

In a class society
history meant the
history of the rulers,
and in a male
dominat...



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Historiography at any point in time is a reflection of the circumstances and constraints in the environment that it is practised. The most revolutionary thinkers are those who break free from these constraints. Historiography is constantly progressing. Historians, above all else should understand that no two generations are the same and that each generation of historians bring something new to the field. The great diversity of a historian's subject matter suggests there could not possibly be one literary form suited to the presentation of every aspect of human life. (John Tosh, 1999, p. 2)

Historical writing today is characterised by a wide range of literary forms but there are three basic techniques: description, narrative and analysis all of which can be combined in many different ways (John Tosh, 1999, p. 93). In the past certain groups of historians have concentrated too much on specific literary forms, often unwittingly and their work has suffered as a result. For example *The Ecclesiastical History of English People* written by Venerable Bede in the seventh century (debatably the first British historical text) had absolutely no reference to sources and an extremely vague reference to causation i. . the will of God.

There are many social and political issues that contribute to Historiography. Before the twentieth century many historians had not yet referred to important social issues such as class and gender. The fact still remains that only a very select few individuals ever had the opportunity to gain higher education, and the few that did were from specific sections of society.

Consequently the historiography of the time only reflected the opinions of certain minority groups. What really matters in the long run is not so much

what we write about history today or what others have written about history. The power of unlimited inspiration to successive generations lies in the original sources" (Cobb, 1991) Historians today are expected to have a vast knowledge of their selected subject matter, they must show the ability to discuss relationships between research and writing but above all else the historian should reflect the ability to reference work clearly and consistently. So how has history been interpreted differently in the past?

How do different social and political circumstances contribute to the way in which it is written? Is the study of history always under construction? Or is it progressing towards a specific point? " If he (the historian) visits the cellars, it is not for love of the dust, but to estimate the stability of the edifice, and because, to grasp the meaning of the cracks, he must know the quality of the foundation" (R. H. Tawney, 1978, p. 55) Very few historians past or present would proclaim their adherence to Whig history.

The Whig historian is not a member of any specific school of history, but the victim of name-calling. The word Whig has its origins somewhere in the seventeenth century as a term of abuse against political opponents, and has become popular as a mark of disdain. Even so, we can still identify certain Whigish tendencies to which many historians have fallen victim. The British Historian Herbert Butterfield (1900 -1978) is generally credited to have been the first to expose Whigish tendencies.

In his short book *The Whig Interpretation Of History* (1931) he complained about historians who wrote present minded history and in so doing fell with a thud into traps that good historians should try and avoid. Whig historians

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allowed their interpretation of the past to be coloured by their own political and social views, this clouded their ability to write fair non-bias history. This led them to make arrogant one-sided assumptions about the route historiography was taking.

They applauded the British system of parliamentary democracy, and assumed that the goal of history was to perfect it. It has been suggested that Whig historians were likely to see the past progressing in a straight line towards parliamentary democracy. There are two problems with this, first it tends to encourage historians to look for, and then to over-emphasise, similarities between the past and present and secondly Whig historians were guilty of categorising their historical characters as those who favoured progress (the winners) and (the losers) who did not.

Identifying winners and losers is a sure step on the road to making morel judgements about people and there for excludes the experience of many individuals in society. " Squatters and trespasses were tolerated to an extent now unknown. The peasant who dwelt there could at little or no charge occasionally procure some palatable addition to his hard fair, and provide himself with some fuel for the winter. He kept a flock of geese on what is now an orchid rich with apple blossom.

He snared wild fowl on the fern which has long since been drained and divided in to corn fields and turnip fields. "(T. B. Macaulay, 1856, p. 421) The Whig interpretation of history requires imaginative powers and an eye for detail not unlike those of a novelist or a poet, they were masters of narrative and this is possibly why they over looked the importance of method. (John

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Tosh, 1999, p. 127) Whig historians often overlooked the importance of social factors such as class and gender, as a result their work has been constantly contradicted by historians in Britain and abroad.

As a stark contradiction to the Whig interpretation of history, Karl Marx and Fredrick Engel published a political manifesto entitled The Communist Manifesto in 1894 (although the thought behind the manifesto was conceived long before it was published) Marx and Engel did not see history progressing toward parliamentary democracy, they suggested that history is subject to inexorable control of economic forces which move all human societies along the road to socialism through the same stages, capitalism being the stage currently occupied by most of human kind.

Marx believed that the proletariat (workers) would eventually overthrow the bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production) by means of revolution. He suggested that humanity would only ever achieve its full potential in every sphere when the basic needs of all people would be amply satisfied. Marx and Engel's theories found international appeal among thousands of people, in many different societies. If Whig's wrote history of the winners then Marx's wrote the history of the workers.

Karl Marx was a revolutionary historian, not because he pioneered new methods of historiography but because he recognised that ultimately all history is the history of class struggle. In a society dominated by the ruling/upper class Karl Marx understood that history is about every class. " If we stop history at any given point, then there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch

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these men over an adequate period social change, we observe patterns in their institutions.

Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is the only definition. " (E. P. Thompson, 1968, p. 15) E. P. Thompson a British historian understood, like Karl Marx that if history is to be written successfully, with out bias it must include the history of all men. Thompson argues that class cannot be cleanly defined; he suggests that class is an active process, and a reflection of common experiences in the light of a vigorous native radical tradition. (E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, p. reface)

Thompson's method of historiography is commonly referred to as ' history from below' how can one gain an accurate understanding of any point in history if defined groups of people are not included? E. P. Thompson's history reflects the opinions of many people in the society in which he belongs. The United Kingdom was the first country to experience an industrial revolution, which in turn lead to the creation of the first ever, so-called working class, and also the first ever unions to protect the rights of the working class.

In western, liberal, industrial societies like the UK, the boundaries of specific classes are becoming less apparent. More and more individuals are given the opportunity of higher education every year. History is becoming increasingly more accessible and reflecting the opinions of many different sections of society. But the fact still remains that whatever work historians do there will always be sections or groups in society whose opinions are not reflected. "

There is a more recent strand of oppositional history: woman's history.

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During the early 1970's women's history emerged as an aspect of women's liberation.

The target of feminist historians indignation was as much labour history as conventional political history, since the workers who organized trade unions or relaxed in pubs and clubs were typically assumed to be male" (Olwen Hufton, 1995) At a Derby in 1913 Emily Davidson threw herself under the king's horse and was killed. She was a suffragette, a woman fighting for the right to vote, especially in Britain before 1914. The suffragettes chained themselves to railings, heckled political meetings and refused to pay taxes. For the first time ever women were campaigning together for the same rights as men.

The suffragette's message finally hit home shortly before the end of the Second World War. In 1918 women were finally granted limited franchise; and in 1928 this was extended to all women over the age of 21. Before such movements as the suffragettes, men predominantly practised the study of history. But as women gained more and more rights it became increasingly easier for them to occupy roles in society previously dominated by men. In the late 1960's historiography finally began to echo this trend. Feminism emerged as a new school of thought.

Feminist historians questioned concepts such as 'gender' and ideas such as 'spheres of influence' They suggested that the only strong female characters in history were those who occupied the roles of men such as Elizabeth 1st (The politician) or Joan of Arc (The warrior). Feminist historians were initially intent on finding a usable past by documenting women's

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historical experience and achievements. (John Tosh 1999, p. 156) “ The history of gender represents a theoretically informed attempt to bring the two sexes and their complex relations into our picture of the past and in so doing to modify the writing of all history” (John Tosh, 1999, p. 57)

History is a subject like no other; it is a hybrid that defies classification. History now embraces social structures in their entirety, the history of collective mentalities, and the evolving relationship between society and the natural environment. The role of the historian has changed. In the 19th century it was possible to fence off history from other disciplines and to confine its brief to the narrative presentation of political events. But since the birth of Economic and Social history the discipline has greatly evolved.

History is no longer limited to one class, nor does it represent only male perspectives. History helps us to explain all aspects of the past and with the help of historians and perhaps the Internet people can begin to understand their positions in society and how they acquired them. In most developed western societies history is a now compulsory subject taught in many schools. More and more individuals are being granted the opportunity to understand the struggles of their ancestors then ever before.