are not the exclusive domain of the discipline of history. They are in the public domain, and the public is composed of numerous social, political and institutional constituencies, with conflicting interests. These are central matters for professional historians, and we can pursue them further by probing the idea of 'public history'.

6 Public History

WHAT IS PUBLIC HISTORY?

Many readers are likely to be unfamiliar with the phrase 'public history', which has been used in recent decades in the United States. We should concede from the outset that 'public' is a difficult term; in this chapter I explore some of its principal aspects in relation to the practice of history. Whatever the complexities of 'public', public history is a useful phrase, in that it draws attention to phenomena relevant to the discipline of history, but too rarely discussed in undergraduate courses. This is not surprising. Universities are staffed by professional historians, and they teach what can be called 'academic' history. While the modern structures of higher education in general and the discipline of history in particular only came into being over the nineteenth century, they have become deeply entrenched. Professional, university-based history is a particular kind of history, although those who practise it tend to speak as if there were little else. Among other things, public history is popular history - it is seen or read by large numbers of people and has mostly been designed for a mass audience. For some historians, 'public history' is a central part of radical history movements, which are critical of elitist, over-professionalised history, and seek to promote politically self-conscious, community-based histories, open to all and usable in political struggles. It is true that much public history has been motivated by such concerns, but precisely because public history can be effective with wide audiences, it is equally a tool of establishments.


2 A useful introduction to the issues is S. Benson, S. Brier, and R. Rosenzweig, eds., Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public, 1986, based on articles in the Radical History Review. In the introduction they distinguish between three types of public history: a slick form, found in the media and serving dominant interests; professional public history; and a radical people's history. In my view there is increasing overlap and interplay between these types. See also the special issue of Gender and History, vol. 6, no. 3, 1994, esp. the useful introduction by Barbara Melosh.
The issues around public history highlight some of the ambiguities of the term `history' itself. Remnants of the past are everywhere, but they are not necessarily seen as `history' or understood as elements in a structured account of the past. Public history involves `history' in many senses: the academic discipline; the dissemination and display of its findings to wide audiences; the past itself in many different forms; and a diffused awareness of that past that varies from person to person, group to group, country to country. Museums and heritage sites are prime examples of the complexities of public history. Indeed, when the phrase `public history' is used, this is what many people have in mind. Heritage broadly defined is a growth industry, and many, if not most public displays involve an element of history. Yet there are relatively few museums that proclaim themselves as being about history in the more academic sense; they are generally associated with a place, a type of object, an activity or a person, and the history is an integral part of everything they do. Perhaps there is least explicit, academic history in the temples of high culture, such as museums and galleries of modern art, but even there it necessarily has a presence. Displays based on themes or events -- war or particular wars, revolutions and political movements, technology, childhood -- are concerned with the past without necessarily declaring themselves to be offering instruction in history. Naturally more overtly historical collections exist -- the Museum of London, the Musée Historique de la Ville de Paris, the Risorgimento Museum in Bologna, for instance. Thus, although relatively few museums and kindred institutions are obviously connected with the (professional) discipline of history, most of them are, loosely speaking, historical and contribute to the views members of the general public hold about history.


4 The connections are closest in archaeology, where the work of museums and that of academics is inseparable. Renfrew and Bahn, Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practice, ch. 14 on `Whose Past? Archaeology and the Public' is an excellent introduction to the issues of this chapter from the point of view of archaeology. For most historians there are few or no links with the museums/heritage world. For the general public it is difficult if not impossible to discern the academic history in what they see displayed. In this general area, see International Journal of Heritage Studies (1994); J. Arnold et al., ed., History and Heritage: Consuming the Past in Contemporary Culture, Shaftesbury, 1998; T. Bennett, The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics, London, 1995; P. Vergo, ed., The New Museology, London, 1989; J. Elsner and R. Cardinal, eds., The Cultures of Collecting, London, 1994; D. Horne, The Great Museum: The Re-presentation of History, London, 1984.

5 See, for example, Journals of the History of Collections (1989), and items cited in footnote 4 above.

6 Williamsburg is an attempt to reconstruct a slice of cultural America in considerable detail. Longleat in Wiltshire, England, is a stately home that has long promoted other attractions, such as wildlife, in the search for commercial success.

7 In the USA, the Radical History Review has played an important part in bringing these issues to historians. The huge amounts of money available, for example, from the Disney Corporation for theme parks with historical dimensions, fuels public discussion. In Britain, a country intensely anxious about its historic past, this has focused on `heritage' issues and on organisations, such as the National Trust and English Heritage, with interests in the area.
activities that are required for any item to be interpreted are not displayed alongside it. Museums have significant silences; their processes of selection, management and interpretation, are rarely accessible to the general public and remain unimagined by them.

The questions of silence and invisibility should serve to remind us of points raised in earlier chapters about the apparatus of scholarship and the goal of transparency, and of the importance of allowing readers access to the resources authors use. By their very nature museums cannot operate in this way and we should not expect them to; furthermore, there is no reason why the general public, which is not after all composed of scholars, would want the apparatus made visible. Nonetheless, it is important to be clear about the consequences of museums being major communicators to the public about the past, given their modes of display. While museums satisfy curiosity about the past, they also shape the forms such curiosity is permitted to take. They transmit ideas about that past through a variety of lenses, of which visitors are unlikely to be fully aware: they convey narratives and values as well as insights and information. Further, they often communicate a sense of the past and its meanings, about which professional historians feel profoundly uncomfortable. Two examples spring to mind. Many museums generalise about living conditions in the past, presumably in order to make it more accessible, including emotionally. This is particularly marked in relation to ‘everyday life’, where generalisations are particularly likely to stress the past as dirty or dangerous, or indeed as innocent and safer than today. Such claims are troubling because they are so value-laden – they touch points of vulnerability, such as fear of death, crime and disease. Museum displays also deploy more straightforward assumptions about causation than would be common among professional historians. Specifically, they allocate individual and collective responsibility more freely, given that they operate, more or less, within an idiom of heroes and villains. Displays for the public are likely to stress moral clarity and the agency of individuals. Even where named and well-known historical actors are not
involved, the idioms of heroism and its flipside can, nonetheless, be deployed. These are significant matters, because there exists a widespread need to understand the past in precisely these terms, that is, in terms of achievement and blame. The desire for clear patterns of responsibility in relation to which we can position ourselves is powerful. It gives rise to the strong emotions evident, for example, in the feelings still elicited by anything to do with Japan among those touched in some way by their prisoner of war camps in the 1940s. So, we want to understand and respect the forms of public history found in museums, and acknowledge their influence, but equally we must be clear about their, admittedly diverse, effects on general historical consciousness, which operate at emotional levels that are hard to get a grip on. This point is all the more important because 'history' appears, in one form or another, in so many different kinds of museum.

While museums and heritage issues dominate many discussions of public history, I want to use the term more inclusively, because there are numerous forms of history that are directed at non-professional audiences and that can usefully be considered together, including documentaries, historical fiction and drama, non-specialist magazines, and memorials. The motives behind such ventures are truly diverse – public history is, for me, simply a convenient umbrella term. Inevitably it includes items, such as buildings and public spaces, which serve as forms of public history, but were not intended as such. The fact is that the past is everywhere; when we are in public our senses are constantly responding to stimuli that are gorged with history, whether we are aware of it or not. This is a kind of historical backdrop that exists in virtually all societies. In some cases, however, it has become exceptionally prominent. This is the case in many western countries over recent years, where the celebration of anniversaries of significant events for the nation and/or for humanity seems to have reached excessive proportions. By virtue of the resulting media coverage and commercial exploitation, they exemplify the point that the past is everywhere. The past that is everywhere frequently springs into focus when it is under threat in some way – a building designated for destruction, a park about to be developed, a square altered in some way, a memorial moved. This too is the domain of public history, as David Lowenthal showed so eloquently in *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985). The fact that this environmental public history is mostly out of focus, not demanding conscious attention as a form of history, does not make it unimportant. When change is proposed it becomes clear how fundamental such features are for local and national identity; hence they require historians’ attention.

Public history is indeed diverse. Sometimes we are in the realm of entertainment, as is the case with much historical fiction, the Scarlet Pimpernel series of novels, written in the early twentieth century, being an excellent example. Set in the period of the French Revolution, and firmly on the side of the aristocracy, they have been frequently adapted for film and television.8 Swashbuckling accounts of the past are pretty much knowing 'reconstructions' to provide their audience with a good time composed of thrills and spills plus good costumes and period effects. At other times we are in the more sober realm of education and improvement; such is the role of many museums, some television documentaries and popular publications, including magazines about history. It is no coincidence that within the burgeoning museum industry, a notably fast-growing sector is educational activities. Naturally it is understood that these are to be, if at all possible, pleasurable and entertaining; nonetheless their main concern is with conveying views of the past. Historical documentaries can be understood in a similar manner. We can see the diversity of public history particularly clearly if we think about its less clear-cut forms, especially in the media and popular publishing. In doing so it is vital to remember that it is the past’s perennial usefulness in the present that underpins these phenomena.

**USABLE PASTS**

The idea of a usable past is hardly new, but it is probably more prominent now than it ever has been before. If the past is usable, then history is an open field that is available to be put to very different, even conflicting ends. History as entertainment uses the past for commercial purposes. History as consciousness-raising uses the past for political ends. History as public education uses the past to inform audiences (selectively) about political and social trends. But what about organisations, such as Britain’s National Trust, the widespread erection of war memorials, the maintenance of public cemeteries and so on? What kinds of usable pasts are being deployed here? The National Trust was founded in 1895, 'to preserve places of historic interest or natural beauty permanently for the nation to enjoy' – a heritage ticket, designed to preserve what was construed as simultaneously precious, of historical importance, and under threat.9 It was, and remains, a complex and contested project, as must

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8 Their author, Mrs Montagu Barstow, published under the name Baroness Orczy; see J. Neild, *A Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales*, London, 1911. The most famous film was made in 1934 and remade in 1958, and there have been several television versions.

9 The statement about the Trust’s aims is printed in their annual handbook. Its holdings include ‘over 200 public houses, 230 gardens and 25 industrial monuments’.
necessarily be the case given that they have acquired a house associated with the Beatles while promoting the grand country house. Clearly there is an educational dimension, but objects in the Trust's properties are not labelled as they would be in a museum; that is, the displays are not openly or conventionally didactic. Visitors are entering a world as close as possible to the original, and thereby their fantasies about the past are engaged. The very notion of an original state is problematic, it hardly needs saying. Houses evolve; there is unlikely to be one single time that they genuinely evoke, although the period of the main building plays an important part in perceptions of the whole. Displays tend to gloss over such questions, so that the main effect, from the point of view of visitors, is of unspecified historical 'authenticity'.

However, it would be a mistake, and a serious over-simplification, to present visits to country houses or palaces only in terms of 'education'. For example, visitors may have a craving for nostalgic experiences which country houses meet. Nostalgia is a longing for a past state, for something by definition unobtainable - it concerns conventionalised forms of fantasy. It is striking how, in recent times, film and television shape the specific forms such nostalgia takes. We could think of this as the Bruges phenomenon, following the huge success of a television adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's 1945 novel about the English aristocracy earlier in the century, and seen in many countries. Self-evidently, the country houses open to the public now are not at all as they were. As we see them today, they have been sanitised - of smells and back-breaking work. For example, so when the kitchens of large houses, often among the most popular attractions, are viewed now, they convey little or no idea of what they were like when in use. Rather they offer a special kind of fiction, which visitors agree to treat as 'history'. Ironically, since more of us are descended from servants than masters, a full recognition of the conditions in domestic service, say a hundred years ago, is potentially quite disturbing. Yet there is ample evidence that country houses are satisfying a range of popular curiosities, which are woven into a collective sense of the past. The simple fact that there are marked national variations in this kind of behaviour reinforces the point. The folk museums found in most European countries, are, except in Wales, rare in Britain, where there is huge interest in the country house, while 'theme-park' history has been most extensively developed in the United States. In many, many places there is a huge appetite for the past, which needs to be understood and respected in its myriad forms. It is met by displays of

'history' and by ways of approaching the past that are not narrowly academic, but are more akin to tourism, especially in their open appeal to fantasy.

If we turn for a moment to memorials, especially war memorials and cemeteries, the matter becomes even more complex. Typically, war memorials affirm the values upon which the war in question was based. This is a matter of rhetoric, of presenting a persuasive, publicly acceptable face. The complicated conditions - diplomatic, military, political - leading up to the conflict are hardly the main issue, which is rather giving an account that bestows honour on the instigators and the personnel involved. Memorials are built to endure but have not mainly been designed as 'history'; they become so the moment they are erected. They constitute in fact a public record (and a representation) of events that are of general interest. But the very nature of the record gives them a particular set of characteristics and that is why they are, like all cultural products, representations. Like most memorials, they cannot be critical of those they commemorate, they have to present a positive image, which is artfully constructed and apt for their moment of creation. What is their purpose? They celebrate events of public significance, for governments and for large swaths of the population. They pay respect to those who lost their lives in the process. They provide a location and object for mourning for those left behind, and are, in their own right, historical documents. Furthermore, they are likely to be visually pleasing or at least markers of some kind, and hence may be visited for 'pleasure' as well as for edification, for historical interest as well as for the expression of grief and consolation. All this is part of public history, indeed it is history in public.

These brief examples are designed to open up the meanings of 'public', such as, 'for a mass audience', 'popular', 'non-specialist', 'of concern to an entire polity' or 'available for anyone to see'. This range of meanings that can be carried by the term 'public' and the diverse uses to which the past is put are closely related issues. 'Public' also refers more specifically to the government, to the concerns and interests of the state, which may be researched in public or state record offices. Such archives are used by numerous groups, both amateur and professional, and they contain many of the raw materials for public

6.2 The Great War Stone for the Imperial War Graves Commission; design by Lutyens. October 1918
Lutyens designed many memorials to commemorate the First World War and held elaborate views on the form such memorials should take. The inscription here is taken from Ecclesiasticus and was chosen by Rudyard Kipling. It may be taken as speaking to, even commanding, those left behind. Remembrance becomes a kind of universal obligation.

6.3 The Vietnam War Memorial, Washington, D.C.
The commemoration of recent events is particularly difficult, especially when views of them are as heated and diverse as those elicited by the Vietnam War have been. This particular war stands out because it has been so extensively discussed in the press and represented in the media. It is equally noteworthy because people across the world recoiled against the weapons deployed - napalm, for example - and the ruthless intervention of the United States government in distant territories. Yet those who died were to be mourned, those who were damaged to be consoled. War memorials have not lost their significance, even when the morality of the war in question is fiercely contested.
history, however this is defined. The creators of much public history tend to be drawn from small cadres with highly specific agendas, even if they claim to be acting in the name of wider groups. This is in stark contrast with what can be termed amateur history, undertaken by those who are not paid for their historical labour. Although what it produces could rarely be called public history, history as a hobby, an activity for amateurs, is an important phenomenon, usefully seen in the context of usable pasts. Local and family history, for example, are hugely popular and often practised by enthusiasts with refined skills in genealogy or charting the history of houses, for instance. Tracing origins, making lineages that serve particular purposes, are important themes in many parts of public history. Spin-offs include local exhibitions and clubs – this is very much history being used for present purposes. One important point to emerge from thinking about the nature of amateur history is the types of concern that motivate people to undertake historical hobbies – remember that ‘amateur’ originally meant ‘doing something for love’, not ‘lacking in skill’, as is sometimes supposed. The difference between professional and amateur historians is probably not as clear-cut as the former think. It may be worth recalling here that the majority of historical bestsellers are by people who write, outside the university system, for money. Hence what constitutes a professional historian, a historical writer, or an amateur historian is somewhat fluid, as reflection upon public history demonstrates.

GENRES AND AUDIENCES

However they are to be defined, professional and amateur historians tend to work within different historical genres. By ‘genre’ I mean a recognisable type of representation, whether in the form of words, displays, pictures or film, that is governed by literary, artistic or institutional conventions, such as the novel, the monograph, the diorama, the local history lecture and so on. Inevitably there are huge variations within genres, and their conventions are far from static, but the concept is nonetheless a useful one. Genres are historically specific. Indeed, genre is a notion of central importance for understanding public history, and vice versa. Let me explain why. Because genres always involve elements of convention, they are recognised, often intuitively, by audiences and readers. There are certain expectations on both sides that are, in effect, informal rules of engagement. Historical fiction is a genre with many subgenres, including historical romances. Readers of these expect closure, romantic resolution between hero and heroine, especially in ones written by popular novelists such as Georgette Heyer, who, writing between the 1920s and the 1970s, specialised in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England. Other sorts of historical novels may culminate in an adventure successfully completed or the death of the hero(ine). These are narrative types and they deploy easily recognised topoi. I want to insist on the importance of genre (and other literary conventions) for any understanding of the practice of history. All writings have a generic context, and being aware of the point enables one to evaluate any given piece more effectively. Recognising genres and analysing instances of them depends precisely on understanding conventions and their implications. This is particularly important in thinking about public history. Public history uses a wide variety of genres, which are different from those of the academic discipline – a fact that shapes the content of the type of history we are designating ‘public’. If we can identify and reflect upon this generic range, the whole phenomenon, including the means by which publics develop their sense of the past, can be appreciated more fully.

One thing is certain, the audiences for history are wide, diverse and in places extremely well informed. Thus ‘public’, which covers so much, is slippery and ambiguous, but nonetheless useful. One historical account, by Jürgen Habermas, the German sociologist and philosopher, which has become hugely influential, charts the development of a so-called ‘public sphere’ over the eighteenth century. ‘Sphere’ here is a metaphor, which unfortunately carries the misleading connotation of watertight areas. Many historians refer, rather unsystematically, to a gendered distinction between the public (male) and the private or domestic (female) spheres, which is also supposed to have developed over the eighteenth century in concert with the economic and social shifts summed up in the phrase ‘the industrial revolution’, and with a political conservatism about female roles in the wake of the American and French

revolutions. Habermas’s approach is rather different, in that it focuses on the generation of ‘public opinion’ — a concept and a set of practices — and on arenas for debate within which matters of wide interest could be discussed in a liberal and tolerant fashion. Emblematic of this shift is the development of newspapers, which Habermas finds particularly marked in eighteenth-century England. We might note with interest that public museums developed in Europe at this very time – the British Museum, for instance. Although the growth of print culture was gradual over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and certainly subject to considerable local variation, the eighteenth century does mark a significant turning point in relation to the history of communications, of audiences, and of the idea of the ‘public’. Benedict Anderson summarised the point particularly eloquently in his influential book Imagined Communities (1991). His purpose was to identify the preconditions for a modern sense of nationhood, in the development of which citizens all over a nation reading simultaneously the same or similar news, played, he claims, a significant part. He was concerned with mechanisms through which what is essentially an abstract idea – ‘nationhood’ – can be communicated to large numbers of people. Part and parcel of this idea was a sense of their nation’s history, shared by a significant proportion of the population, and incorporated into their lives and identities. So, the concept and practices of the ‘public’ are themselves historical phenomena, and more specifically what I am calling public history has been bound up with nation-formation for nearly three centuries. Tracing the uses that governments, professions and other interested parties make of the ‘public sphere’ and of the past and charting the ways in which the results have become part of each society’s imaginary, helps to explain the origins and current importance of public history.

I am suggesting that there is a helpful model here for understanding the development of the phenomenon ‘public history’. People in far-flung places encounter historical displays and publications that are relevant to them, and through which they construct their identity. Political structures, such as nations and their administrative infrastructures, mediate the processes involved, which are thereby value-laden. These days the public can visit museums and see films that have similar effects. They use what they read and see in other bits of their lives, they become parts of imagined communities, often through the nation which, Anderson suggested, exists in part through having a shared, publicly available history. Memorials to leaders and to events of symbolic importance are, like dynasties of rulers, visible signs of a nation’s shared history, even if that past has been subject to the equivalent of creative accountancy. While education systems put in place the building blocks of collective identity, it is further shaped and sustained, occasionally radically altered, by public history. It follows that one of the most important insights the phenomenon of public history affords, is that collective understanding of the past is imibed by all the senses, and worked upon in the imagination.

It will be evident by now that in discussing ‘public history’ I have in mind three principal issues – the non-academic audiences for history, the general cultural uses of the past, and specific displays that relate to history broadly defined. ‘Public’, then, indicates a wider interest and participation in history than simply professional historians and specialised publications. The past is essentially open-ended, and accounts of it are public property, available for numerous uses. Recognising this should help historians to see their own activities in a wider perspective and to raise broad questions about the practice of history. In particular, it should be possible to focus more clearly on those issues that are central to public history, but that are frequently neglected in professional practice. Shortly I shall briefly pursue one of these, which has elicited widespread interest: who, if anyone, owns the past? Raising the question involves thinking less about the raw materials of history, although ownership of these is certainly a matter of some significance, than about who is entitled to represent the past authoritatively. I understand this to be a political issue, so it is important to be clear about the ways in which this is so.

PUBLIC HISTORY AND POLITICS

We should remember that the state, which in many countries plays a major role in funding institutions such as archives and museums, lies at the very heart of public history. Public history is a political matter in at least two further respects. First, since it represents the past to the public, the ‘displays’ that make up public history contain and promote particular interests. Second, they depart from specific vantage points, although the precise nature of these varies from case to case. These are indeed political matters; they concern alignments and representations of power. For example, understanding the role of the state in funding, and of elites in shaping, historical displays, is a vital part of exam-
ining public history. The representation of political winners and losers, whether these are classes, religious alliances, political factions or ethnic groupings, is an obvious example. Furthermore, much public history is sponsored, especially in museums, and when it comes to galleries on the history of food production or nuclear power in which the related industries have a hand, then there are complex political forces to contend with.

There is a related and looser sense in which public history is political in that it weaves moral discourses around objects displayed. We are familiar with the idea that history is composed of narratives. For most people, historians tell stories, not in the sense that they make things up, but in the sense that their accounts of the past are structured and gain plausibility in the same manner as other narratives. We are equally familiar with the idea that historical stories are morally charged. Everyone can laugh at 1066 and All That, the comic account of British history, or the Asterix stories, cartoon strips about Roman Gaul, because they recognise that judgements about, for example, kings, political leaders and whole nations being 'good' or 'bad' are absolutely everywhere, including among professional historians. This should come as no surprise, and I am certainly not suggesting that historians either can or should refrain from moral discussions altogether. The point about history that reaches wider audiences is that the moral judgements can be crude, implicit or concealed, making them (sometimes) hard to discern and to be held up for critical inspection by those not 'in the know'.

The political nature of history for the public becomes exceptionally clear when there are fierce controversies, as there were over the plans to put the Enola Gay, the aeroplane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, on display at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. in 1995, 50 years after the end of the Second World War. Its proposed mode of presentation caused an uproar, especially among veterans. The resulting controversies have been extensively documented and debated, providing an exceptional range of insights into public history in the United States. This was a political matter in that it revolved around how objects associated with one of the most highly charged events of the twentieth century should be presented to the public, the


20 Particularly useful is the special section in Technology and Culture, 39, 1988, pp. 457-82, which discusses not only the Enola Gay fiasco but also broad issues around public history. The Allied bombing of Dresden in 1945 has raised similar issues.

6.4 A page from Asterix in Spain
History reaches the public in many forms. In the case of Asterix cartoons, the past is a source of fun and especially of word play; readers are expected to have some familiarity not only with the Roman world, but also with literary representations of it. Note here the reference to Shakespeare's Julius Caesar.
balance between commemoration and historical interpretation, and the soundness of received accounts that the bombs 'saved' lives in the end. Many people now think that the Allies were simply wrong to drop the bombs on Japan and that their motives for doing so were decidedly mixed. For others the Allies were right, and the event may legitimately be celebrated. It is impossible to present these issues 'neutrally', and it could be argued that it is improper to do so, given the huge destruction of civilian life and the long-term effects of the bombs. Yet, publicly funded institutions are subject to a range of forces and constraints, which have nothing to do with academic history. A critical analytical view of the end of the war proved threatening both to veterans and to the United States government.

Other institutions besides governments and museums are involved in public history, however, which remains a loosely political issue even in its more commercial forms. History is part of many industries that sell the past in one form or another. Reproduction clothes, jewellery, furniture and decorative objects in effect present views of particular historical periods to the general public, thereby creating and maintaining an image of distinct eras – the eighteenth century was elegant, the nineteenth ornate, the twentieth streamlined and so on – based on notions of style. This may sound innocuous, such clear fictions that they are hardly significant, but, as I have argued earlier in the book, aesthetic responses are a powerful force in shaping attitudes to the past. Although there appear to be no political elements here, it is vital to remember what dramatic forms of selection are involved. To see the eighteenth century in terms of elegance, for instance, depends on giving priority to aristocratic lifestyles and to their cultural hegemony. It further depends upon particular readings of the ancien régime, which buy into the ideologies of the time.21 The huge growth of retailing in museums, which involves items related to the collection, has greatly contributed to this trend.

Another significant element in public history is the commissioning of books by commercial enterprises, such as those designed to celebrate a business's history, that is to construct a particular kind of public face for it. The whole question of commissioned histories has become a rather vexed one. Professional associations and political organisations, like departments of government and other organisations, frequently buy in the services of historians, who

21 The chain of shops that retails 'historical' items, Past Times, demonstrates the point. The idea that the eighteenth century was 'elegant' is commonplace, e.g. in relation to clothes and music. Other public, marketable images co-exist, which are equally politically freighted, e.g. the 'romp', bodice-ripping view of the eighteenth century, which totally ignores class tensions, and is based on a selective reading of fiction from the period.
become dependants, losing a measure of intellectual freedom. Such relationships are never unproblematic. One major issue is whether historians are given unfettered access to the relevant archives and allowed to make what they will of them, or whether they will be expected to write a history that is constrained from the very beginning, by the restricted materials to which they have been given access. Then there is the question of interpretation – are commissioned historians able to pass whatever judgements they think fit, or is the account to be written in order to show the company or organisation in a good light? I have stated the issue rather crudely and no doubt in practice it is less clear-cut than this. But it is as well to be aware of the possible pitfalls – he who pays the piper... Although some commissioned histories are written mainly for other historians, and thereby contribute, for example, to the growing field of business history, they also have wider publics. Potential audiences include those who work for or support the commissioning body. Here, the writing of history is being used for purposes determined by the commissioners, making tensions between commemoration and analysis almost inevitable.22

The difficulties of commissioned histories remind us of a theme that runs throughout this book and that is especially important for public history. It is generally accepted that historical accounts are, unavoidably, implicitly moralising. Some historical accounts are commissioned specifically to make the subject look good, precisely because history is deemed to have moral authority and people with power try to make themselves, and those with whom they identify, appear worthy of respect by these means. This is a particularly important issue in the case of biographies, which, for living or recently dead subjects, are often commissioned by families, colleagues and friends. Readers may be surprised that I mention biography in the context of public history, yet as one of the most popular and enduring of historical genres, biographies bring history to a broad public and are themselves widely discussed. They make an interesting comparison with official, commissioned histories. It is worth remembering that unauthorised biographies can cause a fantastic stir. How a life is publicly valued is significant – the actions of significant figures and their interpretation are morally charged.23

The reputations of major historical actors are of public concern. Since many biographers need special permission to use private papers, their relationships with the guardians of those papers is vital. Let us be clear that the issue is rarely that of ‘the truth’. Families may know things about relatives but still prefer biographers not to publicise them – indeed, this could be a condition of granting access. The biographer who agreed to such terms would not so much be distorting the past, as this phrase is generally used, but deftly omitting material that is in some way problematic. Selection is a central historical skill, and its evaluation is exceptionally tricky, since much of it is rendered invisible in the final account. The presentation of historical figures in a positive light is not as simple as it might appear. To write a convincing biography the author needs a certain measure of sympathy with their subject, and they are likely to identify more or less strongly with that person – this is true of all historical projects. A few biographies are written out of dislike, disapproval or hatred, but they are relatively rare.24 If family members are still alive, the historian may get close to them too, and inevitably emotional bonds are set up. Unconsciously, then, historians tell their stories in particular ways that could be seen as ‘flattering’, but are not necessarily intentionally so. All such accounts are necessarily selective. Naturally a historical training involves raising one’s consciousness about such matters, but the unconscious is a powerful force, never completely mastered.

In the very process of writing a biography, the historian’s responses to and evaluations of their subject are expressed. Readers, who already think in terms of praise and blame, of innocence and guilt, will pick this up. All historical accounts contain moral judgements, either implicit or explicit. History written for a general public is, by its very nature, likely to bring such judgements into prominence. In other words, although all historical activities raise questions about morals, responsibility and ethics, public history does so with special urgency. This is partly because public historical discourses tend to be condensed and simplified, bringing out such issues in a pristine form. Biographies make the point particularly clearly, but they are hardly the only genre of historical writing where we run across debates about the moral judgements of historians – debates that are at once about the emotional and political dimensions of history. The content of public history – wars, genocide, dictators, national and international crises, for instance – places moral issues in the foreground. Moral and political dimensions are inseparable.

24 Jesse Foot’s defamatory life of the celebrated surgeon John Hunter who died in 1783, is a good example: The Life of John Hunter, London, 1794.


26 I am emphatically not making a global statement here. Notions of ownership are historically specific. I refer to the political and intellectual traditions that I, and most of my readers, have been shaped by, whether we like it or not.

sought and celebrated. The notion of role models began to be widely used at
that time. Women readers of history were encouraged to identify with women
makers of history through the writers of history, and to applaud, and emulate,
past achievements, which embraced all women. In this sense women's history
was not just about women, but for women, to use in their own lives. And for
some it was 'our' history, that is, a story with special relevance for one group
women - who were its rightful possessors. But who was part of that 'our'?
Black women were quick to point out that a false inclusiveness had been
implied by generalisations about women in the past, and the extent to which
there are common threads in female experience across classes and races at a
given time and place remains a contested issue. Some of the pioneers of
women's history in the 1970s were men, and this gave rise to considerable
comment - they were muscling in on the act, 'using' women for their own
career ends, since this was a trendy new field. All this implies assumptions
about relationships between subjects and interpreters of history most
familiarly expressed in the language of ownership. To say 'my' or 'our' history is to
evoke the past of a group with which the speaker is strongly identified. It is
essential to remember, however, that each speaker is likely to have a number
of possible identities; hence, in practice, it is never self-evident which one is
dominant. Histories, especially popular ones, find multiple identities difficult
to negotiate, often because political imperatives dictate that one should be
paramount. There are those who would say that only women can write
women's history, because only they can know the subject from the inside.
While I happen to think this argument is fallacious - it has to assume that
woman is a timeless category - it is not hard to feel its emotional tug, and for
'women' we could substitute a number of ethnic, racial or religious categories.

I wish to draw attention both to the assumptions about the practice of his-
tory upon which arguments about who may practise what we could call iden-
tity history draw, and to their implications for history presented to the public.28
In fact, these arguments about identity history are quite widely believed in,
especially in the United States, where it is commonly assumed that black his-
tory should be written and taught by black people, Jewish history by Jews and
so on. Similar questions are raised about museums and exhibitions - should a
non-Jew, for instance, be appointed director of a Jewish museum? For the
case in favour of such restrictions to be plausible, two conditions have to

obtain. First, the insider point has to work. There has to be some privileged
insight that is afforded by belonging to the category in question. However it
is unclear just how this privilege works, especially for historians interested in
much earlier times: can enough continuity across centuries reasonably be
assumed to make the insider argument plausible? What kind of continuity is
involved? Second, a political assertion has to be made, so that even if the his-
torian has no privileged insights, it would somehow be wrong for them to
study a group unless they were part of it. An ethical cum political argument
would be required about who is entitled to study the past and by virtue of what
characteristics.

To my mind, all historians, whatever their professional status, have ethical
obligations, to be humane, accurate, self-aware and judicious, for instance, but
these are mobilised in the actual practice of history and not by virtue of those
aspects of the historian's person over which they have little or no control.
Indeed the best historians excel precisely because they can understand condi-
tions that are not part of their own immediate experience. This capacity is
central to the historian's imagination. My position is consistent with one
aspect of public history that I am presenting in this chapter. The past is every-
where, it is constantly being used and re-presented, and ideally should not to
be appropriated by special interests. Yet my position is in manifest tension
with another aspect of public history to which I have also drawn attention.
Public history by and large is interested history, and the closer it is to the state
and its concerns, or indeed to any powerful faction with a strong identity
and plentiful resources, the more insistent those interests are likely to be. Displays
concerning the history of nuclear power, which are invariably controversial,
are an excellent example of the point. This is precisely why those who are
alienated from dominant interests have developed oppositional strategies to
bring their histories into the public eye. This has resulted, in the museums
and heritage world at least, in a proliferation of museums representing the con-
cerns of different groups. Curators within what could be called establishment
museums are working extremely hard to present divergent views within their
institutions. There is a vital distinction to be made between the urgent need
for oppositional public history, and assessments of who is best qualified to
carry it out. To locate those qualifications in the race, gender, class or religious
background of the historian is dangerous. It misplaces historical authority by
putting it in biological or social attributes over which their possessors have
little or no control rather than where it should be - in carefully acquired skills
and experience.
MORAL JUDGEMENTS

One theme that has been running through this chapter is the importance of public history for any understanding of general attitudes towards the past and of beliefs about history among communities. The centrality of public history has two facets. First, public history reaches mass audiences; its capacity to penetrate into everyday life is formidable. In the way I have defined it, 'public history' includes many phenomena, including television and fiction. My hunch is that these two forms of culture have done more than anything else to shape popular historical mentalities. It follows that professional historians need to understand them and appreciate their complex effects. Second, in mobilising potent feelings that can loosely be described as 'moral', public history works with the emotions. There are thus powerful investments in a significant proportion of historical accounts. Some events in the human past are disproportionately dense in these respects. I want to explore these questions a little further, while insisting that they are not unique to public history; it just throws them into sharper relief.

The twentieth century has witnessed, and is currently witnessing, a number of events that appear so terrible we flounder in the face of them. It is unclear to me whether they are completely without human history, and in any case the intellectual challenge they present would not be lessened if precedents could be found.\(^29\) Their terribleness consists partly in their proximity to us, which has less to do with how recent they are than with their \textit{sensual} immediacy through film, television and fiction, as well as through radio, newspapers and oral transmission. Although the Holocaust and the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are extreme in their horror, the responses they elicit have a lot to tell us about public history, and hence about the practice of history in general.

In memorials to the millions who died in the 1930s and 1940s, and in museums on related subjects, a limited number of quotations are repeatedly used. They concern the importance of remembering in order to learn from the past, and in particular they stress that those who forget the past are destined to repeat it.\(^30\) Indeed for many people this would be one of the most important goals of public history; we remember in order to learn. But what precisely can be learnt? What are the lessons of history and how are they to be applied to other times and places? Are there clear, unambiguous inferences to be drawn from past events that can be transformed into recipes for doing it better? We should note that 'doing it better' would necessarily involve an entire society, so historians would somehow have to become politically effective conduits between past and future. It is certainly a problem that historians draw extremely diverse conclusions from the materials they study. The notion of 'lessons from history' is so glibly invoked that the difficulties behind it are often missed. These are extraordinarily difficult questions, and people easily misunderstand each other because feelings about them run so high. The result is a desire for simple answers and for clear moral polarities. One of the most important insights historians can bring to wider audiences is that there are no such things, however clear-cut the moral issues appear. And saying this is emphatically not the same as claiming that the historians can or should be neutral.

At the heart of these difficulties lie guilt and blame. Obviously historians evaluate the competing claims of historical actors, they piece together accounts of how decisions and actions were taken, and they form ideas about responsibility. Once responsibility is assigned, it is a tiny step into the territory of guilt and blame. The need to find culprits for terrible deeds is deep-rooted: it is emotionally satisfying to have hate-figures, it brings clarity and simplicity, and, most important of all, it clears others of blame. And there will always be prior emotional preferences about where blame should lie. I believe it is impossible to explain fully where those prior commitments come from, but historical controversies bear witness to them. For example, in recent years, as events in Germany that led up to the Second World War have been re-evaluated (and how far back do you go in explaining the rise of Fascism?), there have been huge public debates about the role of the German population as a whole. To what extent did they know what was going on? If they did know and were complicit or even willing participants, what kind of responsibility do they bear? Whose fault was the Holocaust?\(^31\)

These questions spawn another set. If responsibility is successfully assigned, what follows? Should the perpetrators make reparations, and if so, how? Is literal or symbolic compensation being sought, or both? Will justice be achieved by saying 'sorry', demanded by those who suffered in Japanese prisoner of war camps; by returning property, which is being asked of museums and banks who


hold Jewish possessions; or by paying compensation, a fairly frequent request to governments, banks and businesses? Should aged Nazis be prosecuted so long after the relevant events took place, and, if found guilty, punished? What punishments are appropriate—imprisonment, execution, public shame? Naturally the intensity of these debates is fuelled by many of the participants still being alive, and the practical consequences of prosecutions are hardly straightforward. It is possible to reflect upon many of the questions just posed in an abstract manner; more concrete responses have to be based on national and international law. Legal cases demand extensive historical evidence. Furthermore each case, each issue, must be seen in context, its particularities examined. This is, at least in part, the historian's province, a point which explains why many of the protagonists in the on-going consequences of the Holocaust are employing historians to undertake archival work. Much of the sorting out involves trying to determine who knew what and when, because only then can responsibility, blame and guilt be assigned in a more secure manner. The Holocaust and its aftermath involves historians in a number of ways—historians are doing research upon which judgements are based, they participate in wider debates about what happened and why, they bear responsibility, especially to survivors, for accounts that go out in the name of history. Historians are thoroughly implicated then in the history that reaches the public. It follows that they carry special responsibilities by virtue of the stakes in historical accuracy and the moral authority that the discipline of history enjoys. But what counts as authoritative 'history' here is just what is at issue. Not all accounts of the horrors of the 1930s and 1940s are equally authoritative. Popular discourse, which is rather unreflective about moral polarities, and scholarly history need each other, yet they march to different beats.

It is widely known that there are revisionist historians around who believe that a distorted view of, for example, Nazi concentration camps has been disseminated in order to exaggerate the suffering of the Jews. This is anti-Semitic history and its existence reinforces many of the points made earlier in the chapter. If the past is open, available, usable, public property, what is to stop revisionist historians, such as David Irving, telling stories that could be regarded as deeply malicious, unethical and completely irresponsible, especially when they claim to have evidence to back them up? In earlier chapters I argued that the apparatus of scholarship, and the ability to scrutinise other historians' sources, methods and arguments, are the solution. In the context of public history and debates about the Holocaust, this response appears naïve and inadequate. It does so precisely because public discourse is not scholarly discourse. Given that many people do not possess the materials or the tools to evaluate radically different accounts of a morally charged event, they will turn to their emotions for guidance. It is in the interest of many groups to present the past in simplified moralistic and didactic terms, which play upon intense feelings. The problem is that feelings are not always a very good guide because, by their very nature, they make people uncritical. And since there is never unanimity on matters of the heart, who is to say whether one person's emotions are 'better' or more justified than another's?

At this point we have reached the hub of concerns about relativism. A simple definition of relativism would be 'the rejection of absolute standards of judgement'. In the eyes of critics, however, the term implies a repudiation of any standards at all, a lack of discrimination in seeing everything as equally acceptable. However tricky or emotive a subject, 'relativism' sums up a cluster of concerns that historians have to consider. On the one hand, it has been part of educational philosophy for some time that different opinions are to be respected; seeing the world through the eyes of diverse groups has come to be preferred over passing judgements based only on our own perspective. It seems to me that the recent growth of interest in environmental history is a striking example of this trend. Changes to the management of natural resources are no longer seen in terms of necessary and inevitable economic progress but from the vantage points of natives, poor labourers and so on. This example further illustrates the close relationships between politics, public policy and the practice of history, given the rise of environmental movements over the same period. Many recent trends in the discipline depend on this orientation towards other ways of life and belief systems, which is partly due to the huge influence of anthropology.

On the other hand, we have been encouraged to respect (some types of) interested history. Committed history puts one particular perspective and may not be terribly sympathetic to other, competing ones. This, rather different, form of relativism, sanctions value judgements, usually so long as they are on


33 See, for example, P. Finney, 'Ethics, Historical Relativism and Holocaust Denial', Rethinking History, 2, 1998, pp. 359–69.

the 'right' side. For example, it was only relatively recently that left-leaning historians have turned with some confidence and pleasure to writing about the history of the aristocracy. While there are diverse ways in which the history of the aristocracy can be approached, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a surge of interest in less privileged groups. Since then the ideological climate has shifted and the rich materials left by aristocrats have exercised an allure over historians, who are approaching their research with the agendas of social and cultural history in mind.\footnote{Work on the aristocracy has included, L. Stone, The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1556-1641, Oxford, 1986, and The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, London, 1977; D. Lieven, The Aristocracy in Europe, 1815-1914, Basingstoke, 1992; S. Tillyard, Aristocrats: Caroline, Emily, Louisa and Sarah Lennox, 1750-1832, London, 1994 and a TV series: P. Mander, The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home, New Haven, 1997.}

There are a number of possible responses to the resulting dilemmas. One could say that all history departs from a specific viewpoint, so that identifications and preferences are inevitable, they are not objectionable in themselves so long as they are avowed, and the scholarly apparatus is in clear view. However, this works better in scholarly than in public history. Or, one could say that the positions taken should depend upon the situation studied. This implies that historians need to be open and flexible, rather than coming to research with fixed ideas. For example, the assertion that history should, on principle, be written from the servants' rather than the masters' viewpoint, could be criticised as too abstract, ungrounded in the materials. It seems that many servants exploited their masters, for instance through blackmail, while in other cases masters exploited their servants, for example sexually.\footnote{On servants, see C. Fairchild, Domestic Enemies: Servants and their Masers in Old Regime France, Baltimore, 1984; A. Kusmahl, Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England, Cambridge, 1981; J. Hecht, The Domestic Servant Class in Eighteenth-Century England, London, 1956, Similar issues are raised by any kind of historical research on unequal power relationships where one side is widely castigated.} Indeed even in a single household the situation might vary, so that to take one position as the starting point fails to do justice to the historical complexities. Thus it could be argued that the framework should always be grounded in the historical problem it is designed to elucidate, and not in abstract positions.

Yet another response to the complexities of relativism in relation to public history might be to attempt to change the terms in which history is debated in public, so that the genuine ambiguities can be acknowledged and more generally appreciated. But does this mean that a historian has the right to publish a book 'sympathetic' to Hitler – to take an extreme case?\footnote{Irving, Hitler's War; cf. Kershaw, Hitler: 1889–1936: Hubris.} I feel the answer

must be 'yes', so long as they abide by the rules for the responsible use of evidence and for the production of an authoritative historical account. They should also declare the nature of their commitment to their approach, and justify it on intellectual rather than emotional grounds. It needs to be made clear that analysing something is not the same as approving of it, a mistake that is all too commonly made. In any case, the censorship of historical publications is inherently undesirable, and diversity of opinion is healthy, so long as the results can be critically evaluated, in both scholarly and public history.

**BRIDGE**

The moral commitments of historians and the nature of their human values need to be made explicit whenever possible and tempered by evidence that is open to scrutiny. But, because of their professional obligations, historians must be willing to mount arguments about their commitments and values rather than just asserting them, and to explain more openly to a wider public the processes through which historical judgements are reached. As I have argued, public history raises exceptionally complex issues upon which all historians must reflect. We cannot dismiss public history as 'mere' popularisation, entertainment or propaganda. We need to develop coherent positions on the relationships between academic history, institutions such as museums, and popular culture. One way in which this can be done is by addressing the misleading notion of lessons from history. The study of the past is indeed inspiring and instructive but it is not a fount of clear, unambiguous lessons or recipes. Rather it is an arena for contemplation and thought. Certainly the past is the context for the present, but it does not by that token generate simple instructions. Historians do well when they raise awkward questions and unsettle received views. To imagine that the general public could not appreciate these points is patronising, and they should, at the very least, be given alternatives to tabloid history. My vision of a world where scholarly and public history work more closely together depends not only on collaboration between constituencies too often kept apart, but also upon the widest possible dissemination of the skills and insights that historians possess. These are too often veiled in public history. An array of skills is the foundation of the historian's craft and the subject of the culminating chapter of the book.