although I don’t think that I have ever self-consciously judged my epistemic take on doing history as in any way being politically motivated or even politically inflected, it must be because I am an ethical creature. I am obviously aware that I am not objective and that I have always got a ‘bee in my bonnet’ to use the immortal phrase of the late Arthur Marwick. And I guess this applies to all historians. So, I don’t think I even get annoyed by the invariably self-satisfied and smug notion – quite rare I suppose these days – that historians must try to suspend their politics. This claim is no more convincing than the argument that you can write a history without imposing an emplotment or using an argument. I think ideology ought to be considered as just another ‘factor’ along with everything else. My apologies for just stating the obvious.

OK, having said all that I have to admit that I remain almost wholly unaware of injecting my politics into my thinking on the nature of history. But I am conscious of the ethics of ‘doing history’ in terms of my epistemic choices. So, I assume my philosophical decisions about the nature of history are in part driven by my ethico-political decisions in more or less complex

ways. Now you have posed the question I might do it more self-consciously in the future. A book entitled 'ethical historying' might be necessary to write ... But then you have already done that with your *Why History?* and your analysis of the undecidability of the decision and your conclusion that we can survive pretty well without 'modernist histories' or, indeed, even histories at all.

KJ: This is an interesting reply, because it seems to me that you have always written 'ethical historying' texts. We might come to some individual texts or themes shortly, but first I wondered if you could say something about your work on the journal, *Rethinking History*. It's been running for 15 years and, right from the start – from, say, your Editorial in issue Number 1 – you seem to have had an 'agenda' that you haven't really deviated from; certain 'ethical' principles concerning your idea of good history/historying that has steered the journal and to which I think your various co-editors have nuanced but hardly objected to. So, could you, for those who can't instantly recall the said Editorial(s), briefly remind us of their guiding principles and then, turning a critical eye over the last 15 years, say if you're happy with the way things have worked out? Or, put another way, what do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the journal vis-à-vis your 'desires' for it?

AM: Well, I am more than happy to admit that *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* has always been collaborative from the start. The support from the outset of yourself, Robert Rosenstone, Laura Mason the first reviews editor, and a number of editorial members was and remains essential to its development. Of course, measuring success is tricky. Some professional historians might not regard it as ever being a success given its agenda. As to what that agenda was and is, well the first three editorials do summarise it I guess. I wrote the first two and Robert the third. But even before that the scholars who had been asked to comment on the proposal all supported – with one exception – the idea of a new journal the express function of which was to address and critique the 'epistemic take' on what H/history was.

In the proposal and in the first editorial I thus outlined my view that upper and lower case history did not either separately or together constitute an autonomous, objective, representationally truthful and disinterested discipline – and most of the referees agreed. Beyond that there was no agreement on what to do about it. And this is exactly what *RH* set out to do – develop an analysis of historical thinking and practice that rejected the argument that history was essentially an empirical-analytical undertaking, arguing instead that it was a culturally implicated narrative discourse as just the most cursory of analyses should suggest. This was also 'the message' of my first book too, I suppose. I guess my argument was that *RH* was there not merely to publish the product of that thinking but to inquire into the

fictive nature of our engagement with the past. This, it turned out, was to promote radically sceptical epistemic thinking and foster experimental historying.

As some sort of attempt to judge its success, after reading a recent piece in *The Observer* Review that addressed experimental literature, I wrote to the appropriate editor suggesting a piece on ‘experimental historying’. The result was silence – not even a reply to my email. What was I to infer? My message didn’t arrive? Or, more likely perhaps – and here I sound like a proper historian – was ignored because of, what, interest but no room? Or, daft idea from some Boondocks academic that the Editor had never heard of? My point in retelling this is what? What would a proper historian do with this ‘bit of the past’? In re-telling this little ‘historical narrative’ where is ‘the truth’, what is ‘the story’ and how could it be expressed differently in alternative expressive forms? Eventually Robert and I theorised these kinds of question in our 2004 book collection *Experiments in rethinking history*. The essays published in this collection demonstrated one of the key purposes of the journal in my view. Anyway, it was *The Observer’s* loss.

In confronting the basic precepts of self-styled proper history that separates source from interpreter, that accepts the notion that the most likely story is back there, and that both are facilitated by the processes of smart inference and Bayesian probability, I came to believe H/history was far more complex than that list suggests. And this I believe entailed much further thinking about practice – expressing history. I have long come to the conclusion that in ‘doing history’, form always precedes the content of the past.

In theorising this, I suppose the three guiding principles of so called proper history – or what, following your lead, I call ‘history of a particular kind’ – are three doubts. The first is to doubt the conventional notion of the operation of the correspondence theory of truth within what is a fictive narrative. Second, the unalloyed faith of most historians in metaphysical realism as defined and supposedly demonstrated in the epistemic connection between evidence and theory. And third is my belief that the ontological status of history is that of a linguistic-narrative and cultural artefact that, as White so famously said, is as much imagined as found.

Anyway, in the second editorial, I moved toward a notion that has preoccupied me ever since. This is the simple idea that the only connection we have with the past is through the historian’s descriptions of it. Now most historians might today say they agree with that idea up to a point. But they would use the concept of interpretation as if the past was some kind of foreign language that could be translated, deciphered and rendered pretty much for what it was and most likely meant. Given this very odd belief, most of them still try to square the epistemic circle by also claiming that while historians narrate the past as history, that act

does no injury to being able to ‘tell the truth about history’. As you know, I believe this notion of ‘as’ and ‘about’ get confused. What I take to be the clear and unavoidable position – that ‘the past’ and ‘H/history’ belong to different ontological categories – has devastating implications for ‘practical realist’ historians – and for their historical practice. This is what the vast majority of them either fail to see or, worse, just disregard. They are so wrapped up in their role as ‘gatekeepers of the past’ that ‘they just don’t get it’.

What all this meant to me in 1997 – and it still does – is that our ‘historical practice’ is all that we have as historians. In just about every book I have written I have made this argument in one form or another and, in various ways, I have tried to tease out the implications for ‘historical thinking and practice’. This is why Robert Rosenstone and I were an intellectual marriage made in heaven – or hell if you believe some of our critics. Robert has offered a sustained and luminous critique of conventional historical understanding through his work on film as history and history as film. His 1994 *Revisioning history* and then his 1998 *Visions of the past* (which came out just as *RH* was getting started) were key texts for me. He subsequently produced his *History on film/film on history* in 2006 which is a further elegant and sophisticated insight into how H/history can be understood in radically different ways than it is at present. If H/history is all we have, then I think we need to address the epistemic functioning of the historian and Robert did that in his books and in his first *RH* editorial.

In *RH* vol. 1, number 3, Robert brilliantly cut to the chase when he addressed the role of the historian as first and foremost a thinker and author. Of course, in his path-breaking narrative of American nineteenth-century sojourners in Japan, *Mirror in the Shrine* (1991), Robert had already broken the mould of conventional history. But his first editorial was a breath-taking examination of history as autobiography. Implicit in this was the astute and radical notion of history as an authorial artwork. A great deal of my thinking in the past 15 years has been built on this notion – that the historian is an *auteur*. But, in addition, his argument that history is always an authorial act meant it could be experimental, overtly ‘personal’. I have pursued these notions at some length in my last couple of books – viewing H/history as an act of authorialism and then asking the obvious question – what might it turn into in the future?

OK – the strengths and weaknesses of the journal. Well, the strengths are the ideas of the people who have written in it and those editors who have published them, as well as the journal publishers Taylor & Francis and their production staff. They have all without exception been and remain exceptional people and colleagues. The intellectual strengths of the journal are immense in my view. There is a passion in being involved with *Rethinking History* that I have never come across in my dealings with

other journals which are in far too many cases just up-market franking machines. I like to believe that there is an exceptional level of care and attention paid to the process of publication from initial contact made by authors through to the finished product. So, for me the first greatest strength of the journal is our policy of discussion and dialogue with authors. We never just read, referee and accept/reject. *RH* editors always try to engage constructively with the ideas of those who submit. Very occasionally we get submissions that are just not right for us mainly because a very tiny handful of authors don't seem to read the first page of our website where we set out our intellectual stall. But even then we take the time to explain what we are about. The other strengths are certainly in editing and production.

As for weaknesses, they are virtually all mine. And no, this is not some kind of cloying false modesty on my part. I can be really tetchy and short-tempered with people who don't read the website, or submit stuff that is plainly meant for other journals, or fail to make prior contact before submission if they want or – more usually – need advice. Now, *RH* is not a drop-in centre for historian malcontents and anti-epistemic repeat offenders, because we do like to debate with historians who openly question the key ideas in which we are interested. And we have, we do and we will publish essays and articles that critique our views. But we do enjoy assisting people who have questions and doubts. And while it might just be pure luck, everyone I have been involved with at *RH* has always seemed to have a strong sense of humour and share in some degree an ironic view of what being a historian involves. But this little narrative does not necessarily have a comedic plot because I fear nothing will be resolved in the final act or chapter as is supposed to happen in comedies.

So, am I happy the way *RH* has turned out? Yes, so far I am. I like to think we have published radical thinking and practice and are a unique site for those historians who have wanted to examine their own authorial functioning – producing history that problematises history as Robert said. And, of course, we are within a critical tradition that I would applaud. Many other theorists have pursued history by critiquing its properties of cultural imbrication – from Nietzsche through Gramsci to Sande Cohen and Martin Davies. But, unhappily I think, most professionalised H/history remains in a really bad way if we want it to be a useful (critical) cultural discourse. I think this is because too many of its practitioners – though well-meaning – are barking in the epistemic dark. Or should that be barking up the wrong ontological tree? Actually, I think they are doing both.

KJ: Can I pick up on this idea of the reluctance by historians 'of a certain kind' to be 'open to newness', not least when I think that you and others have now shown pretty convincingly the massive intellectual shortcomings and incoherence of their epistemic claims to historical knowledge and

understanding. So before I get on to asking about some of the thematics of your books and the future of history as you see it, can I ask you this. It seems to me that your postmodern-type critiques of bog-standard history is pretty unanswerable. But the question that remains is why do mainstream historians refuse to 'get it'; why can't they embrace what I think of as *liberating* arguments and move what is the most conservative of discourses toward a new form of life; of thinking and living and being alive and alert to future possibilities: why do you think they are so literally 'backward looking'?

AM: It is very interesting that in an anonymous review for my book proposal on the history of history – a book that I hope will be nearing completion by the time this conversation is printed – one reader said I was erecting a straw man in my description of 'historians of a particular kind' as being generally unwilling to examine what they do. This reviewer argued that historians are far more self-conscious and aware of 'relativism' than I give them credit for. In support of her or his objections, she or he subpoenaed Dilthey, Burckhardt, Beard and Carr as examples of historians who are self-conscious about what they do and the relativism inherent in 'doing history'. Now, I would hardly regard that selection as demonstrating a high level of self-consciousness about the fragility of the epistemic beliefs and practices of most practitioner historians today. I do not believe Carr or the others – probably because they were dead - engaged with the intellectual revolutions of the last 50 years? And neither had this reviewer it seems.

I suppose, then, that my answer would be pretty much along the lines articulated by other critics from Paul Ricoeur and Hayden White through Sande Cohen, Robert Rosenstone, Martin Davies and yourself – and many others of course. For me most historians today and still far too many theorists don't get it because (a) multi-sceptical criticism is philosophically unconvincing for them, (b) they dislike what they see as the dreadful cultural consequences if their beliefs and practices were suddenly dispensed with, (c) history is not just another narrative form, and (d) such changes would usher in the collapse of society as we know it. The contemporary rush to domesticate and thereby neuter poststructuralist thought is testament to this desire, I think. This is the direct result of the effort to shore up such failing but simplistic verities as correspondence truth, objectivity, practical realist common sense and representationalism. Of course, it is always going to be an uphill struggle for you and me because of the cultural institutions built and dedicated to defend practical realist epistemology. I suppose such proper historians will say that as long as it's just you and me talking to each other and they get to write the history syllabuses we will not get the chance to pollute the minds of future generations of young historians.

But there is more bad news, I think, because of what we might call the professional fear of not being able to 'learn from history'. Now I don't think

we can learn much if anything from any history narrative that purports to say knowing what happened in the past can produce lessons for the present. As an old socialist (see, my politics are hardening as we speak!), I do not want to live without ethics or for that matter deny the existence of statements of justified belief that refer us to the meanness, madness and viciously exploitative side of the human spirit – whether now or in the past. But you don't absolutely and of imperial necessity need only a history of a particular kind in order to demonstrate bad faith, or decide what we think is morally right or wrong. For me there is no given moral lesson or imperative in empiricism.

As you and others have said, the first philosophy is ethics. So as a historian who likes to think they care about the process of 'historying', I am simply saying that history of 'a particular kind' is not at the top of my list when it comes to facilitating my being able to make ethical decisions in navigating my present. I do not need to know the excruciating details of the Crusades to believe that the Bush–Blair invasion of Iraq was a criminally stupid act even if wrapped in the rhetoric of creating freedom. Anyway, as someone once said, if history teaches, then why do we keep making the same dumb mistakes? I immediately think of the British 'History and Policy' organisation that says it works for better public policy through an understanding of history. I guess they would argue that knowledge of the past helps avoid past mistakes. Well, that argument falls at the first hurdle I think, and the second, and so on and so forth. It just makes no kind of sense epistemically.

Take the concept of revisionism. I don't wish to and so I won't trivialise what most professional historians do – or the honest efforts of organisations like 'History and Policy' to do right in the present by re-examining the past. But challenging the 'assumptions of historians' – which I presume means their 'misreading' the available evidence – is really like re-organising the chairs on the Titanic. For a start the process of underdetermination ought to be taken 'on board' – if you see what I mean? The argument that the evidence we have at a given time may be deficient in determining what beliefs we should hold about the past convinces me. As does the argument that there is no fact-value and is-ought entailment. But presumably it would not convince a historian who believes that the truth is 'back there', that it is discoverable, and that this allows us to make public policy in accord with such an interim understanding. So, I can see the Jenkins argument for forgetting the past and making the best of the present through ethics and logic. For me, I would still engage with the past but radically redefine it as an aesthetic – specifically a narrative making cultural discourse which by definition is not going to facilitate planning for an unknowable contingent future.

Getting the data correct and deriving most *likely* meanings and explanations is actually not a big deal. I manage to do that most times

when I go shopping. But to elevate and defend that thinking as the only basis for 'doing history' worries me because of the narrow-minded conclusion it generates, which is that if it is not empirical-analytical-representational history, then it's fiction. Were it not for my happy temperament I would cut my throat at this point.

What concerns me is that the 'History and Policy' arguments tend to foreclose on a wonderful universe of imagination and intellectual freedom. Imagine a world where the only painting officially permitted and sponsored (given 'funding') was empirical-analytical-representationalist, i.e., realist. Plainly this is the world of 'doing proper history' in which we live. I guess that's why I try to foster and encourage the notion of experimental and expressionist history and the confronting of accepted verities. This is why the journal in which this interview appears is unique. It tends to force the issue about the nature of history as an immensely creative cultural endeavour. Of course, to accept this argument, historians need to think outside the empirical-analytical-representationalist paradigm. I know you would not necessarily agree with this, but I want 'doing history' to remain a significant cultural undertaking but not for 'History and Policy' reasons. I think we have a duty to engage meaningfully with the presumed past, but for me that duty entails being self-conscious about how we go about it – at every level of thinking and practice.

Let me finish my reply with a little narrative. Recently an undergraduate history student contacted me to ask about the nature of history because he was getting fed up with 'proper history' consequent upon reading the works of 'deviationists'. I replied with an anecdote. This concerned my sharing a panel with Hayden White years ago (it was at Chichester and you were there) and he was asked was it not best to teach would-be historians the 'proper way' to do history before they considered deviationism? And he said no. In effect why bother teaching students gobbledygook in the first place? Change the assumptions about what is history from the start. I was very naive then and I said they should know what proper historians think before they deviated. But now I am persuaded by White's argument such that my future school or university history course would offer core courses that work on the epistemic understanding that history is an aesthetic cultural form but which can be construed as realist and representationalist if that is the pleasure and decision of its individual teacher-practitioner. But that that doesn't logically follow from anything: it's a decision.

My own imaginary future 'history course' would examine the past in accord with a new formalism. In the first semester of it the main focus from the start would be on the 'formalist' elements of history understood as a narrative-making activity. I would expect such a course to explain how historians write history. As I explained in my book *Narrative and history* (2007) I would want historians to be taught the figurative and compositional techniques that they will need to deploy in order to 'write-the

past-as-history'. So, rather than start with empirical sources and 'historical theories', I would begin with the nature of history as a narrative making exercise – start with the grammar of the history narrative. In so doing, I hope this would put the later arcane empirical-analytical-representationalist choice in a perspective that demonstrates that this way of doing things is indeed a decision rather than being the only way to 'do history' as most historians still maintain it must be.

KJ: I think this brings us nicely to a discussion of some further aspects of your work(s). I myself would concur absolutely with Sande Cohen's argument that the overwhelming function of history/history culture in a social formation like ours is – by the way the past, present and future are threaded together affirmatively – to remove new claimants from the future. Historians – not least those 'of a particular kind' – all too rarely *damage* the present; all too rarely is anything *disturbed*. So Cohen asks the question on the final page of his *History out of joint* (2006), as to what it would take in our 'advanced' society that has been so heavily (and negatively) historicised to openly say that historical representation is just material for discussion – we wish to test ourselves with it instead of stepping inside its comfort zones? What would one make of a society where history was actually taken for its disjunctions instead of seeking identifications within it?

And I use Cohen because I think – you tell me if I'm wrong – that you agree with Cohen too, and that it is this which drives your thinking with regard to 'the future of history' (incidentally the title of your 2010 book), and perhaps provides the *raison d'être* for your advocacy of experimental histories. So, the future of history and experimental history: could you talk about these areas and why you think the future of this discourse should *not* be more of the kind Cohen insists it now is?

AM: This is a terrific question in at least two senses. First, it directs historians to consider that while they may think they are doing their bit to change the world for the better in terms of the ideological and cultural interrogation of the past – although most would not put it in those terms – they are actually doing nothing of the kind. First, just think of the legions of historians who seem to believe they are discovering the most likely narrative back there which tells them (and us) of the empirical and analytical correctness of their convictions/interpretations. And second, the belief that only a form of history 'done in a particular way' will make us all 'free', serves to illuminate the spurious status of those who strive for 'balance', 'objectivity' and 'correspondence truth' without recognising the force of the Cohen argument. As Cohen as well as Davies and yourself argue – and I think your shared/collected arguments are irrefutable – historians are wrapped (rapt?) in that peculiar form of emotional and

intellectual self-deceit or disavowal which is the well-intentioned pursuit of empirical reality slash humanitarian search for ‘the social good’ that can only be revealed in all its value and worth by means of ‘doing history of a particular kind’.

Now, to think about the process of doing history beyond the touching simplicities of empiricism, analysis and representation, demands rethinking what historians do to counter that complex process of epistemological interpellation of which the other forms I mentioned earlier already are integral. So the short answer to your double question is that experimental history – in a variety of forms – is for me the only sustainable route to confronting the basic epistemic redoubts in which the vast majority of historians seek refuge.

And it is not as if experimental history is a particularly new notion even given the dogged efforts of the journal *Rethinking History* to promote it. Think of Milo and Boureau’s collection *Alter Histoire: Essais d’histoire expérimentale* (1991). Anyway, the notion I would advocate in pushing our engagement with the past to hopefully a more culturally useful level is that of what I would describe as ‘testing-the-past-as-history’ through the process of estrangement. Rather than making the past familiar, we need to make it strange. By that I do not mean strange in the classic senses of (a) ‘they do things differently back there’, but (b) we can still figure out the meaning of what they did. In my view once the notion of historical experimentation is accepted ‘history of a particular kind’ should no longer prove to be the cultural medium that tries to resolve problems, give explanations and teach us useful lessons. So, the idea of history as a continuous production line off which better and higher spec historical models roll is pretty much a definition of what it means to be irrational. I would like to think that by ‘de-familiarising’ history, we might achieve a new kind of ‘estranged familiarity’ with the past that rejects such ideas.

Now, when this kind of argument is put, the response of the vast majority of historians is very revealing. They immediately say that either this is the argument of a fevered brain and should be ignored, or it is deliberately anarchic and should be ignored, or it does insufficient justice to the substantial degree of sophistication of proper historians and should be ignored. And of course, these proper historians bend the argument back to their own territorial claim to empiricism and inference. They say you have to respect the evidential facts or the liars, cheats and Holocaust deniers will destroy ‘the truth of the past’ and that we will exist in the kind of society predicted in Orwell’s *1984* when history becomes what the party tells us what it was, and not what it ‘really’ was. But this argument is plainly shallow. Experimenting with history is not the same as saying the past never existed or that we cannot know some of its empirical details or that we cannot ‘choose’ to draw inferences about possible meanings or – for that matter – never do ‘history of a particular kind’. For me it is ‘live and let live’.

If self-styled proper historians want to carry on regardless with their way of 'doing history' then I guess that's OK. However, the danger for me in this 'proper history exclusivity' is to restrict the debates over the functioning and nature of history per se to those selected exclusively by those somewhat beleaguered empirical-analytical-representationalist minds. It reminds me of the famous line spoken by Kenneth Williams in (appropriately enough a 'historical farce') the film *Carry on Cleo* [Clio?]: 'Infamy, infamy, they've all got it in for me'.

My point, then, is that this kind of epistemic petulance suggests that if you don't understand the nature of our (i.e. their) engagement with the past entirely in *their* preferred terms, you must be (a) close to madness, and/or (b) be deceitful, and/or (c) morally bankrupt, and (d) that you and I, Cohen, Davies, White, and even the likes of Ricoeur, are deranged minds. And that plainly the whole post-structuralist insurgency was an unfortunate outbreak of mass hysteria. This is nonsense, of course. De-familiarising history may actually make our engagement with the past less oppressive because it is only through our understanding of history as a self-conscious epistemic fictive invention that we can engage with the past. As Cohen, and you as well Keith, and others like Davies have said, it is the lien claimed on evidences, realities and actualities, that make the majority of historians unprepared to concede that their acts of narrative aesthesis are fundamental to the notion of history as a form of constantly disputed and all too often a repressive regime of knowledge – the oppression of the correspondence theory of truth and so forth. This is the irony that Cohen in particular highlights – that knowledge created in only one 'professionally assured' way is the guarantee of intellectual freedom. However, as Davies suggests, I think *aesthesis* endures despite (a) the drive to epistemology, and (b) its manifestation in the history text's organisation of data.

KJ: Alun, drawing things towards a close now, I want to mention finally something which might appear to be merely silly and much too personal and idiosyncratic, but which might also signify something about our social formation which could be the cause for renewed optimism. For surely we cannot yet live in the 'best of all possible worlds'.

Although I may have got this completely wrong, then, I suppose that for some/many people the common image (or caricature) of a post-modernist (and broadly speaking I think this is what you are), is that of a rather youngish, stylish, somewhat modish, metropolitan/cosmopolitan figure, winging his/her way around the world on umpteen conference circuits, guesting at art/literature festivals, partying, and of generally being 'ahead of the game'.

Now, I know that you do indeed go to conferences and that you have appeared on various literary/philosophical platforms. But I also know – *contra*

the image possibly being conjured up – that you live in the very tiniest of hamlets miles from anywhere in the middle of rural Staffordshire; that your car has hardly any mileage on it, that you have an (unfortunate) *penchant* for wearing flat caps, and that ‘going out’ for you is taking Rosie-the-dog for her daily walk. And that when we last met, we did so in the tea-room of a small village opposite the church and the duck pond and ordered cream teas. And given that I’m also an (albeit fairly ancient) ‘country-boy’, and that the tea-room was my idea (which makes it even worse!), then the notion that these two old codgers are – as we ate our fruited scones and gossiped – a *danger* to the history profession and even ‘history as we have known it’, just struck me as being, well, if not comical, at least *incongruous*. Yet, at the same time, I wondered if our very *unlikeliness* said something not just about the contingencies and ironies of life, but that this *incongruity*, this somewhat bizarre ‘reality’, offers the hope that, from the most *unlikely* people and the most *unlikely* places, the ‘social’ that ‘contains us’ is never so hegemonic, is never so tightly sutured, as to prevent iconoclastic, irreverent and disobedient voices from speaking.

I may be over-egging all of this of course, exaggerating your and my importance: I mean, in the greater scheme of things, who knows or cares, really, what you and I think of history? Yet, given all of this, am I still so wrong to see, figured in this small *incongruity*, *optimism* for the radically new; for thinking and doing other-wise? For new emergencies? And hope?

AM: Well, I like the description of us being two old codgers eating scones and gossiping. And certainly I do live the quiet rural life. The most metropolitan I get is going into Uttoxeter to shop at Tesco and doing the occasional lecture at the local U3A on a variety of historical topics. There is a certain irony in this as you will appreciate. And of course I walk my little dog Rosie wearing a flat cap – well, obviously I wear the cap, not Rosie. This is about as far removed from the cosmo-metro-politan you describe as I suppose one can get. But it’s often the case that the most unlikely individuals can produce radical changes in thinking and practice in a whole variety of fields of endeavour. So, even the most ordinary of folk can become disobedient, insubordinate, noncompliant, uncooperative, dissenting, non-conformist and – hopefully – a real pain.

Of course, the ultimate accolade is to be accused of erecting straw man arguments. This is the accusation of those who have no answer to the criticisms made of them. So, it strikes me that such an indictment reveals the analytic/epistemic failures of most practitioner-historians. I do not accept as true that me and you have created some kind of illusion with our claims to refute a position or set of beliefs that the vast majority of historians say they do not hold. For I would argue they do hold analytical epistemological beliefs and so I conclude that we must have them worried. We may appear

to be somewhat grumpy – although those who know us understand that we are exceptionally good company and are unstinting with our meagre resources and many might even say princely! OK, I concede that might be something of an exaggeration. But we are not injudicious or imprudent, and I don't think that in any degree we misrepresent the positions of most historians.

What you and I have offered, I think, is a critique of the theories of knowledge that most historians accept. And what we have had the temerity to do is to try to demonstrate the failings of those theories of knowledge. For myself, I believe that despite their protestations to the contrary, empirical-analytical-representationalist historians actually shape what they take to be their hand-me-down experience of the past by imposing on that experience their own organising ideas, theories, arguments, ideologies, figurations, authorial and narratological practices, emotional convictions and standpoints. But in saying that, I don't believe this is a bad thing. Indeed, it is precisely these interventions that make history what it is – an authored narrative *about* the past and certainly not some kind of facsimile or a 'copy' *of* the past that aims to be 'true', or even worse, a series of 'interpretations' delivered like a baby. History defined as the past 'born again' lacks any conviction in my mind. And just how can you have a 'truthful interpretation'? Or, worst of all perhaps, the image of the historian as a resurrectionist? And it is no good proper historians saying well, obviously they are smart enough to know all of this, that they are not epistemically naive and understand all too well about being authors and the nature of their interventions. Etc. Well, if they did, then they would do history very differently in my judgement, and certainly not continue with what they do as if these *constraints* 'can be overcome' or in some way circumvented. There are alternative – and for me more legitimate and useful – ways to engage with the absent past. So, I do not believe you can have it both ways. If historians say they tell stories about the past, then what are the implications for both thinking and practice of that act even if those stories are 'based on fact' and clever inference? As I think any fully paid up old codger would say, 'I do not believe it'.

Now, I know that you have decided not to write anything else on history Keith, as you believe you have said all you want to say. But for myself I hope to keep ploughing the sands if spared and if I can find publishers willing to publish me. The journal – the editorial role – is certainly crucial as a megaphone for my multi-sceptical 'voice'. I make no apologies for using *RH* as a means for my arguments and for proselytising. After all, this is what the 'proper' history journals do as well, except they don't see what they do as offering a platform for the products of the analytical and representationalist epistemological choice. They think that what they do is above such criticism because it is, after all, just the embodiment of 'common sense' and, well, the obvious and 'proper' way to do professional history.

So, you are right of course. The ‘proper history’ Intellectual Establishment probably doesn’t care what you and I think of their form of ‘historying’. And yet I believe you are also right to remain just a little hopeful for what you call the radically ‘new’ and for variously re-thinking the present ‘condition’. However, I cannot end this conversation without saying that the cosseted nature of what most historians write and think about the past suggests to me that they are going nowhere with it – either now or in the future.