What are historians for?*

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Abstract
This lecture addresses the general issue of the public function of academic history. In doing so, it considers the changing role of ‘history’ (both the practice and the form) from the Greeks to contemporary times, by exploring ways in which the muse Clio has been represented. It raises questions about the nature of public history in the U.K., by comparison with the so-called ‘History wars’ in North America and Australasia. It also engages with the relationship between the supposedly disinterested nature of historical enquiry and the ethical assumptions of historians as agents in society. By reflecting upon the tensions between the claims of historical writing as ‘scholarship’ and its literary form as a means of communicating with an audience, it argues that a priority for the discipline is to engage with pertinent matters of public concern.

‘History that is not useful, that has not some lay appeal, is mere antiquarianism; history that is not controversial is dead history’ claimed Hugh Trevor Roper in 1957.

Taking this view as a departure point, this article will reflect upon whether historians have responsibilities to communicate with the public, and how their public utility has changed over time.

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What I have to say is based upon an unfashionable claim that the activity of being a historian is artistic rather than scientific – historical claims to the truth are aesthetic and ethical, rather than empirical and objective.\(^3\) We do history to illuminate the nature of the human condition: the artefacts we produce are the result of a certain sort of dialogue with traces of the past – the value of that labour is shaped by the trust we and others place in a collective integrity. Good history is history that is honest – it is also history that is critical, informed, engaged and committed. It should expose tyranny, celebrate achievement, condemn crimes, explain prejudice, describe sacrifice, honour victims, commemorate the dead, but most importantly, provoke debate. Such history will try to preserve what is slipping from our grasp, and aim to recover what has been lost.\(^4\)

My argument has a simple thrust: I believe that the profession in the U.K. has become distracted from the proper function of engaging with the public. Anxieties about the epistemological foundations of our discipline – or, in more public language, worries about whether we are capable of telling the objective truth about the past – have meant that we have retreated into the increasingly dark corners of the academic community, publishing research in exclusive, recondite and expensive journals and monographs. As David Starkey in typically waspish mode asserted, history today is ‘a private conversation amongst dons in academic cloisters’.\(^5\) Some historians have resisted this by engaging with a broader audience, whether by writing books adjusted to popular tastes, or in other types of media – television and radio being the most obvious. These are valuable projects – although arguably at the moment they are driven by commercial interests, exploiting market demand for the entertainment value of such history. Success, too, has often bred envy: it is a commonplace mutter that such work is incompatible with the serious business of proper history.\(^6\) I wish to dispute vigorously this core assumption: entertainment and good history are not antithetical enterprises. For history to work in the broader community it must engage, entice, entrance, intrigue and fire the imagination. A book unread is not only mute, but dead.

Historians are essentially storytellers. We may have created more reliable, more robust ‘methods’ for doing it – for discovering, collecting, examining and interpreting the traces of all types of pasts – but at the core of

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\(^3\) See the recent discussion in A. Curthoys and J. Docker, *Is History Fiction?* (Sydney, 2006); and A. Curthoys and J. Docker, ‘The two histories: metaphor in English historical writing’, *Rethinking History*, i (1997), 259–73.

\(^4\) For a powerful statement, see Glannmor Williams’s inaugural lecture at University College, Swansea, *History in a Modern University* (1959), esp. pp. 6, 8, 13–15, 16, 31.


effective and instructive history, is its ability to connect with an audience: it should be imaginative, lucid, vivid and readable. Historians have an intellectual responsibility to make every effort to connect the past to the public: history is ultimately a cultural form of public property. The traffic between the past and present is two way: all history is contemporary history – it is written by men and women, now, to communicate ideas and understanding, to make honest judgements about events, people and societies that have some purchase on the conduct of life for modern audiences. This is not to argue that historians have either a prophetic role predicting the future, or that they are simply ideologues. Historians’ methods may not be ‘scientific’, but they certainly aim to manifest a brand of intellectual integrity; to make their history with a scrupulous use of the evidence; to exercise a honed critical approach to any set of claims and narratives; and to communicate those judgements with clarity.

It is possible to harvest some reflections on how the historical profession is valued in contemporary society from popular culture. One can contrast the generally positive images of the profession in the media with some less respectable literary representations. Elaine Showalter in a highly entertaining recent study – Faculty Towers – exploring ideas of academia in modern literature, underscores a number of pertinent themes. Historical scholars in the novel have been a fairly risible bunch: the characters – from Casaubon in Middlemarch (a man dead from the waist down) to Lucky Jim and The History Man – are pedantic, other-worldly, predatory adulterers, cantankerous, obsessed with status and precedent, preening, self-satisfied, semi-detached and inward looking. These representations play off a cynicism about the value of erudition, and scepticism about the moral character of individual historians. The point is that, almost despite themselves, historians and history have a public status – but it is a mantle reluctantly taken on. Why?

We are all now accustomed to spending time in the virtual company of some distinguished historians: they come in many shapes and sizes. In recent years historians have been everywhere – B.B.C. 1, 2, 3 and 4, Discovery, Channels 4 and 5, cable, satellite. There have been historical reality shows,

8 For some reflections, see D. Greenberg, ‘“History is a luxury”: Mrs. Thatcher, Mr. Disney, and (public) history’, Reviews in Amer. Hist., xxvi (1998), 204–311; and M. Cassity, ‘History and the public purpose’, Jour. Amer. Hist., lxxxi (1994), 969–76.
mega series on monarchy, empire, and the Spartans, reconstructions of wars and plagues, histories of technology, and real time style discovery programmes which have caught the interest of the public and the commissioning editors alike. Such has been the demand that entire new channels have been launched. Much of this history has been presenter led, using the talking historian to provide a narrative backbone for the visual components of the story. The strength of such programmes rests a good deal on the different styles of the historians: contrast the brutal virtuosity of Starkey – who has made an art form out of puncturing the pomposity of a range of figures, contemporary and historical, political and religious – with the more gentle, learned and generous image of Simon Schama, a historical voice sensitive to subtlety, and as interested in the down-trodden and disadvantaged as the regal and aristocratic; or perhaps the more handsome and contrarian Niall Ferguson – keen to provoke politically correct sensibilities by delivering a celebration of the achievements of empire and American foreign policy. These historian presenters, all distinguished academics, deliver clear, engaged, authoritative accounts. Through expert delivery, complex historical subjects, and decades of research, are rendered into a powerful cultural form – we can all see the past in their capable company.11 In recent years the trend for epic series has been supplemented by more popular formats. The huge impact of access to genealogical resources driven by The National Archives’ digitization of census material has created an almost insatiable desire for tracing ancestors: in their worst form these are television driven exercises in celebrity watching; in the form of projects like ‘Moving here’ many individuals have reconstructed their own stories of difference.12

One of the other successful ways of projecting historical research to broader audiences is through B.B.C. Radio: here the immediate pressures of commercial imperatives are not so dramatic and arguably the product has more integrity. Ongoing programmes such as ‘In our time’ and ‘The long view’ take a deliberate view on either bringing together academic voices to discuss central themes, or seeking out parallels between then and now to illuminate modern matters. The best of these historical programmes work by hanging interpretative argument off the details of real lives. Using dramatic techniques, skilful editing and historians who are prepared to deliver opinions without the clogging qualification of verbal footnotes, inspiring programmes have translated serious archival research into effective public history. Academic historians need to do more to shape such projects – too often we are isolated by our own misguided sense of disciplinary worth.13

11 See Champion, passim.
What are historians for? 171

We have a conundrum then: history in the U.K. is everywhere, but we are not quite sure what it’s for. It is on television and radio, it provides material for Hollywood films and it shapes some of the most successful novels, so it certainly fulfils its function as ‘entertainment’. What is less obvious is its instructive role. It is clear that the public has expectations that historians will tell the truth, but it is not clear what this truth is for. For example, the little public debate about the future of the monarchy in this country is not framed with a historical perspective, but rather in terms of the heritage industry. Compare the cultural and political significance that national celebrations of Bastille Day in France assume with the almost entire disregard for the republican tradition in the U.K. – where the revolutionary values of liberté, égalité and fraternité born in 1789 lie at the core of contemporary French culture, one would struggle hard to find equivalents drawn from the turbulent years of the revolutions of 1649 or 1689. There is, then, a peculiar, and perhaps deliberate, lack of reflection on the nature of public history in the U.K., despite a sophisticated and passionate debate about the nature of the heritage industry and the National Trust. 14

This is not the same in all contemporary cultures: although I am not confident in writing with any particular insight about the public function of historians in Japan, Korea, India or Pakistan, my colleagues assure me that the content of public history (as taught in the schools and universities) is driven by present-centred and very often explicitly political ambitions which have not compromised either the status of the history digested by the public or the reputation of the historians who write it. 15 Such historians are not marginal to the central tasks of public debate and engagement – it is quite clear that in some contexts writing the wrong sort of history has resulted not only in exclusion and censorship, but even in death. It is hard to imagine similar consequences arising from the publication of articles in the historical journals or the learned presses of the U.K.

Elsewhere in the world – in particular in South Africa, America, Australia, France and Spain – there is an urgent and powerful engagement with the public value of historical discourse (whether disseminated through books, journals, exhibitions, museums, television or film). 16 In Australia

14 For an important overview, see P. Mandler, History and National Life (2002); D. Lowenthal, The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History (Cambridge, 1998).


the so-called ‘History Wars’ have seen a conflict between ‘black arm band history’ and those who claim that the ‘killing of history’ is the consequence of political correctness. Driven in particular by the question of the genocidal impact of imperial settlement on the aboriginal peoples, and the consequential issues for questions of national identity, debates about immigration, the commemoration of Gallipoli and the content and presentation of exhibitions in state museums have all prompted heated public controversy – historians argue with politicians, journalists, museum trustees and the broader public. The public debates on these issues are informed by the exchange of historical opinion: such contestation about the relevant historical perspectives is at times manifest even in the form of dispute over the wording on exhibition labels.

Public history elsewhere, then, is public-centred and politically engaged. Recently, despite the unfortunate remarks of Charles Clarke, the then Secretary of State for Education, leading politicians have made explicit claims about the potential public role of history. The chancellor Gordon Brown, in an address to the Fabian Society on Britishness, argued for an intimate connection between understandings of the past, national identity and citizenship. Central to Brown’s vision of a collective past was what he called the ‘golden thread’ of liberty running from Magna Carta to the great reform acts. The past delivered two key values: the concept ‘of the individual standing firm against tyranny’ (perhaps a personal remark regarding his own political struggles?); and ‘the idea of government accountable to the people’.

Critics have disputed the simplicity and triumphalism of this version of the past – Brown’s golden thread of liberty also underpinned, most pertinently for our modern multicultural society, the legacy of slavery and empire. The dangers of producing a master narrative of the national past that might be taught in the national curriculum quite rightly horrifies sensible people.

Other government agencies show profound interest in the provision and function of history in schools. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority complained that school history had too much ‘Hitler and Henry’. As a consequence history played ‘an increasingly marginal role’ in education because of the ‘perception that it has only a limited relevance to many pupils’ future working lives’. Interestingly, the report underscores the potential of history ‘to contribute to young people’s awareness and appreciation of the notion of common identity and sense of Britishness’. A noteworthy innovation prompted by these concerns is

What are historians for? 173

a new G.C.S.E. in history which quite explicitly introduces present-centred engagements as part of its curriculum by including modules on heritage management, marketing, multimedia and history. Topics like ‘Bringing history to life’ explore the representation of the past on television, on film and in other media.\textsuperscript{21}

The premise of this initiative is that students’ engagement with the past is important for ‘understanding and participating in their own communities and the wider world’. With a sufficient range of historical knowledge students will be equipped with understanding and skills to ‘participate effectively in the world around them’. Their sense of personal identity will be developed alongside commitments to citizenship and ‘a respect for the diversity of human experience’. History will provide the skills that citizens need – ‘making decisions, formulating judgements, and maintaining perspective’. It seems then, from the top down, that historians are intended to have a central role in educating the nation to an engaged and dynamic citizenship – perhaps we could say historians might even have a duty to make the ‘public’? It is not clear how many historians are aware of this duty.

While the public function of history in the U.K. does not obviously follow the vibrant patterns of shaping and enriching political conversation and debate found elsewhere, it was not always so. In the nineteenth century, historians acted as public moralists contesting Liberal and Tory views of the British past – historians like Macaulay, by communicating with a very wide reading public, helped to shape national identity by their persuasive portrayals of the past. Professionalization of the discipline in the later nineteenth century meant that this public role was displaced by the ‘footnote governed pedant’.\textsuperscript{22} There are, it must be admitted, still some furious and bitter disputes fought out on the pages of the learned journals – battles over the accuracy of citations, the integrity of professional conduct, and over the interpretation of specific moments or interpretations of the past – but it is very unlikely that any of this has surfaced in public, and if it did, very few, I imagine, would care – so much energy, passion and labour for such little end.

Very often these academic disputes mask deeper ideological commitments – for example the now ailing scholarly industry that pitted revisionists, Marxists, liberals and counter-revisionists against each other over the causes of the outbreak of the English Revolution (which rumbled on for most of the late nineteen-seventies and eighties and certainly distorted many undergraduate perceptions of the seventeenth century) might now be read as a shadow of the more obvious national political cleavages between old and new Labour.


and the rise of Thatcherism. Many historians today write and research because they have commitments – political, cultural, religious, gendered or a mixture of all of these – but most are uncomfortable in making these commitments too explicit for fear that their academic reputations might be tarnished. Perhaps it is time we were all much more open about this issue.

The relationship between truth-telling and ethical value has been fractured in the discipline’s self-image – a commitment to tell the truth, it seems, is enough to reassure the world that historians are serious about their moral obligations. Indeed, a historian’s ethical values are absorbed from contingent circumstances – the institutional setting for his or her education, the practices and values of the employing institution, the broader ‘life of the mind’ chosen by the individual. This diversity of ethical value is a good thing: it might, ordinarily, be expected to sustain an engaged debate about shared values. However, much of this ethical dimension is masked in the modern discipline: claims to objectivity act as a modesty blanket for other activities and values. It is an appropriate time to embrace a more honest and open engagement.

This ‘noble dream’ of objectivity, a legacy of the late Victorian cult of the archive and the fact, has obscured a long-lived tradition that insisted history and the historian were profoundly ethical activities and actors. The aspiration of early twentieth-century historians to be able to compete with the scientific truths of fellow academics in their laboratories has distracted the modern profession from its more explicitly public duties. It is worth pausing briefly to revisit the words of George Trevelyan, one of the most passionate defenders of the public and imaginative function of history, and a bestselling author. Addressing the National Book League in 1945, he argued that ‘the fundamental question is whether history has any important relation to the reading public at all’. Dismissing the idea that the public should simply be reduced to overhearing the learned talk among themselves, he insisted that the ‘value and object of history is . . . to educate the public mind’.

Drawing a distinction between the discovery of facts and writing about them – he insisted that the ordinary reader could be engaged by effective writing – Trevelyan suggested that such imaginative pasts were useful

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parents of the present. This was not a defence of history as propaganda, but as a mechanism for the ‘education of the mind of the reader’. Historical awareness (the ‘pageant and process of human affairs’) was fundamental to a mature and engaged political citizenship: as he explained, ‘if he knows no history, he is not properly educated either as a citizen or as an intellectual and imaginative being’ (we should note that the ‘he’ is quite deliberate here). People would not read history if they did not enjoy it: for that reason it was the duty of the historian to produce books that were both interesting and delightful – works that buried the fascinating past under a ‘heap of learning’ were pointless indulgence. Trevelyan used the idea of Clio to think about history. The edifying function of history has long been presented through this means. Representing history in the image of Clio is ubiquitous even today: departmental websites around the world often include one image or another – the most popular being the enigmatic painting by Vermeer (see Figure 1). Examining images of Clio, goddess companion of Apollo, is also an excellent excuse for some visual diversions.

Who was Clio? Firstborn muse – daughter of Jupiter and Mnemosyne (memory) – she was responsible for inspiring the composition of history. Her duty was to record faithfully the actions of brave and virtuous heroes, to provide models for emulation and admiration. She is commonly represented with a crown of laurel signifying glory, a trumpet to proclaim fame, and a book, scroll or tablet in which to record the deeds of the virtuous and worthy. The dual function of the communication of ‘fame’ by means of the trumpet and the scribal documentation of acts in the book or scroll are powerful aspects of the tradition of portraying Clio. We should be clear, though, that Clio has been adapted to many different purposes. In the myriad depictions of Clio (mosaics, sculptures, painting and engravings, ranging from antiquity to the present day) there is a variety of ways of representing history. Clio records the acts of the honourable and the famous, but she does so in different ways. In the classical mode, history was a device for teaching philosophy by example – good history was good because it cultivated the right values, not necessarily because it was simply an accurate view of an event. The scroll is open, the deed recorded: Clio is modestly dressed, even austere. The purpose of history was to lead an audience to virtue and emulation of correct civic conduct.

29 Some of the more identifiable images of Clio include paintings by Claude Mignard (1689, now in the Musée des Beaux Arts, Budapest); Eustache Le Sueur (1652, now at the Louvre, Paris); François Boucher (The Wallace Collection); Giovanni Barbieri, engraved by W. W. Ryland (1763); Artemesia Gentileschi (1632); and Angelica Kaufman (1700, now at Augsburg).
Engravings of Clio by Hendrik Goltzius (1592) were re-worked by many subsequent artists for inclusion in editions of historical works – the 1617 edition of Sir Walter Raleigh’s History of the World, and Thomas Heywood’s 1624 Of the Muses are examples. The iconographical tradition of Cesare Ripa was also a source of other representations. Sculptures by Clodion (at the Palais de la Légion d’Honneur, Paris) and Carlo Franzoni, in the National Statuary Hall of the U.S. Capitol are reproduced here. The image of Vermeer’s Art of Painting is reproduced (with permission) from Jonathan Jansen’s excellent website Essential Vermeer <http://essentialvermeer.20m.com/> [accessed 31 Jan. 2007].
The invention of the apparatus of scholarship in the late renaissance saw Clio adopt a more scholarly pose: by the time of the engravings of Goltzius in the late sixteenth century, she is represented undertaking serious research (see Figure 2). The trumpet has disappeared: academic recording is given priority over blowing the brass. The practice of historical writing over this period developed the use of footnotes, documentary citation, extracts and appendices, acting as a literary strategy to cultivate credibility and status for historians. This public credibility enabled them to make authoritative statements about significant issues. The classical mode of depicting Clio persisted, but was adapted to contemporary historical practice – so, for example, the scroll gives way to the printed page. In some portrayals, the studious is displaced by the frivolous. It seems, too, that Clio becomes increasingly immodest in her attire – shoulders and breasts exposed. In some paintings Clio is clearly adopting an anachronistic classical mode. In others, for example the works by Artemesia Gentileschi and Angelica Kaufman, the clothing is contemporary and quite ordinary, although the classical motifs of the laurel crown and the papers are present discarded on the desk. That Clio might be presented to embody very different notions is most easily seen by comparing Boucher’s rather titillating, and not very serious Clio, immodestly reclining in the clouds, with the serious figure of Clodian, where the muse is in the act of recording for posterity the fame of a young Napoleon (see Figure 3).

Artists and historians continued to do a good deal of thinking with Clio. Charles Sims’s *Clio and the children* (1915) shows perhaps a profound break with the earlier iconographical traditions: here we see the return of the scroll on the knee of a veiled and bowed Clio – far from recording admirable episodes, she seems to be mourning bloody deeds. Depicted in a recognizably modern English landscape, Clio also has an audience of predominantly young women and girls. Perhaps this is a fledgling public? We have lost this edifying aspect of history in the din of claims about the disinterested nature of history and the historians who write it. The retreat into professional specialization has meant that for many today, history is not only disinterested, but also profoundly uninteresting and disconnected from the world.

Does this matter? My own ruminations on the public role of historians have been driven by two conflicting experiences: the first, and perhaps most personal, was that of marching against the war in Iraq. In a long experience of protesting against the stupidity and immorality of British governments and American foreign policy – whether campaigning against apartheid, pogoing against the Nazis and Rocking against Racism, marching under the banner of ‘Jobs not bombs’, supporting (from a safe distance) the women of Greenham

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31 For some similar remarks related to the arts in general, see J. Carey, *What Good are the Arts?* (2005).

Figure 2. Hendrick Goltzius, *Clio* (1592)
What are historians for?

Common, protesting against anti-abortion legislation (does anyone remember the rather quaint chant of ‘Corry Corry, withdraw like your father should have done’?), defending the miners, resisting the vicious homophobic Clause 28 legislation, condemning the bombing of Tripoli, or resisting the Poll Tax – there was always hope that such expressions of dissent might have an effect in contesting national policy, even against the stubborn will of the Iron Lady.

That Saturday, marching alongside friends and family, young and old, millions of people peacefully but powerfully expressed their profound hostility against an immoral and allegedly illegal war. Young Muslims, trendy Christians, elderly Jews rubbed shoulders, shared jokes, sang, danced and cried together – English, Scottish, American, Turkish, Chinese, Israeli, Nepalese, Iranian, French, German and Dutch people combined to express utter contempt for the supine and deceitful conduct of the Labour prime minister. The feelings of impotence, anger, frustration and helplessness have had a dramatic effect on my understanding of what it is to be a historian. Put very bluntly, the experience of being part of a historical event of the magnitude of the march, but also of observing the relationship between that moment and the wider political and military processes, underscored some deep anxieties about not only the possibilities of making historical sense of such an event, but also, perhaps, the futility of being a historian.33

Interestingly, the Euston Manifesto ‘statement of principles’ number (12) makes a commitment to ‘Historical truth’ on the grounds that ‘In connecting to the original humanistic impulses of the movement for human progress, we emphasize the duty which genuine democrats must have to respect for the historical truth’ <http://eustonmanifesto.org> [accessed 28 June 2006].

Figure 3. Clodian, L’histoire, Palais de la Légion d’Honneur, Paris

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People marched because they believed that the grounds for war were immoral, and the political process that led to British involvement was corrupt – how far, I wondered, were these views informed by my professional activity as a historian? Was it possible to apply the tools of historical analysis
commonly used to explore eighteenth-century politics to understand my own culture? What was the relationship between my historical and political commitments? Certainly the attempt by the government of the day to persuade the public with material plagiarized from academic sources grated against scholarly sensibilities. If the national administration could not be condemned for such improper and deceitful behaviour, the chances of explaining to errant undergraduates that the practice was illegitimate were slim. My gut feeling is that the bulk of the professional discipline would frown deeply at any practitioner admitting that there not only could, but in fact should be an intimate and necessary connection between the past and the present. A commitment to objectivity, it seems, may compromise the pursuit of the truth.

The second prompt that led to a consideration of the question before us happened in 1999–2000, returning to the public stage in 2006. In 1999, David Irving, the holocaust denier, attempted to use British libel laws to silence Deborah Lipstadt for exposing his scholarship and compromising his reputation. As contemporary reports and subsequent academic studies have reinforced, the trial was critical to the public understanding of the nature of history.\textsuperscript{34} It subjected Irving’s historical conduct to forensic analysis – his full, profound, repeated and deliberate misuse, manipulation and distortion of evidence was relentlessly exposed. It was very clear, as the judicial judgement established, that Irving was not a historian: he was a liar.\textsuperscript{35} Subsequently, in February 2006, Irving was imprisoned for Holocaust denial in Austria.

This is not the place to rehearse the angry hive of debate that both the original trial, and the imprisonment, provoked: there are others better qualified to discuss the arguments about censorship and freedom of speech. Whether we believe that the judgement against Irving and his imprisonment is just, appropriate or righteous is only indirectly pertinent to what I wish to pass comment on. One of the most alarming aspects manifest in the trial was the response of other, often distinguished, academics. Most, it is fair to say, supported the unambiguous statements made by Richard Evans, who dismissed Irving’s claims to be a historian. But, as Evans pointed out, many eminent historians qualified this criticism by asserting that in some respects Irving’s scholarship was impressive and weighty – this was one of the most disturbing elements of the trial.\textsuperscript{36}

Despite the exceptionally clear and overwhelming thrust of the defence argument that in almost every examined case Irving had compromised the integrity of the evidence – combined with his anti-Semitism, and racism


\textsuperscript{36} See Evans, \textit{Telling Lies}, pp. 248–54.
– it was still possible for people to hold his historical work in some regard. This ability to distinguish between the person and the work seems to me to be problematic. While I may write bad history because I am incompetent and incapable of understanding the sources, or of translating a foreign language, or of decoding a difficult piece of handwriting, such poor scholarship does not necessarily mean I am a bad man – but it does mean that I am a bad historian. However, a person who deliberately and systematically manipulates the historical record to present a distorted vision of the past is not only a bad historian, but a fraud and a liar – these are offences not only against historical scholarship but against bonds of trust in society.

The Irving trial made it very evident that claims to historical objectivity still, despite the assault of the post-modern theorists, conjure up powerful authority in the public domain. It is because historians are perceived, somehow, as having an ability to make authoritative and truthful statements about the past that there is such concern when manipulation and fraudulent claims are discovered. The irony is that, despite this cultural authority, so few historians are willing to employ their insights to illuminate issues of public interest. Strangely, while the public is willing to listen to the remarks of historians, many use their disciplinary duties of objectivity as grounds for retreat into scholarship and immunity from contemporary comment.

Trust is at the core of all historical practice: the great problem posed by bad history is that, to the unwary reader, it looks as solid as good history. As many comment, Irving’s books are built upon great doorsteps of archival citations, footnotes, extracts – a conspicuous display of supposed scholarly credentials. Only after exceptional and dedicated scrutiny by a team of expert researchers was this foundation exposed as insubstantial and sandy. Yet, not one in a thousand books is subject to even a fraction of such forensic attention. This is not to suggest either that Irving has been subjected to unwarranted attention, or that the majority of history in the libraries and bookshops is potentially as erroneous and corrupt. We are forced to take the value of many historical statements upon credit – but why, for example, should we believe a historian more than, say, a politician? The Irving trial was a timely moment to encourage reflection on the public nature of historical writing: certainly the debate about the status of the discipline convulsed the broadsheets, journals and senior common rooms of universities. Strangely, however, despite the anxiety prompted by Irving, this did not translate into a more general engagement with the contribution of historians to public culture. It seems that the public was content to let the rest of us get on with our work un-scrutinized.

There is a profound and necessary connection between the type of people we are and our historical commitments. How we relate to our worlds,
to our neighbours, to our families and friends, to the homeless in the street, and to our students is shaped by and shapes the sort of historians we become. Our experiences and values form the types of inquiries that we devote labour and imagination to pursuing – the history we produce, then, is indissolubly mixed up with our personal identities. Collectively historians have been rather shamefaced about this fundamental fact of our social being. Sophisticated defences, evermore complex and rigorous disciplinary methods, have been contrived to erect a screen against these charges – supposedly our footnotes save us from partiality, our careful use of archives preserves us from bias, and our dense, thicket-like prose ensures that no one might mistakenly suggest our writing had any purchase on contemporary affairs. If history is to be regarded as an activity that claims to engage with the ‘truth’, then it must at least claim to be an ethical enterprise, and if so, it by default ought to have some present-centred function. If claims to the ‘truth’ make people uncomfortable perhaps ‘informed, trustworthy and ethical opinion’ might be suitable?

One area where historians have valuable and important perspectives to offer on current concerns relates to the difficult relationship between religion and civil society. We live in dangerous and troubled times – not simply in the U.K., but in the global community. It is as a historian of what I shall for convenience call the English Enlightenment that I personally feel the urgency and potential destructiveness of this moment. The bulk of my research (apart from rather gory digressions into the everyday lives of dying and diseased Londoners) has been focused on thinking about early modern religion, the cultural dimensions of its lived experience, the relationship between the demands of devout belief and the duties and responsibilities of civil life and citizenship – put simply, the struggles between conscience and the state – combined with a fascination with why people believe and how belief motivated action.

Historians of the early modern period have spent much time examining the debates and conflicts between faiths, and more passionately the arguments against faith – whether by exploring the polemics between Roman Catholics and Godly Protestants over the nature of the early church, the inerrancy of Revelation or the nature of the antichrist; or by reading the millenarian tracts and pamphlets of prophets of the ‘end times’ in the sixteen-fifties; or by describing the disputes between those Anglicans who believed it was a godly duty to persecute the heretical and dissident, and those men like John Locke, who believed Christian duty enfranchised a liberty of sincere conscience – the resonances between then, and now, are almost too violent to record. Reading the writings of radical Calvinists defending the duties of the godly to resist the Roman antichrist ‘even to destruction’, or the pamphlets of the Cromwellian regime approving the destruction of the pagan Irish peasantry in the name of godly Israel, or the writings of scholars who employed considerable learning and erudition to establish that every single phrase of the Bible was inerrant and inspired makes the
drawing of contemporary parallels and connections inescapable. Just as various religious communities call now for blasphemy laws to restrain the impious and the ungodly, so too did they in the seventeenth century. The language and aspirations are sometimes chillingly similar; indeed, the traditions are the same.

That the last person in the U.K. to be executed for blasphemy (in 1698) expressed ideas – that scripture was a fable, that the three great religious leaders of Judaism, Christianity and Islam were political impostors, that religion was a fraud used to manipulate the ignorant and stupid – which, if publicly articulated today, would involve him or her in considerable difficulties under legislation protecting religious sensibilities is profoundly worrying.38 In early modern Europe religious minorities – mainly Christian, that is, Quakers, Baptists, Roman Catholics, Protestants – were persecuted and deprived of equal civil and political rights by the state. The arguments used to justify this mixed claims to religious truth and anxieties about political subversion. The connection between sacrificing civil liberties and protecting the public community against the threat of subversion by religiously inspired terrorist minorities is, unsurprisingly, not the invention of George Bush and Tony Blair. The word ‘refugee’ was, of course, coined to describe those minorities that the French state cleansed from its national boundaries in the sixteen-eighties.

Despite the aspirations of the children of Darwin and Nietzsche, it seems that neither God nor the power of religion is dead. We live in times where the discourses of ‘faith’ exercise enormous power over national institutions, devout populations and committed minorities. The complacent values and cultural tradition of civil society seem fragile. The competing claims of individual conscience, shared cultural identity and civil communities are complex and muddled. The topical conflicts that have convulsed the U.K. – the fate of Salman Rushdie is notorious, but more recently the Ken Livingstone affair, the irreligious cartoons, the riotous civil disorder prompted by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti’s play Behzti, the coordinated campaign against the B.B.C. for showing Jerry Springer the Opera – argue that the relationship between religious sensibilities and communal liberty is once again a matter of fundamental dispute. The absolute mess that the current government has made of pursuing legislation restraining public criticism of faith, while trying to compromise civil liberties in the name of protecting us from those who ‘glorify’ terrorism, illustrates quite how incapable contemporary political expertise is of understanding these issues.39

These tensions have obvious global dimensions: historians, especially those who work on periods where religious ideas and institutions were dominant, have insight and advice to offer that may deliver some different perspectives. This is not a claim that historians have the answers, but they

38 See O.D.N.B. entry on Thomas Aikenhead.
39 The various positions are outlined in Free Expression is No Offence, ed. L. Appignanesi (2005).
certainly do have some serious opinions and evidence drawn from deep reflection upon how other minds and cultures dealt with similar concerns. In the current climate it is an urgent priority to return to the Enlightenment as a source for intellectual techniques and political languages with which to engage with the rise of religion – the tools of reason and the values of tolerance and civil liberty are ones that may provide us with the most effective means for resolving some of the difficulties that our culture faces.\footnote{J. Robertson, \textit{The Case for the Enlightenment} (Cambridge, 2005).}

This claim, that ‘enlightenment’ values have critical purchase on our own situation, is not a simple assertion that we need to bow before a version of the Enlightenment past: that past itself had a dark and intolerant component – on questions of race and empire, on class and on gender we would find much out of kilter with modern values. Contemporary politicians and religious leaders would do well to read some of the classics of this period, many of which expose the political aspirations of religious domination and provide a cogent defence of the rights of reason to challenge the claims of the religious to truth. Historians can provide more than content for addressing contemporary difficulties – they can also offer insight into how past writers engaged tactically with dominant religious discourses. Those religious authorities still rest many of their assertions of legitimacy on the same traditions and values challenged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Enlightened thinkers recognized that religion, in all its forms, is a cultural artefact, neither revealed by God nor channelled by prophets, but made by humans. The second key contention, and one dramatically pertinent to the contemporary world, was that because religion was both man-made and powerful, it needed careful management to maintain the integrity of civil society. Dissident thinkers of the time took a step back from the divine claims of their contemporary churches and explored the public function of religion as either corrosive or supportive of civil peace. Prefiguring the arguments of contemporaries like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Lewis Wolpert, enlightened thinkers regarded all traditional religious institutions as pathological – they ridiculed the ‘mystery’ of belief, while reserving the full thrust of their criticism for the churchmen.\footnote{See D. Dennett, \textit{Breaking the Spell} (2006); L. Wolpert, \textit{Six Impossible Things before Breakfast} (2006) and R. Dawkins, \textit{The God Delusion} (2006).} All known history, for such men, was a battle between ignorance and liberty: priests crafted the mental shackles that empowered political tyranny. Exploiting the natural fear that the ignorant manifested when faced with the unknown, ‘unpleasing priests’ fabricated beliefs to reinforce their own authority and status. Not only did such thinkers challenge the political power of religion, they also made the point that it was entirely plausible for atheists to be sociable, firmly breaking the assumption that all social and political order rested on religious orthodoxy. It is still far from commonplace to assume that it is possible to be moral without being
religious. Enlightenment writers exposed the absurdity of organized religion with satire and ridicule – at its most extreme, in the clandestine manuscripts of the eighteenth century, Judaism, Christianity and Islam were damned as imposture and fraud, the scriptures were fables, the afterlife a misunderstanding, and God reduced to matter. Tony Blair’s claims to divine inspiration look remarkably familiar to an early modernist.

One important contemporary function for historians like myself is to keep these views in the conversation. We have all been brought up to believe that somehow modern democratic societies were born out of a struggle with medieval tyranny and despotism. The history of modern liberty, especially in the U.K., is often told as a story of parliamentary institutions defeating the absurd prerogatives of monarchies. If we configure the story of the birth of the modern secular state in a different way – one that saw a disentangling of civil values from religious imperatives – the core task of those who shape our modern liberty must be to make a difficult compromise between the freedoms of those who wish to pursue their own peculiar religious values and those who believe that the escape from such theological worldviews is the most urgent commission that confronts us.

Peter Novick has claimed that the job of historians is to make up ‘interesting provocative, even edifying stories . . . as a contribution to collective self understanding’ – in doing so they ‘make no greater (but also no lesser) truth claims than poets or painters’. This brings us back to Vermeer’s presentation of Clio, and the opportunity to make some concluding reflections. This is not the place to set this work in its proper artistic or historical context – it is enough to say that, since the refurbishment of Vermeer’s reputation in the late nineteenth century, the painting has been regarded as enigmatic; academics have debated the significance of its composition (a departure from the traditions of historical method), the technical achievement (painted with the use of the camera obscura or not?) and a vast range of other issues.42 The painting is useful for doing some thinking about the activity of being an historian. People might raise the legitimate query ‘How can a piece of seventeenth-century art help us to think about history?’ Well, I think history works in very much the same way as when we look at this (or any) painting. If I asked the question ‘what does this painting tell us about history?’, you might respond by describing it: our access to the image, in this sense, is transparent – we can see what is going on before our eyes.43


43 When the lecture was delivered, a reproduction of Vermeer’s ‘The art of painting’ was on display for the duration of the event.
If we wanted a deeper understanding of the painting, a much more complex set of ‘ways of seeing’ is necessary. In examining the image the following questions might be prompted – ‘What are the maps of, and for?’ Why does the artist have his back to us? Why is his hand so crudely drawn when the rest of the painting is so precise? What does the drapery in the corner signify? Are the figures’ clothes authentic? Does the double-headed eagle on top of the chandelier represent the Habsburg empire? What are the items on the desk near the window – an antique mask, a book of architectural drawings, a substantial volume – do they signify something? By raising such questions we make an engaged inquiry – historians can undertake deep and profound research which may even suggest answers, and with those insights all of us can benefit by being encouraged to look at and think about the painting in a different way. Historians do not simply pose questions and provide the means for answering them, they also create verbal representations that operate in the same way that this painting does. Vermeer’s work is an artefact: it was made deliberately; despite its representational form, it is a work of intentional construction. Because we are so used to the photographic image sometimes it is easy to suppose that artists simply paint what is before their eyes. It is often the same assumption with history – we simply describe what happened. One of Vermeer’s points in this painting, it seems to me, is to prompt reflection on the process of making art and history – we have a representation of the artist, making the painting we see. In one sense, the author and the viewer share the same perspective on the scene. Vermeer was not simply describing what he saw, but also making claims about the business of representation – the domestic setting, the items of everyday life, the maps and tapestries all root the subject of art and history in the present day, and in the real. Clio the muse, here, is an ordinary young woman holding real objects. Historians, I believe, should work in the same way. We generate plausible and ‘real’ pictures of the past. Like Vermeer, we load our pens with insight and witness: some history is as elegant and as visually lucid as Vermeer’s art; other history is as obscure, indigestible and self-indulgent as the most controversial of contemporary art. Public art and public history should not be merely decorative, but should have meaning. We do not, I believe, engage in reconstructing jigsaws of the


46 Interestingly, Richard Evans (Telling Lies, p. 257) remarks that historians are like ‘figurative painters’ who may use different techniques from different perspectives but still aim for representational verisimilitude: someone claiming to paint a mountain should not produce a picture of a fried egg. This is a debateable view of the nature of art which avoids engaging with the aesthetic dimension of artistic expression.
past without the picture on the box, but in fact try to paint pictures (in books, on television or radio, or in person) that will engage and provoke the widest possible audiences. In making that connection with the public, we might also contribute to making the world a better place. This discussion opened with a remark from Hugh Trevor Roper, but will conclude with a statement from a man of very different intellectual temper – Friedrich Nietzsche. Railing against the self-regarding antiquarians of his day, he insisted ‘we need history; but our need for it is different from that of the pampered idler in the garden of knowledge – we need it for life and for action’. As he continued, and it is a remark that may provoke some thought in our current condition, ‘History stands in the service, not of pure knowledge but of life’.  