Science in Context **26**(4), 553–555 (2013). Copyright © Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0269889713000252

Introduction: "Right as diverse pathes leden"

Oren Harman

Bar Ilan University
E-mail: oren.harman@gmail.com

"A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history," Mahatma Ghandi is often quoted as saying, and, one might add cheekily, but with unquestionable truth, so too a small group of determined historians. Burke may have counseled that "those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it," but the Irishman clearly gave memory greater credit than it deserves. Not only do we use the past by many means and to many ends, but these means and ends necessarily color our view of the past, shape it, oftentimes constructing it forthright. And what is true for the layman may in fact be argued to be doubly true for the professional historian, his or her many years of considered disciplining notwithstanding. Being taught to be aware of our biases doesn't always help us overcome them, nor do we necessarily write about the past because we simply want to tell it "like it was." Memory is fallible, and historical records incomplete – yes – but over and above these limitations, we often seek to recall the past and breathe new life into it for very particular reasons. Churchill knew this all too well. "History will be kind to me," he wrote, "for I intend to write it."

In this topical issue, seven historians were invited to respond to two questions: "Why do you write the history of science?" and, in connection to that question, "How do you write the history of science?" The goal has been to present to our audience, in as personal and hence palpable form as possible, the plurality of the enterprise. To put it simply: different people practice history of science for very different reasons, to the extent that the term "practice" is almost entirely eviscerated of coherence.

The present issue is unusual on several counts. It grew from a series of conversations and exchanges of letters between myself and Alexander Métraux, the co-editor of *Science in Context*. For over twenty years, the journal has provided a public space for authors of many stripes, representing different narrative styles, approaches to history, methods of analysis, and modes of reasoning. In the journal's archive a number of articles can be found addressing "meta-history" in one form or another, but these are comparatively rare. Absent altogether is a concerted introspective examination, collectively achieved, of how and why historians of science write about their subject, much less why they decided to walk down this particular career path to begin with. Such accounts are invariably highly personal, and are for that reason not subject to peer review. Rather, seven leading practitioners have been asked to share with us, uniquely, their motivations, aspirations, and techniques.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889713000252 Published online by Cambridge University Press

What, then, are some of the reasons why historians do what they do, besides such prosaic truisms as circumstance and inertia? Scientists with an eye to the past, as Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb show, may marshal history to champion a particular current theoretical position – in science, whereas philosophers, such as Menachem Fisch, might find history to be part and parcel of a philosophical claim. Looking deep into the past, as Geoffrey Lloyd has spent a career doing, might allow us to track the ways in which what counts as understanding changes over time, and for what reasons, as well as educating ourselves about the uncertainties concerning what science can and cannot deliver. Unpacking the politics of more recent science, as Naomi Oreskes intimates in her work if not in her explicit theorizing, can help to inform current policy-making – an entirely different approach to history writing. History can also be a way to investigate human psychology, a kind of time-lapsed, contextualized therapy session; or institution-building, a reckoning of knowledge-making based on the nuts and bolts of its organization – two preoccupations that have engaged Roger Smith and Daniel Kevles in their myriad projects, respectively. Or, as with Hans Jörg Rheinberger, it can serve as a probe to help answer fundamental questions concerning the penetrability of scientific logic, observation, and process by cultural, social, and ideological affairs. On a less utilitarian tangent, it might satisfy aesthetic values, such as the artistry of story-telling and its musicality: "love," as Einstein once remarked, may really be "a better teacher than duty."

But if history generally and the history of science more specifically are written today by leading professionals for different reasons and to different ends, some complementary perhaps, but not all – what does this plurality mean for the enterprise as a practice and as a process? If it is more than one thing, as it seems quite obviously to be, how are we to teach it? How are we to think of its provenance, and its *raison d'être*? If it is a tool rather than a description, does this mean that we historians are more akin to artisans than geologists, painters than photographers, politicians, perhaps, as opposed to interested, or disconcerted, citizens? Such questions are beckoned by the contributions included in this issue.

Setting aside personal bents and proclivities in order to take historiographical trends seriously: why, in different times and places, does our relationship to history writing change? What is the connection between our situatedness in time and place, in a particular moment in the development of our discipline and the educational and research context in which it resides, and our practice of thinking and writing about the past? To some extent the study of intellectual traditions may provide answers, but such changes often reflect deeper cultural re-castings, or so we feel – the kinds related to our shifting understanding of the self and of the social, as well as our evolving conceptions of memory. To look at the past is to view our reflection in the present. No less urgently, it is to construct that reflection, as well.

To be sure, science, politics, and fashion all play their role in such re-castings, often in ways that render any hard and fast separation between the three impossible. As historians, many of us find ourselves engaged in just such projects of disentanglement

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889713000252 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in our daily grappling with the past, but as with the two young fish in David Foster Wallace's rendering,[1] it is not always easy to sense the waters in which we ourselves swim in the present. Realizing that our communal relationship to history changes invites different kinds of reflection than does the realization of the variety of personal relationships to history writing, certainly. But together they mount a serious challenge to the unity of the second oldest of the crafts of the word, after poetry, a defiant summons to its pretention to cohesion. To speak of "histories" may not be good enough when such disparate undertakings are bound by little more than a name.

But if we turn to history for different ends, do we necessarily use different means to uncover, delineate, and deliberate about it, too? The answer would seem to be that we do, but not always for the reasons we think. Matching ends to means is itself a complex and malleable endeavor, traversing the peaks and troughs of history to many a shepherd's pipes. But who is the illusive shepherd, and from which reeds does he construct his pipe? To what extent do we adjust our definition of history in the process of negotiating the fit between method and goal? To what extent are we consciously aware of such adjustments? The answers to these questions, or the intimation of answers, can be found hiding between the lines of the featured articles.

The final essay by Alexandre Métraux rounds out this topical issue. Indeed, "Approaches, Styles, and Narratives: Reflections on Doing History of Science" was conceived, as indicated above, as a response to one of his interrogations, and, no less importantly, as a kind of farewell present to Alexandre. While he will be staying on for some more months to honor a number of earlier editorial obligations, Alexandre is rounding off near to fifteen years of editorship at the helm of *Science in Context*. His stewardship has been exemplary and inspiring, and, in keeping with his passion for historiography and its craft, nothing could have been more fitting than an intimate topical issue, adorned by leading historians, on the essence of Why and How history. Here, in a biographical self-dialogue constructed with humor, Alexandre delves deeply into the craft of history writing, discussing, among other issues, the importance of scenes for constructing narratives, the role of marginal histories, and the difference between the preoccupations of the ethnographer and the historian.

It is my hope, as well as that of Alexandre Métraux, that this collection of very personal accounts, from the "innards" of historiography, as it were, will inspire young minds contemplating a career as historians. We would be especially gratified if it were to encourage the realization that, if History can be used as an appellation for diverse enterprises, many paths can be followed to satisfy its calling. As the poet Goeffrey Chaucer wrote, fittingly, in his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, "Right as diverse pathes leden the folk the righte wey to Rome."[2]

[1] David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water*, Kenyon Commencement Address, May 21, 2005.
[2] Geoffrey Chaucer, *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, Prologue, II. 39–40, 1391.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889713000252 Published online by Cambridge University Press