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# The New York Times Magazine

SEPTEMBER 8, 1991

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Kurt Masur. Photograph by Anthony Barboza for The New York Times.

# Clio Has a Problem



History's muse has been muffled, a historian argues, her poetic voices stilled.

By Simon Schama

**T**HE SCENE: A seminar room at Harvard. The occasion: an oral examination for a history senior in danger of flunking his final exam. The question: "Would you care to compare the Italians' experience of the First World War with their experience of the Second World War?" Panic strikes the student; beads of perspiration form on his brow. His nervous response: "You mean there were two?"

What has gone wrong with historical education? Consider the landscape. More professional historians — those who earn their bread by doing nothing else — are at work today than at any time since Herodotus began his chronicle. Graduate programs in mighty universities produce legions of Ph.D.'s, who go on to produce yet more Ph.D.'s, who populate the countless conferences and multiplying institutes. The once-spacious chambers of the historical house have become subdivided into ever-smaller closets of specialization. More and more is known about less and less. Articles like "Labor Relations in the Dutch Margarine Industry 1870-1934" (*History Workshop Journal*, 1990) have no difficulty in finding a publisher.

Things are just as bad in the high schools, where students sit stupefied over world history textbooks the size of telephone directories and about as thrilling to read. Millions of publishing dollars are tied up in an industry where the sacred rule is "Do not give offense."

*Simon Schama, a professor of history at Harvard, is the author of "An Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age," "Citizens" and, most recently, "Dead Certainties."*

ILLUSTRATION BY JONATHAN ROSEN



especially not to politically elected adoption committees whose acceptance or rejection can make or break a publication. Playing safe, many of these books are manufactured by an assembly line of graphic designers, editorial committees and text drones, and then rubber-stamped by scholars paid to hold their noses and look the other way. Entirely missing from these productions are the great narratives of history, written by a single hand or at most a pair (like the Nevins and Commager of my school days), capable of stirring the imagination, feeding the immense hunger for historical drama latent in nearly every young mind.

**L**ARGELY DEMOTED to a minor branch of civics, Clio, the Muse who dare not speak her name, is nonetheless under assault. On the one hand, she is told to stand forth and deliver the Eternal Verities of the Western tradition; on the other hand, she is told that she is a wicked good-for-nothing unless she becomes "multicultural."

Furious battles ensue over niceties that would be comically preposterous — like the difference between "enslaved persons" and "slaves" — if they didn't leave behind a wasteland of bitter polemics. But "Eurocentric" and "Afrocentric" name-calling misses the point entirely: namely, that as long as history in schools and colleges takes the form of a scrapbook of documentary snippets and bland pieties, its capacity to seize the imagination will be lost. A multicultural history that does nothing but offer user-friendly shorthand guides to world civilization (two pages on Benin, two on the Mughals) is just as likely to bore with its gospels of ancestral saintliness as the older histories distorted

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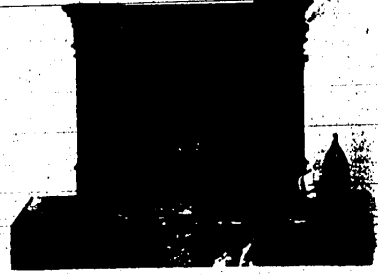
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events by their emphasis on cost-free European dynamism.

And while history in our schools may be genuinely threatened with a kind of extinction, scholars like the formidable Gertrude Himmelfarb fret and fume lest footnotes turn into an endangered species. (I myself have recently been taken to task by her in *The New York Times Book Review* for omitting footnotes in "Citizens," my book about the French Revolution, a work expressly written for a popular audience.) Other self-appointed constables for Clio hit the panic button at the least sign of literary playfulness. Above all, historians are cautioned and reprimanded: Eschew the subjective, the interpretive. The road to the truth is the hard and stony way of cumulative empiricism; the holy grail at the trail's end, a chill, limpid objectivity. The face of the historian should not betray the storyteller's animation; it should be a mask of dispassion.

But self-effacement — the pretense at distance — was not a conspicuous quality in the historians I read in school, nor indeed in any of the great historical texts that have endured. The scholars I admired — David Knowles, who taught and wrote about the Tudor dissolution of the monasteries as a tragic moment rather than a triumph of English state-building; the Glaswegian Denis Brogan, who turned a sardonic eye on the politics of both the French and American republics; Richard Cobb, whose seminar on the French Revolution was one of the chaotic glories of Oxford in the 1960's and 1970's — shared an instinctive ability to dwell in worlds separated from our own by time, and to bring the closeness of that experience of the "other" to their work, to give it voice and color and texture.

PERHAPS THE MOST EC-CENTRIC of these involuntary time-travelers was Walter Ullmann, the great historian of the papacy to whose attic rooms in Neville's Court, Trinity College, Cambridge, I was sent in the summer of 1965 to study medieval history. The day was unusually stormy, a gray-black morning lit up by sudden forks of lightning. In his philosopher's cell was the somber, hunched figure of Ullmann,

Pius XII spectacles perched precariously on his nose, his gown greenish with the kind of mildewy iridescence that much-used academic robes acquire in damp East Anglia. Chain-smoking cheap cigarettes and flicking the ash into his trouser cuff, he was a figure — even by Cambridge standards — of daunting eccentricity. I dutifully proceeded to read my clumsy essay on the conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity against the background opera of the increasingly violent storm. At one point, just as I was nudging the

History needs to be liberated from the school curriculum, where it is held hostage by social studies.

Emperor toward an expedient decision, there came a deafening clap of thunder. Ullmann shot to his feet, rushed to the window and exclaimed, "I hear the death-knell of Byzantium!"

And so, I imagine, he did. Was Ullmann's history — that astonishing sense of immediacy it conveyed — the worse for it? Was he the more dubious scholar, the weaker analyst, for this psychological abridgment of the centuries? I very much doubt it, any more than Macaulay was hobbled by his ebullient belief in the Whig religion of progress, or Jules Michelet by his burning faith in the democratic destiny of France.

The tension between popular historians and the arbiters of professional decorum is itself ancient history. Many of the most enduring historians — Voltaire, Gibbon, Macaulay, Carlyle and Trevelyan — wrote not just outside the academy but in

self-conscious defiance of it. Gibbon was abruptly whisked away from Oxford by a father enraged by his flirtation with Catholicism and packed off to Lausanne where his intellect would flower. But his autobiographical recollection of the "deep and dull potation of the dons" is one of the most damning accounts of the somnolent quality of academic life.

G. M. Trevelyan, who wrote so eloquently of the "sclerotic self-congratulation of scholars," abandoned his fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge, precisely because he believed he would be intimidated by analytical historians from creating the literary history that was fermenting in his marvelous imagination. The great 19th-century American historian Francis Parkman did, in the end, become a professor at Harvard, but his chair was in horticulture.

For all these writers, history was not a remote and funereal place. It was a world that spoke loudly and urgently to our own concerns. How can their sense of the dramatic immediacy be revived? In the first place, history needs to be liberated from its captivity in the school curriculum, where it is held hostage by that great amorphous, utilitarian discipline called social studies. History needs to declare itself unapologetically for what it is: the study of the past in all its splendid messiness. It should revel in the pastness of the past, the strange music of its diction.

The very worst educational tools used to interest children in history are, to my mind, those "historical newspapers" that flatten the experience of past centuries into modern newspaper headlines with Q and A interviews of Thomas Jefferson or Frederick Douglass, thus robbing these figures of their own voices and draining them of exactly the qualities that make history so gripping. The storytelling power of history does not depend on its being regurgitated as network news. Quite the opposite, in fact: In the right hands it will gain in power exactly as it differs from, rather than resembles, the pabulum of our throwaway information world.

G. M. Trevelyan put it best: "The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous

fact that once, on this earth, on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions but now all gone, vanishing after another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall be gone like ghosts at cockcrow."

**B**UT WHY SHOULD we be spooked? Students will reasonably ask. Why should we wander among gloomy tombs? The answer should be unequivocal: History isn't a how-to manual full of analogies to explain whatever this week's crisis happens to be — Saddam as Hitler, Kuwait as Munich — and certainly not some carefully prepared tonic for ethnic self-esteem. As an irreproachable historian, R. G. Collingwood, once put it, we study what man has done to discover what man is. History is an indispensable form of human self-knowledge. Nations and communities can no more disregard the special kind of insight that comes from the study of their past than individuals can understand themselves without knowing the deeds and beliefs of their own families, their own ancestors.

It was, I think, the Roman poet Horace who wrote that a people without history remains locked in the mentality of an infant who knows neither whence he came nor whither he will go. To know our past is to grow up. History's mission, then, is to illuminate the human condition from the witness of memory. Yet the truths likely to be yielded by such histories will always be closer to those disclosed in great novels or poems than the abstract general laws sought by social scientists.

To this end, the institution of protocols of objectivity, policed by Clio's constabulary and accountable to some sort of Supreme Historical Court appointed by the American Historical Association, seems a less pressing task than restoring history to the forms by which it can catch the public imagination. That form, as Ken Burns's stunning PBS series on the Civil War demonstrated, ought to be narrative; not to discard argument and analysis, but to lend it proper dramatic and

poetic power. Yet the only subject not taught in university departments of history is narrative; even when it is cautiously admitted to the curriculum, it makes a brief appearance usually hobbled by the leaden boots of narrative theory. Perhaps we should train our academic historians, not in front of a class of graduate students who have already attained professional respectability, but in front of a class of eighth graders, for whom the importance of history will not be self-evident.

These kinds of recommendations are, I suspect, not likely to be met with bursts of applause by many of my colleagues, even though a fascinating debate about textbooks is, at last, appearing in the pages of the A.H.A.'s newsletter, *Perspectives*. History has always been "a debatable land," as Macaulay noted. "It lies on the confines of two distinct territories. It is under the jurisdiction of two hostile powers; and like other districts similarly situated, it is ill-defined, ill-cultivated and ill-regulated. Instead of being equally shared between its two rulers, the Reason and the Imagination, it falls alternately under the sole and absolute dominion of each. It is sometimes fiction. It is sometimes theory. . . ."

But when Macaulay wrote this, he had the temerity and confidence of his 28 years. He had been born exactly with the century in whose progress he so fervently believed. In 1828, the great work of narrative historians — Carlyle, Bancroft, Michélet, Prescott, Mommsen and Macaulay himself — still lay ahead. More significantly, much of the very greatest imaginative writing of the century would address itself directly to history: "The Betrothed" by Manzoni, "War and Peace" by Tolstoy, "Felix Holt the Radical" by George Eliot, "Les Misérables" by Victor Hugo, "Sentimental Education" by Flaubert. In 1874, Alexandre Dumas could congratulate Lamartine (only half in jest) for having raised history to the status of a novel.

Then, in the third quarter of the last century, as history became an academic discipline, the free companionship between literature and history was deemed by newly-founded university de-

partments to be fundamentally unserious. The storytellers were shoved aside by scientists intent on reconstructing "from" fragments and clues what they insisted would be an empirically verifiable, objectively grounded version of an event, its causes and consequences precisely delineated. Until, that is, another historian working from exactly the same sources came to exactly the opposite conclusion, thereby establishing the character of "historical debate," a differentiation game played in almost every historical journal. The conventional form runs something like this:

"*Serfdom in Baroque Fredonia: A Revision*" by John J. Juggins.

In 1968, Wendy F. Muggins published her seminal article on manorial social structure in 17th-century Fredonia. A decade later, this orthodoxy was substantially corrected by Cuthbert C. Buggins, based on a reading of Fredonian tax records. Unaccountably, neither Muggins nor Buggins consulted local manorial records in Upper Syl-

vania. Had they done so, they would have seen that the prevailing view ought to be radically revised. In the pages that follow, I hope to shed light on...

AS THE ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS of history grew in strength and numbers, so the Juggins-Buggins-Muggins syndrome became the predominant form of historical argument. Analysis was to proceed by knuckle-rapping corrections; the temporarily victorious scholar inevitably became the ignominiously corrected dunce. The subject of history became other historians. And the narratives that had been the great intellectual engine in works by Motley, the celebrated historian of the Dutch revolt, or Michelet were now demoted to mere entertainment. The power to make a reader live within such vanished moments, to feel for a while the past to be more real, more urgent than the present, was henceforth left to the historical novelists, while the "professionals" got on with "serious work," the production of a Definitive Explanation — for Important Events.

Storytellers not only lost ground, they became aggressively despised: Michelet was replaced by Marx; Carlyle and Macaulay by Sir John Seeley and Bishop Stubbs, the vigilantes of British and imperial and constitutional history. The thrilling, beautiful prose of the Bostonians — Bancroft, Prescott and Parkman — began to gather dust and line the shelves of antiquarian bookstores, where they may still be dependably found, neglected giants slumbering within their dark green casings of cloth and morocco.

To emulate, of course, is not to imitate. We shall never write again in their manner and with their rhetorical confidence, nor should we try. The present generation of historians must find its own voice, just as every generation has before it. The narrative tradition is by no means extinct. In work of unimpeachably "professional" historians and scholars — Bernard Bailyn, Jonathan Spence, Eric Foner, James McPherson, William Cronon, Peter Gay — it remains brilliantly vivid. Non-

The present generation of historians must find its own voice.

fiction writers outside the academy — like Richard Rhodes, J. Anthony Lukas and Taylor Branch — have created forceful and creative, even epic, work on the history of our century and find a correspondingly large reading public.

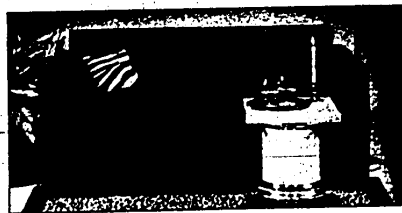
And then there are commemorations of significant dates like 1776, 1789, even 1492 — time-markers not to be dismissed out of hand any more lightly than our own private anniversaries — that in their best narratives bring present and past lives into deft, vivid communication.

We are on the threshold of

the next millennium. It seems safe to predict that the strategists of publishing (not to mention the visual media) are already planning to greet it with projects of epic magnitude — encyclopedias, multipart film series, T-shirts and bumper stickers that will proclaim "I survived the second millennium," Nintendo history in which whole ages and empires stroll past for review, to be judged with politically acceptable impartiality.

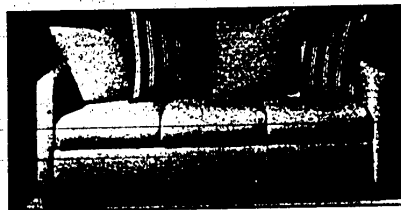
Is it too much to hope that between the contending battalions slugging it out to heap blame or praise on the record of imperfect humanity the pathos of the past might once again find its historian? Will we, like Arthur C. Clarke's voyager of 2001, discover our beginnings while we search for the future? More modestly, we may, perhaps, hope for some grand narrative that will recall the time described by Macaulay, when the appearance of a new history was so exciting that "the circulating libraries are mobbed; the book societies are in commotion; the new novel lies uncut." ■

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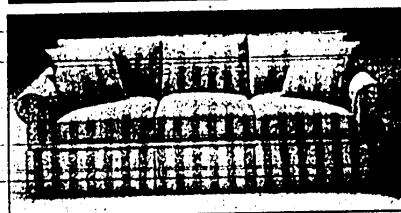
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