

That is, and is meant to be, high praise. This *Festschrift* is for once both attractive to the well-rounded reader, and worthy of the well-rounded scholar it honours. An index, even a general one, would have been a help; it is notoriously difficult to find wide markets for works within this category, partly

because of the tiresome and all too frequent omission of indices. But whether British archaeology, in the broad sense, strikes you as young and fresh, old and clapped-out, or just a little middle-aged, it's nice to see a regular injection of timeless learning.

History as Communication

Describers & Debaters—By ASA BRIGGS



HISTORIANS are notably impatient with each other. Herodotus mentioned Hecataeus four times, on each occasion only to criticise him. There are fewer debates

between historians than combats, and where there are debates there are few shared rules. Reviews, too, can be very one-sided. It is left to historiographers to sort things out, and either by way of atonement or insurance most historians, particularly if they were brought up in Cambridge, respect historiography.

Yet there are problems there also, as Pieter Geyl pointed out in the first essay in his revealing *Debates with Historians* (1955). What now stands out in that essay is not Geyl's swipe at "the vehement one-sidedness" of a review in *The Times Literary Supplement*, but a highly telling critique of Lord Acton on Leopold von Ranke, "founder of professional history." For Acton, Ranke's work had been "unequalled as regards bulk" and, he felt it fair to add, "influence." Yet it was "colourless." "He decided effectually to repress the poet, the patriot, the . . . partisan . . . to banish himself from his books." Geyl, who from his own experience as a historian knew as much about combat as debate, would have none of that. "We do meet Ranke in his work, and the history which he has given us in his fifty volumes is no dry statement of facts without sense or intention. If that is what Acton meant to convey [note the unwanted caution in that if clause] it only proves that he had not understood Ranke."

In the light of such observations current talk of "the varieties of history", the title of an admirable book (1970) by Fritz Stern, sometimes rings a little hollow. Certainly some varieties are approved of more than others, and professional pluralism tends at best to be uneasy. In *The Pursuit of History*,¹ a book designed to help students of history through their initiation, John Tosh assembles many of the best recent statements about "what is history", including Richard Cobb's demand, not a new one,

that the historian should, "above all, be endlessly inquisitive and prying, constantly attempting to force the privacy of others", and that his principal aim should be "to make the dead live." This seems, and indeed is, a long way from Keith Wrightson's approach to social history, also quoted by Tosh:

"Society is a process. It is never static. Even its most apparently stable structures are the expression of an equilibrium between dynamic forces. For the social historian the most challenging of tasks is that of recapturing that process, while at the same time discussing long-term shifts in social organisation, in social relations and in the meanings and evaluations with which social relationships are infused."

It sounds nice when Mr Tosh, in a worthy effort to reconcile two such approaches, makes a general statement of his own (also, of course, not new) that:

"history cannot be defined as either a humanity or a social science without denying a large part of its nature. The mistake that is so often made is to insist that history be categorised as one to the exclusion of the other. History is a hybrid discipline that . . . straddles the two."

Yet the word "hybrid" is awkward, and Mr Tosh, who has many supremely sensible and useful things to say in his book, does not seem too happy when he turns briefly to literature.

"It makes good sense", he writes, "to cite Chaucer as a spokesman for the attitudes of the fourteenth-century laity to abuses in the Church, or Dickens as evidence of the frame of mind in which middle-class Victorians considered the 'condition of England question'." If that is thought of "the use of literature", then there is surely something very wrong. R. H. Tawney, cited in many of the books under review, was far more perceptive when, after describing in a lecture how History and Literature were provinces presided over by Muses, he warned his hearers that "the enjoyment of great literature is an end, not a means; and only a barbarian would degrade its timeless truths to the status of materials for a humbler art."

Tawney, like G. M. Trevelyan, believed in history as communication. He wanted his hearers and his readers (not necessarily the same group) to know more about the past *both* for its own sake and for whatever relevances (not necessarily the same set of relevances) it might be thought to have for the

¹ *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*. By JOHN TOSH. Longman, £4.95.

present. The last thing that he *wanted* to do was “to banish himself from his books”, for he felt that this would be to banish his readers also. And Trevelyan, too, from the start—even more than Tawney—separated himself from professional historians who were interested only in talking to or fighting with other professional historians. In 1895, the year when Lord Salisbury appointed Acton as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, Trevelyan, who had already met him as a schoolboy, wrote:

“I must act as interpreter of history, in its truest sense, to all those who can understand it, to those in fact who read books. I believe I am more fitted for that than for going further afield as a specialised digger.”

BECAUSE MUCH HISTORY is written in plain language it can be accessible, and because there is, at least in Britain, a remarkably widespread interest in “the past”, many historians—not all of them poets (or prophets)—have succeeded in attracting a large audience. Veronica Wedgwood is one, and whatever professional historians might say in 1984 she is perfectly entitled, if she chooses, to turn from the 17th century she knows so well to the history of the world which she knows less well, with a view to making world history more intelligible and more interesting to people who feel they know little about it.

The task is a formidable one, however, and so far she has only reached the year 1550. She admits that one of her reasons for embarking on *The Spoils of Time: A Short History of the World*² was her own “desire for wider knowledge”, and there are signs of the intensity of effort required in such a quest in some of the chapters of the half-completed study. Like other would-be world historians, she does not find it easy to relate what was happening in one part of the world to what was happening in another. Yet she tries hard to establish unities as well as continuities and often succeeds in doing so, and she deals competently with “economic, social, intellectual and moral forces” as well as with individuals and events. Having chosen an evocative title for her book, it would have been more interesting, perhaps, had she chosen titles with content for her chapters: they are simply headed with time labels like “From

the Beginnings to Circa 1500 B.C.”, “Circa 900-1200” or “Circa 1200-1450.” More discussion of different senses of time (including B.C./A.D.) would have given an extra dimension to the narrative. As it is, time simply marches on.

It should be added, however, that Dame Veronica states quite explicitly that her book is “essentially a narrative, not a philosophy of history”, and it should be judged in these terms. Appropriately in the blurb on the back of the dust-jacket, therefore, there is a quotation from a critic in the *Daily Telegraph* who wrote of one of her previous books that “Miss Wedgwood is probably the best writer of historical narrative alive, and one can only marvel at the skill.” Most critics would agree. Inevitably, however, in a world history it is extremely difficult to tell different stories in one, so that narrative is attenuated and turns instead into record. Moreover, although *The Spoils of Time* begins and ends with the idea of the earth as a planet, one possible way of leading through a single story, the end of the book is somewhat forced. Perhaps men in space in Volume II will provide the right eventual perspective. Columbus, of course, is already dead in Volume I, but America, where another recent historian of the world, Daniel Boorstin, began his voyage of discovery through time, is only briefly introduced. There were to be some strange transatlantic links in the future, links best known to travellers, like the curious link between Palaeologus and Barbados, but many of them, like this, were links of coincidence without functional significance. A travellers’ history of the world—and Herodotus pointed the way—would be a different kind of book from that which Dame Veronica has chosen to write.

HISTORY AS NARRATIVE, whether of the world, a country or a place, is being taken increasingly seriously across the Atlantic and conferences of historians are now being devoted to it. What lies behind the narrative, of course, is of crucial importance in any historiographical judgment. Yet there is value in focusing on the narrative itself, in so far as narrative is directly related to communication. In this connection a third view of the role of history, quoted by Mr Tosh, is worth identifying. It was well put by Geoffrey Barraclough, who has never hesitated to cross centuries and continents. “Man”, he wrote in 1955, “is a historical animal, with a deep sense of his own past [some men, many men, or man?]; and if he cannot integrate the past by a history explicit and true, he will integrate it by a history implicit and false.” The historian should intervene essentially as a communicator.

This communication is an adequate reason in itself for historians to try to write books on long periods of history as well as short ones, and to be willing to learn themselves, as Dame Veronica says she has done, in the process. Mr Tosh, who is a specialist in African history, quotes a resolution carried by the International Conference of African historians meeting at Dar es Salaam in 1965, stating that “an African philosophy of history which would serve as a liberation from the colonial experience must be a vital concern of all historians studying in

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² *The Spoils of Time: A Short History of the World. Vol. 1: From Earliest Times to the 16th Century.* By C. V. WEDGWOOD. Collins, £15.00.

Africa.” Maybe, but less emphasis on a “philosophy” and more on a critical narrative would better fulfil Geoffrey Barraclough’s sense of purpose, provided that there could then be communication between historians and hearers or readers. If there is not that communication (and it is not difficult to identify barriers to it), then there is bound to be false integration at almost every level of a society and culture. Indeed, the pursuit of history can never really start.

THE IMPORTANT NEW VOLUME *An Open Elite?*, by Professor and Mrs Stone,³ tackles one familiar integrating hypothesis about English history, which they profess to be false. Theirs is not narrative history but problem-orientated history; the language is not always plain, the methodology includes quantitative analysis based on sampling, and there is a question-mark in the title.

The hypothesis has been that there is one particular feature which has distinguished English society from that of other countries in Europe since the 15th century:

“the easy access of self-made men to power and status; and the harmonious intermingling with the landed interest, not only of successful public officials and lawyers, but also of men enriched by trade, speculation, what was high, and sometimes dubious finance, and even industrial entrepreneurship.”

In other words, there has been “an open élite.” As corollaries, it has also been claimed, four advantages have accrued to England. First, it acquired, with the possible exception of Holland, the most productive agricultural system in Europe. Second, it won the race to industrialisation. Third, it permitted, even encouraged, the development of a stable yet flexible political system. Fourth, by a twist, it accounted for England’s more recent economic decline. Entrepreneurship withered as the sons of entrepreneurs—often entrepreneurs themselves—bought country houses and adopted gentrified life-styles.

The Stones set out in their book to test the main hypothesis by analysing it in the light of evidence derived from three very different countries—Hertfordshire, Northamptonshire, and Northumberland. They seek to show how the “country élite” (there was, in fact, more than one élite) has been composed in different periods, and how and to what extent new wealth infiltrated its ranks. Downward mobility, they note, requires a book of its own. Theirs concentrates on upward mobility from below and the consequent degree of turnover. Their conclusion is that as a result of their analysis “the paradigm of an open élite is dead”—the family statistics just do not support it. What many foreign observers as well as Englishmen took almost for granted, therefore, is a myth; and the main question that remains is why did it enjoy such longevity and ubiquity.

It is difficult at first reading to judge whether this main conclusion is as firmly established as the Stones claim. Three counties are not the whole of England, and though the three they chose were selected so as to offer “the greatest possible

diversity of social experiences”, it remains necessary to consider other counties: for example, Lancashire, Yorkshire, or Warwickshire. Moreover, there is an important assumption in the book which itself requires scrutiny—that the indispensable criterion for defining men of “landed élite status” is ownership of a country seat of a certain minimum size and aesthetic elegance. For the Stones, the distinction between a country house and a house in the country is fundamental. Finally, the hypothesis itself is set out in a form in which not all social historians would seek to frame it; and without access to any of the quantitative data which the Stones analyse there have already been vigorous debates between historians about the four so-called corollaries of the hypothesis. There has certainly been no agreement there.

THE WAY THE BOOK IS SET OUT is perhaps too tidy. The plan of it is economical and methodical—with chapter headings like “Strategies: Social Ideals and Demographic Constraints”, “Transitions: Intra-Familial Inheritance”, “Ruptures: Sellers and Drop-outs”; “Intrusions: Newcomers” and “Interactions: Land and Money.” These are modern labels applied to old social phenomena, and there is much borrowing in the book from another Stone hypothesis—that concerning the evolution of affective attitudes within the family—that has not been without its critics. The term “possessive individualism” is taken for granted too, and there is an over-use of the term “crisis” which directly influences the use of the term “strategies.”

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³ *An Open Elite? England 1540-1800*. By LAWRENCE STONE and JEANNE C. FAWTIER STONE. Oxford University Press, £24.00.

Such language contrasts sharply with the language used by contemporaries, most of whom believed in what is now called the myth. Yet it is necessary to add that the Stones in these pages present as a part of their argument and not just as decoration a remarkably rich anthology of contemporary comment, much of it highly quotable. They genuinely succeed in doing what John Tosh wants as they introduce and assess literary evidence as effectively as demographic and other social data. There are some highly readable passages, too, which demonstrate that history need not be narrative history in order to appeal to a wide audience. There are fascinating sections, for example, on surrogate heirs and changes of name in landed families and on surname hyphenation, which began at a time when many family seats were passing to new owners through heiresses of ancient families during "the demographic crisis of the seventeenth century." As they rightly say, there was nothing "accidental" about this.

Finally—and it is more than a bonus—the Stones know how to use visual history. There are a hundred rewarding pages on country houses which once again draw on the widest possible range of evidence. Such history finds little place in Mr Tosh's book, although it is increasingly popular in schools, polytechnics and universities, and provides a new kind of communication. For him, his treatment of historical sources, as he himself acknowledges, is "in practice limited to verbal materials (both written and oral) because it is in this sphere that the claims of historians to special expertise lie." It is fortunate that this is no longer proving to be as generally true as it would have been twenty years ago, and the Stones point that way. They observe *en passant*, also, how "touring" country houses did not begin with the English Tourist Board. There was a

difference, however. In the 18th century it was not landlords, like the 20th-century Lord Montagu, who led the way, but servants. Indeed, Arthur Young once stated that Wallington, Northumberland, was "the only place I have viewed, as a stranger, where no fees were taken."

In their last three pages the Stones turn briefly to what has happened since 1880. It would take too long to explain why the account they give there—in sharp contrast to the rest of their book—seems completely impressionistic. There could be another myth in the making if the argument were left to stand where they leave it.

TURNING FROM THESE BOOKS to *Justifying Historical Descriptions* by C. Behan McCullagh⁴ is something of an anti-climax, although this may be merely to say that if historians are impatient with each other they may be even more impatient with philosophers of history. The purpose of Dr McCullagh's enquiry is "to discover the logical conditions under which people are justified in believing historical descriptions to be true." He is deliberately concerned with descriptions, and not with interpretations. Yet when he turns, for example, to "historical generalisations" he moves inexorably into questions of interpretation. He also includes a brief appendix on "truth and interpretation in history" which would doubtless make its way, along with his excellent bibliography, on to Mr Tosh's reading list.

For young historians seeking initiation, however, it would probably be more enlightening to compare and contrast the "varieties of history" expressed in Wedgwood on the one hand and the Stones on the other than to read about history and how it is written. Paradoxically, it is non-historians, particularly specialists in other disciplines, who will find the books about history most absorbing. And that raises other questions of communication.

⁴ *Justifying Historical Descriptions*. By C. BEHAN MCCULLAGH. Cambridge University Press, £25.00, paper £7.95.

Poetry Doesn't Move

Poetry doesn't move—not at tenpence
and not at one penny: but the gold-lettered bookmarks
donated by Len are selling well.

Yesterday all was sunshine on the old
manor-house lawn. The Community Centre's annual Do
is, today, ill-fêted. We bring plastic sheeting in case. . . .

The Art is insipid, the Pottery rather rough,
the Flowers (*arranged*) are gasping. O Rose, thou art sick!
Have we seen the Soft Toys on the other side of the lawn?

I buy one, a copydexed Pretty with daffodil hair,
and muse the comparative use of verses and dolls.
Will my words wash? Will they last? Will they at least
give someone ephemeral pleasure? The sky is all mildew and doubt.
It drizzles. The wind flicks the leaves. . . .

Gerda Mayer