

**Historical Constructions of Knowledge**  
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**Pymble Ladies' College**  
**12 September 2017**

It's only a diary. Everyone knows diaries are just full of crap.  
(Bridget Jones)

I have, in my possession, a copy of an old family photograph. It is a picture of my grandfather, or 'Nonno', as I called him (far left) standing with an employee outside his fruit and vegetable shop in Northcote, a northern suburb of Melbourne. I have been told that the photograph was taken on the eve of the depression, in the late 1920s. I often show this photograph to my students, and ask them how a historian might find the photograph useful. What historical questions might they ask of it? What can it tell us about the past? Pretty early in this kind of discussion, a student will normally comment that the photo can be used to work out the prices of fruit and vegetables in northern Melbourne on the eve of the depression. This comment is a sensible one; but it is also wrong.



When I was looking at this photo with my grandmother ('Nonna') once, she remarked that my Nonno had, on the very morning the photo was taken, raised the prices of his goods. Why? Because the photographer was coming to take a photo of him standing outside his shop, and he didn't want his stacks to be ruined before the shot had been taken! This story contains a warning about the perils of doing history. My grandmother is long dead, and, in due course, I'll be joining her. When I'm gone, and my descendants find this photograph among my possessions, what will

they make of it? Even if I take the precaution of writing the approximate date on the back, along with the place and the name of my grandfather (I have already forgotten the other man's name), unless I also record the story my grandmother told me, the context of this photo will be forgotten, and the photograph will be open to misinterpretation should any historian seek to use it as a source.

The great nineteenth-century German historian, Leopold von Ranke, is often quoted to the effect historians are interested in 'what actually happened'. Richard Evans, in his book *In Defence of History*, translates Von Ranke's German phrase (*Wie es eigentlich gewesen*) slightly differently from other commentators. The historian's object is to learn 'how it essentially was': that is, the historian, far from being interested in collecting facts for their own sake, wanted to 'understand the inner being of the past'.<sup>1</sup> Yet it isn't easy for historians to find out how it essentially was: that is, to understand the past in its own terms. Historians don't have direct access to the past. They only have access to the past *via* existing sources. That is, the lived experience of real human beings comes to historians in the form of documents, photographs, film, sound recordings, and so on. The past has been subjected to some kind of order — it has already been, to some extent, interpreted — by the creators of primary sources before the historian has any chance to get to it. Which way was the camera pointing? Who was the journalist working for when she wrote an account of that public meeting or this political demonstration?

Bridget Jones, then, is on to something. If diaries are, as she suggests (with perhaps some exaggeration) 'full of crap', historians need to use them cautiously. But can they use them at all. There was a postmodernist understanding of the historical construction of knowledge — heard often when I was a PhD student twenty-five years ago but less often today — which suggested that historians could write only about language itself. Since they had no access to the past — only to the language of the past — all historians could really study was language, texts and representation. The dire predictions that postmodernism would wreck history as a discipline did not, however, come to pass. Historians did become more self-conscious than they had been about how they built knowledge, and notably about the relationship between language and experience. But they did not, in the end, abandon the idea that the historian's role was to explore 'experience'; that the past was real, even if elusive.

That the historian has intellectual and ethical responsibilities to represent the past in a truthful way — not merely to throw her hands and say it's all 'fiction' so let's not worry about 'truth' — is perhaps made clearest when we are confronted with actual falsification and fraud. Richard Evans, for instance, was central to the British court case that ultimately discredited David Irving, the historian of Nazi Germany, as a holocaust denier. In Soviet Russia, too, thousands of photographs were doctored during the Stalin era in order to 'rewrite history'. Leon Trotsky, who had fallen out of favour, was removed from various images, which were also doctored in order to exaggerate Stalin's importance in the Russian Revolution and his closeness to Lenin. These photographs are now valuable sources in their own right, but only if we know how to read them. They can tell us much about how the Stalinist state falsified the past for its own political ends; they are a window on to the terror that was integral to Stalinist rule. The lives of human beings were obliterated in labour camps, but this was not enough: the brutal rulers of the Soviet Union also wanted to obliterate the memory of them, and one way to do this was to remove their faces from the photographic record.<sup>2</sup>

Even statistics, which can seem so objective in their long columns, often embody the values of their creators. This is not a matter of falsification so much as a reminder that even apparently 'objective' statistics are dripping in the values of those who create them. Let me give you one very telling example. In 1890 an Australia-wide conference of statisticians decided that, in their collection of statistics on work, the population would henceforth be divided into two categories:

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, Granta Books, London, 1997, p.17.

<sup>2</sup> David King, *The Commissar Vanishes: the falsification of photographs and art in Stalin's Russia*, Metropolitan Books, New York, 1997.

breadwinners and dependents. The female relatives of farmers and small businessmen were to be called dependents. This category included 'all persons dependent upon relatives or natural guardians, including wives, children, and others not otherwise engaged in pursuits for which remuneration is paid; and all persons depending upon private charity, or whose support is a burthen on the public revenue'. So, *via* a particular method of classifying women, they became 'dependents' rather than 'producers', even if they worked a sixteen hour day on a farm. This type of classification obviously embodied particular attitudes to women, men and the family: it was not value-neutral. It rendered women's labour of farms invisible in the statistics.<sup>3</sup>

All documents, to some extent, embody the values of their creators. That is because the creators of documents, when they describe an event or person, are influenced in what they see by their own ideals, values and circumstances. You and I might see and describe the same event — say, a football or hockey match — but the stories we tell about it can be quite different in their emphases and themes. We'll probably be able to agree on the final score, but not on its significance, nor necessarily on who were the best players and whether or not the referee favoured one team or the other!

One way of looking at primary source documents is that they are a kind of first draft of history, an effort by someone in the past to subject reality to some kind of order. History, too, including when it is written by professionals, is shaped by the circumstances and values of those who create it. When history emerged as a distinct academic discipline in Germany of the nineteenth century, the study of government, diplomacy and war had a privileged place. Historians raided official archives to gather information about the thoughts and actions of various movers and shakers. History became an account of the affairs of a powerful minority: the bulk of humanity was at best a shadowy presence and at worst, omitted from consideration entirely. This kind of historical writing came at a time when nation-states were still emerging in Europe as the primary form of political unit; historians were implicated in what was as much a political as intellectual project.

The twentieth century, however, saw the rise and rise of social history. This, too, was influenced by the context in which historians operated. In the second half of the twentieth century, a group of English historians developed 'history from below'. Their view was that historians had spent too much time focussing on the doings of the rich and powerful; they should now turn their attention to the common people, but without neglecting the relationship between elites and masses. One of the most famous of these historians was E.P. Thompson. Thompson wrote social history, but his work was also profoundly 'political'. After all, Thompson was interested in class and power. In his best known work, called *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), he was interested in questions such as: How much control did ordinary people have over their own lives? How did the ruling class of English society during the industrial revolution seek to impose its will on them? To what extent was the common people able to resist the will of its 'betters'? These are all profoundly 'political' issues, but what Thompson was doing was redefining the idea of 'the political'. Politics, for Thompson, wasn't simply what was happening in the British Parliament. Politics was something that happened in the everyday lives of ordinary men and women. It occurred in factories, in markets, in churches and pubs. He was particularly interested in popular politics: the political organisations, forms and techniques used by working-class men and women to resist oppression. Thompson was a leader of the peace movement — the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament — at the time he wrote his classic work.

We can now see the way in which Thompson was part of a broader movement which was redefining politics in the 1960s. The new social movements of the late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, such as black liberation, women's liberation, gay liberation, nuclear disarmament and environmentalism, sought to challenge the idea of politics as simply an activity pursued by

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<sup>3</sup> Desley Deacon, 'Political Arithmetic: The Nineteenth-Century Australian Census and the Construction of the Dependent Woman', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol.11, no.1, 1985, pp.27-47.

politicians. The rise of social history in the English-speaking world was a part of this process. It recognised that everyday life was not only of historical interest, but a profoundly political beast. By the 1970s, social history seemed to be dominating the whole historical enterprise. Virtually any aspect of human activity was deemed to be worthy of attention: birth, childhood, work, leisure, love, sex and death were all on the agenda.

Social history has also helped to enrich the methods of explanation available to political history. Let me give you one example. For the last fifty years, diplomatic historians have debated the origins of the cold war. Some have seen post-war Soviet aggression as behind the cold war. Others have seen US economic imperialism as responsible. An American historian of the cold war, John L. Gaddis, has pointed to a neglected factor: the widespread use of rape by Soviet troops during their 'liberation' of Germany at the end of World War II. The Soviet leader, Stalin, hoped that a communist regime could be established in Germany without the use of Russian force, but rather with the consent of the German people. Why was he disappointed? Gaddis suggests that the behaviour of Russian troops in Germany might provide a clue. That the rape of German women by the conquering armies of the Soviet Union was very common was well known to Stalin, but he seems to have done nothing to stop it. Instead, the rape of the local women was seen as a right to be enjoyed and exercised by the long-suffering troops of the invading army. Thousands of German women probably suffered this fate. On the other hand, rape was much less common in the west of the country, where American, British and French troops were the occupiers. Gaddis argues that if we wish to understand why the German people were unlikely to be won over by the Russians — and instead had to be repressed — we should pay closer attention to the Soviet rape of German women.<sup>4</sup> This brutality doesn't explain the cold war but it does reveal how attention to the lives of ordinary men and women — the common Russian soldier, the German woman — can enrich our understanding of modern political history. The examples is particularly telling because Gaddis isn't a social or feminist historian, but a rather traditionally-minded diplomatic historian. But without the influence of social history, or of feminism, would he have come round to advancing such an explanation?

Consider how this has worked in Australia, too. In the decades between Federation and the 1970s, Indigenous people were often virtually ignored by Australian historians writing what we now think of as imperial or national history (although, interestingly, not always in local history, which permitted a space for the discussion of frontier violence in a way imperial and national history — perhaps because of its critical legitimising function — could not). But in the late 1960s and 1970s, as the movement for land rights gathered momentum, there was renewed interest in Aboriginal and frontier history. Many white historians involved in the land rights movement wrote history in this field, and some of them emphasised the ways in which Aboriginal people had resisted the encroachment of European civilisation in Australia in earlier times.<sup>5</sup> Arguably, the involvement of these historians in 1960s and 1970s political struggles had disposed them to view the past in certain kinds of ways. These ways were not 'wrong', but they did emphasise certain features of the past, such as Aboriginal resistance, at the expense of other themes.

Since the 1980s, there has been a renewed emphasis on the ways in which Aboriginal people accommodated themselves to the British presence in colonial Australia. New times means new political projects — such as the movement for a Treaty and for Reconciliation — which also tend to reshape historical interpretations.<sup>6</sup> The past is open to interpretation and reinterpretation, and that historical debates are influenced in subtle ways by the political circumstances of the present, as well as by the evidence that comes to us from the past. It is no coincidence that the rise

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<sup>4</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997, pp.286-7.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1990 [first published 1981].

<sup>6</sup> Henry Reynolds, *With the White People*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1990.

of environmental history in recent years has occurred at the same time as growing consciousness of the threat to the environment posed by human-induced climate change.

History cannot then be value-free — that it is in fact a ‘cultured’ activity, and a product of the imagination, an act of communication. The Sydney-based historian Iain McCalman once portrayed historians as the story-tellers of their tribe. Does this make historical constructions of knowledge less valuable or reliable than those in other disciplines? Or does it simply recognise that the knowledge that we produce is a product of context and culture, and therefore subject to the challenge of new sources and new perspectives? We try to tell the truth about the past, but recognise that what we say will only satisfy us – and probably our audiences – as true for the time being.

I’ll finish with another favourite quotation about history, this time from Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*.

“ ... I can read poetry and plays, and things of that sort, and do not dislike travels. But history, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in. Can you?” [Catherine]

“Yes, I am fond of history.” [Miss Tilney]

“I wish I were too. I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all—it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention. The speeches that are put into the heroes’ mouths, their thoughts and designs—the chief of all this must be invention, and invention is what delights me in other books.” [Catherine]

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“You are fond of history!—and so are Mr. Allen and my father; and I have two brothers who do not dislike it. So many instances within my small circle of friends is remarkable! At this rate, I shall not pity the writers of history any longer. If people like to read their books, it is all very well, but to be at so much trouble in filling great volumes, which, as I used to think, nobody would willingly ever look into, to be labouring only for the torment of little boys and girls, always struck me as a hard fate; and though I know it is all very right and necessary, I have often wondered at the person’s courage that could sit down on purpose to do it.” [Catherine]

“That little boys and girls should be tormented,” said Henry, “is what no one at all acquainted with human nature in a civilized state can deny; but in behalf of our most distinguished historians, I must observe, that they might well be offended at being supposed to have no higher aim; and that by their method and style, they are perfectly well qualified to torment readers of the most advanced reason and mature time of life. I use the verb ‘to torment,’ as I observed to be your own method, instead of ‘to instruct,’ supposing them to be now admitted as synonymous. [Henry]

I won’t torment you any longer!