

American Historical Association

Why Study History

By William H. McNeill, 1985

WHY should anyone bother learning about things that happened far away and long ago? Who cares about Cleopatra, Charlemagne, Montezuma or Confucius? And why worry about George Washington, or how democratic government and industrial society arose? Isn't there quite enough to learn about the world today? Why add to the burden by looking at the past? Historians ought to try to answer such questions by saying what the study of history is good for, and what it cannot do. But since no one can speak for the historical profession as a whole, this essay is no more than a personal statement, commissioned by the American Historical Association in the hope of convincing all concerned that the study of history is indeed worthwhile and necessary for the education of effective citizens and worthy human beings. Historical knowledge is no more and no less than carefully and critically constructed collective memory. As such it can both make us wiser in our public choices and more richly human in our private lives.

Historical knowledge is no more and no less than carefully and critically constructed collective memory.

Without individual memory, a person literally loses his or her identity, and would not know how to act in encounters with others. Imagine waking up one morning unable to tell total strangers from family and friends! Collective memory is similar, though its loss does not immediately paralyze everyday private activity. But ignorance of history—that is, absent or defective collective memory—does deprive us of the best available guide for public action, especially in encounters with outsiders, whether the outsiders are another nation, another civilization, or some special group within national borders.

Often it is enough for experts to know about outsiders, if their advice is listened to. But democratic citizenship and effective participation in the determination of public policy require citizens to share a collective memory, organized into historical knowledge and belief. Otherwise, agreement on what ought to be done in a given situation is difficult to achieve. Agreement on some sort of comfortable falsehood will not do, for without reasonably accurate knowledge of the past, we cannot expect to accomplish intended results, simply because we will fail to foresee how others are likely to react to anything we decide on. Nasty surprises and frustrating failures are sure to multiply under such circumstances.

This value of historical knowledge obviously justifies teaching and learning about what happened in recent times, for the way things are descends from the way they were yesterday and the day before that. But in fact, institutions that govern a great deal of our everyday behavior took shape hundreds or even thousands of years ago. Having been preserved and altered across the generations to our own time, they are sure to continue into the future. The United States government is such an institution; so is the world market, armies and the Christian church. Skills like writing, and devices like bureaucracy are even older than Christianity, and concerns that bother us still can be read into the cave paintings left behind by Stone Age hunters as much as twenty thousand years ago. Only an acquaintance with the entire human adventure on earth allows us to understand these dimensions of contemporary reality.

Memory is not something fixed and forever. As time passes, remembered personal experiences take on new meanings. A bitter disappointment may come to seem a blessing in disguise; a triumph may later turn sour, while something trivial may subsequently loom large—all because of what happens later on. Collective memory is quite the same. Historians are always at work reinterpreting the past, asking new questions, searching new sources and finding new meanings in old documents in order to bring the perspective of new knowledge and experience to bear on the task of understanding the past. This means, of course, that what we know and believe about history is always changing. In other words, our collective, codified memory alters with time just as personal memories do, and for the same reasons.

... the changing perspectives of historical understanding are the very best introduction we can have to the practical problems of real life.

When teachers of history admit that their best efforts at understanding the past are only tentative and sure to be altered in time to come, skeptics are likely to conclude that history has no right to take student time from other subjects. If what is taught today is not really true, how can it claim space in a crowded school curriculum?

But what if the world is more complicated and diverse than words can ever tell? What if human minds are incapable of finding neat pigeon holes into which everything that happens will fit? What if we have to learn to live with uncertainty and probabilities, and act on the basis of the best guesswork we are capable of? Then, surely, the changing perspectives of historical understanding are the very best introduction we can have to the practical problems of real life. Then, surely, a serious effort to understand the interplay of change and continuity in human affairs is the only adequate introduction human beings can have to the confusing flow of events that constitutes the actual, adult world.

Since that is the way the world is, it follows that study of history is essential for every young person. Systematic sciences are not enough. They discount time, and therefore oversimplify reality, especially human reality. Current events are not enough either. Destined to almost instant obsolescence, they foreshorten and thereby distort the time dimension within which human lives unfold and, thanks to memory, are conducted.

Memory, indeed, makes us human. History, our collective memory, carefully codified and critically revised, makes us social, sharing ideas and ideals with others so as to form all sorts of different human groups. Each such group acts as it does largely because of shared ideas and beliefs about the past and about what the past, as understood and interpreted by the group in question, tells about the present and probable future.

BUT, you may say: suppose we agree that some sort of knowledge of history is essential for an adult understanding of the world, what actually belongs in our classrooms? The varieties of history are enormous; facts and probabilities about the past are far too numerous for anyone to comprehend them all. Every sort of human group has its own history; so do ideas, institutions, techniques, areas, civilizations, and humanity at large. How to begin? Where to start? How bring some sort of order to the enormous variety of things known and believed about the past?

Teachers of history have always had to struggle with these questions. Early in this century, teachers and academic administrators pretty well agreed that two sorts of history courses were needed: a survey of the national history of the United States and a survey of European history. This second course was often broadened into a survey of Western civilization in the 1930s and 1940s. But by the 1960s and 1970s these courses were becoming outdated, left behind by the rise of new kinds social and quantitative history, especially the history of women, of Blacks, and of other formerly overlooked groups within the borders of the United States, and of peoples emerging from colonial status in the world beyond our borders. These, and still other new sorts of history, enhanced older sensibilities and corrected older biases; but, being both new and different, did not fit smoothly into existing surveys of U.S. national history and western civilization.

Clearly we need careful reflection about, and search for, enduring patterns and critical turning points in the past, for these are the historical facts that everyone needs to know ...

Teachers found it exciting to teach the new kinds of history in special courses that allowed them time to develop the subject properly. It was less satisfying and much harder to combine old with new to make an inclusive, judiciously balanced (and far less novel) introductory course for high school or college students.

But abandoning the effort to present a meaningful portrait of the entire national and civilizational past destroyed the original justification for requiring students to study history. As specialized electives multiplied, historians could not convince others that random samples from the past, reflecting each teacher's special expertise or interests, belonged in everyone's education. For if one sample was as good as another, none could claim to be essential. Competing subjects abounded, and no one could or would decide what mattered most and should take precedence. As this happened, studying history became only one among many possible ways of spending time in school.



Level I. Personal-Local History

The costs of this change are now becoming apparent, and many concerned persons agree that returning to a more structured curriculum, in which history ought to play a prominent part, is imperative. But choice of what sort of history to teach remains as difficult as ever. Clearly we need careful reflection about, and search

for, enduring patterns and critical turning points in the past, for these are the historical facts that everyone needs to know, not what happens to interest a particular teacher or aspiring specialist. Whether historians will rise to the occasion and successfully bring old and new sorts of history together into an understandable whole remains to be seen. In the meanwhile, a few obvious suggestions are all that can be offered here.

Amongst all the varieties of history that specialists have so energetically and successfully explored in recent decades, three levels of generality seem likely to have the greatest importance for ordinary people. First is family, local, neighborhood history: something often transmitted orally, but worth attention in school for all that. This would seem especially important for primary school years, when children start to experience the world outside their homes. Second is national history, because that is where political power is concentrated in our time. Last is global history, because intensified communications make encounters with all the other peoples of the earth increasingly important. These levels belong to high school and college, in the years when young people start to pay attention to public affairs and prepare to assume the responsibilities of citizenship. Other pasts are certainly worth attention, but are better studied in the context of a prior acquaintance with personal-local, national, and global history. That is because these three levels are the ones that affect most powerfully what all other groups and segments of society actually do.

Can such courses be taught and fitted into the curriculum? The answer is yes, if teachers and administrators try hard to put first things first and achieve a modicum of clarity about what everyone ought to know. National history that leaves out Blacks and women and other minorities is no longer acceptable; but American history that leaves out the Founding Fathers and the Constitution is not acceptable either. What is needed is a vision of the whole, warts and all. Global history is perhaps more difficult. Certainly our traditional training sidesteps the problem of attaining a satisfactory vision of the history of humanity, since few historians even try for a global overview. Still, some have made the attempt. Moreover, every scale of history has its own appropriate patterns which, once perceived, are as definite and as easily tested by the evidence as are the meaningful patterns that emerge on any other scale. This means, I think, that careful and critical world history is attainable just as surely as is a careful and critical national history that does not omit the important and newly self-conscious groups that were previously overlooked.



Level II: National History

But consensus is slow to come, and may never be achieved. In the meanwhile, teachers and curriculum planners have a difficult task. Authoritative models for courses in national and global history are not readily available. Personal and neighborhood history, too, must be worked out independently for each classroom and locality. But questions to be asked and the range of information that can be handled by children in the primary grades is, perhaps, less difficult to agree upon than at the high school and college levels. Serious and concentrated effort is clearly called for. Only so can history and historians deserve and expect to regain the central place in the education of the young that once was theirs.



Level III: Global History

THREE points remain. First, the study of history does not lead to exact prediction of future events. Though it fosters practical wisdom, knowledge of the past does not permit anyone to know exactly what is going to happen. Looking at some selected segment from the past in order to find out what will occur "next time" can mislead the unwary, simply because the complex setting within which human beings act is never twice the same. Consequently, the lessons of history, though supremely valuable when wisely formulated, become

grossly misleading when oversimplifiers try to transfer them mechanically from one age to another, or from one place to another. Anyone who claims to perform such a feat is sadly self-deceived. Practical wisdom requires us instead to expect differences as well as similarities, changes as well as continuities-always and everywhere. Predictable fixity is simply not the human way of behaving. Probabilities and possibilities-together with a few complete surprises-are what we live with and must learn to expect.

Second, as acquaintance with the past expands, delight in knowing more and more can and often does become an end in itself. History offers innumerable heroes and villains. Reading about what people did in far away times and places enlarges our sense of human capacities both for good and evil. Encountering powerful commitments to vanished ideas and ideals, like those that built the pyramids, puts our personal commitment to our own ideals into a new perspective, perhaps bitter-sweet. Discovering fears and hopes like our own in pages written by the medieval Japanese courtier, Lady Murasaki, or reading about the heroic and futile quest for immortality undertaken by the ancient Mesopotamian king, Gilgamesh, stirs a sense of shared humanity that reaches back to the beginning of civilization and across all cultural barriers.

On the other hand, studying alien religious beliefs, strange customs, diverse family patterns and vanished social structures shows how differently various human groups have tried to cope with the world around them. Broadening our humanity and extending our sensibilities by recognizing sameness and difference throughout the recorded past is therefore an important reason for studying history, and especially the history of peoples far away and long ago. For we can only know ourselves by knowing how we resemble and how we differ from others. Acquaintance with the human past is the only way to such self knowledge.

... ignorance of history--that is, absent or defective collective memory--does deprive us of the best available guide for public action ...

Finally, for those especially attracted to it, search into odd corners and contemplation of the main outlines of history can develop into a hunt for understandings of one's own, as new ideas about connections between one thing and another spring to mind. This sort of historical research and creativity is, of course, the special province of graduate school and of the historical profession at large. Reinterpretations and modifications of received notions about what really happened result from such personal venturing; and new ideas and meanings, tested against the evidence available to other historians, feed into high school and college classrooms by providing teachers with an ever-evolving understanding of the past to set before the young.

In such interaction between research and teaching, eternal and unchanging truth does not emerge. Only inspired, informed guesses about what mattered and how things changed through time. That is all human minds can do to unravel the mystery of humanity and of human groups' encounters with one another and with the world. Not very good, perhaps; simply the best we have in the unending effort to understand ourselves and others, and what happens and will happen to us and to them, time without end.

William H. McNeill was born in Canada in 1917, received his PhD from Cornell University in 1947, and currently serves as Robert A. Millikan Distinguished Service Professor of History at the University of Chicago. He has written more than twenty books, of which the most important is *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago, 1963). His other works include *Venire: The Hinge of Europe, 1097-1797* (Chicago, 1974); *Plagues and Peoples* (Garden City, NY, 1976); *The Metamorphosis of Greece since 1945* (Chicago, 1978); *The Human Condition: Art Historical and Ecological View* (Princeton, 1980); *Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force and Society since 1000 A.D.* (Chicago, 1982); and *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago, 1986). In addition to serving as 1985 President of the American Historical Association, he is Vice-Chairman of the Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission.

Last Updated: April 2, 2008

400 A Street, S.E., Washington, DC 20003-3889 | tel: (202) 544-2422 | fax: (202) 544-8307 | e-mail: info@historians.org
 © 2006 American Historical Association