

# Beginning With History

## Revisions and Deviations

by Clyde Wilson

Any fool can write history, and many do. Please do not assume that I mean by this statement to vaunt the “expert” and slight the amateur. In writing history the amateur is sometimes gifted, and there is no more pestiferous fool than the smug, pretentious “expert” who thinks of his own mind as the repository of ultimate truth. What a good historian most needs is not “expertise” but the qualities we look for in a juror: intelligence and an inclination to avoid snap judgments and get to the bottom of things, to weigh evidence honestly, and to imagine times and places that are no longer recoverable in the flesh. No juror can entirely escape his own bias, but some are a lot more honest and fair than others.

Anybody who has been following the pronouncements that have been issuing from the mouths and word processors of professors of history (and official government historians) in recent years ought to be disabused of trust in the competence and good faith of “experts”—even if he has not seen firsthand the gutting of graduate education that has been taking place. There was a time when professors of history, whatever their viewpoints and degrees of talent, had to have proved themselves by the rigors of primary research and literate, balanced exposition. Increasingly they are just people who stayed in school a long time and learned the fashionable attitudes that entitle them to become spokespersons for the ruling party. The juror has been replaced by the commissar.

Young people should not study history for final answers but to expand consciousness. History is (properly) about human life—about the conflict of human perspectives, experiences, and values. On all human experience there is always the possibility of a differing perspective. Even the “facts” are often not as solid as they seem, having been selected out of a host of possibilities. Human life (and therefore history) is not a logical proposition, nor a source (chiefly) of entertainment, nor a mine of ideological precepts and pseudomoral judgments, nor a repository of accepted conclusions. It is a drama taking place in the mind of God, and only He knows the end. In a drama we look for a deeper meaning than “the facts.” We look for understanding of the mystery of our existence. Since we

are human, all that is human should interest us.

To guide the study of history for young people is a challenge, and nowhere more so than in regard to the war of 1861–65 and its causes and results, the Gordian knot of American history. Fortunately, we have, for a start, Shelby Foote’s *The Civil War: A Narrative*, a magnificent and readable masterpiece of world literature which tells the most important part of the story—the experience—with fairness, depth, and insight. Note that Foote was not an academic “expert” but a novelist. He understood that the method of history must differ from the method of fiction but that both were seeking the same truth of human experience. There is more truth about the Civil War/Reconstruction in the 300 pages of Faulkner’s *The Unvanquished* than in a million words by “expert” historians. The same goes for George Garrett’s Elizabethan novels.

Generally speaking, in American history, what was written in the first half of the 20th century is more reliable than what came before or after. Much of the mainstream history produced in the 19th century reflected the viewpoint of people who took for granted that they were at the center of the universe—Boston. Since the mid-20th century, academic history has become more and more a party line, and popular history has deteriorated greatly under the same influences. The 21st century bodes fair to replace history as an intellectual enterprise with subsidized multicultural groupthink. The first half of the 20th century, though far from utopian, was the soundest era of American historiography.

There is much that is good, though little that is great, written about the War Between the States. The subject deserves a book-length annotated bibliography. However, to start: Foote for the story; Ludwell H. Johnson’s *North Against South* for the facts, figures, and issues of 1848–1877; Avery O. Craven’s *The Coming of the Civil War* for the causes; and Robert Selph Henry, *The Story of Reconstruction*, for the consequences. “Experts” will tell you with Pavlovian predictability that such works have been discredited by “new scholarship.” This is a conventional lie. Many works that are now out of fashion have never been refuted and indeed were written by people vastly more learned and honest than their critics, who usually have not even read them, much less studied their sources. They have simply been declared multiculturally unacceptable.

For homeschoolers, let me suggest two “series” that will


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provide a rich source of reading. They are out of print but readily accessible. For primary students: the Landmark Books, published by Random House, in the 1950's and 60's, with individual titles covering many of the important events of U.S. history in interesting fashion. For secondary students, I recommend the 50-volume Yale Chronicles of America series published in the 1920's. The quality, of course, is uneven, but a large number of subjects are covered, many of them having dropped out of present-day consciousness. Homeschoolers ought also to have handy books that many have already discovered: Thomas DiLorenzo's *The Real Lincoln*, Thomas Woods' *Politically Incorrect Guide to American History*, and Kevin Gutzman's *Politically Incorrect Guide to the Constitution*. These works expose the host of lies, old and new, that circulate for truth in American discourse. (I thought I was the ideal person to write the *Politically Incorrect Guide to the War Between the States*, but the publisher wanted a writer who was younger and better-looking.)

All that being said, young people should be led away from the all-too-common American tendency to place the United States at the top and center of world history. America is far too young and unchastened a human experience to deserve or receive the attention of a great historian (although John Lukacs's *Outgrowing Democracy* makes a start). Aside from the European-educated Lukacs, there are perhaps only two American historians that can be considered world-class: the brilliant but warped Henry Adams, and the valiant anti-imperialist Charles

A. Beard. "Conservative" historians (*i.e.*, Republican Big Business flacks) have sought to discredit Beard, but his works (such as *The Rise of American Civilization* and *Pearl Harbor studies*) remain highly relevant and readable).

I would not encourage much advanced reading in American history until after exposure to the great ancient historians and to the sophistication of the best European writing. (One might start here with Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* or Johannes Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*.) And for understanding what history is and does, read John Lukacs's *Historical Consciousness* (preferably the first edition).

A particularly nasty and dishonest left-wing group, which has appointed itself watchdog of other people's opinions without any intellectual or moral qualification for the role, has damned me as a "revisionist" in regard to the era encompassing the War Between the States. They mean to make folks recoil from me in horror as kin to those notorious "revisionists" who deny Nazi atrocities. I am not a revisionist, but note that their assumption is that there is only one valid opinion, deviation from which is a crime. This bit of agitprop is pure Soviet tactics. It used to be that revisionism was thought of as the occasional change of historical perspective, an inevitable and benign thing that indicated a healthy intellectual life. When our present Culture Masters condemn disapproved historical viewpoints, they do not mean "revisionism" but the offense that the commies call "deviationist." 

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## Post Card

by William Baer

"Hello!" This one's from Montego Bay:  
"Glad you're not here." She never signs her name  
but sends a different card each Valentine's Day,  
for fifteen years. The message is always the same,  
and all the cards are beautiful: Marseille;  
Nazaré; Hilton Head, Carolina;  
Maui; Acapulco; St-Tropez;  
Casçais; and even the wall of China.  
But what did he do? She'd left him without a word,  
then, every summer, mails her forget-me-not,  
and though he knows it's stupid, even absurd,  
he craves forgiveness for he knows-not-what,  
and wishes her nothing but love, which was, he knew,  
exactly what she wanted him to do.