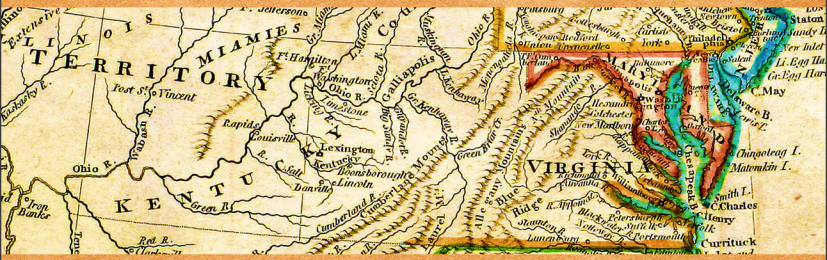
SECOND EDITION

Why Study HISTORY?

REFLECTING ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PAST



John Fea

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I have presented my ever-evolving thoughts on the importance of historical thinking to several audiences over the past few years. Thanks to the Messiah University history department (where I delivered the inaugural Faith and History Lecture in 2010), the Center for

Applied Christian Ethics at Wheaton College (especially its director, Vince Bacote), the Center for Vision and Values at Grove City College (especially Paul Kemeny and Steven Jones), and St. Peter's United Methodist Church in Ocean City, New Jersey (especially pastor Brian Roberts), for the invitations to speak. Jay Green of Covenant College provided helpful remarks on an earlier version of chapter 7. I am also grateful to the history faculty at Woodberry Forest School who provided stimulating conversation on many of the ideas covered in this book and to the hundreds of history teachers across the nation with whom I have had the privilege of sharing my thoughts on historical thinking through my work with the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History.

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My family, as always, has been supportive of my writing and historical work. Carmine Fea offered me a week at her house in the north woods of New Hampshire that allowed me to complete the first draft of this book. My parents, John and Joan Fea, remain curious and encouraging about all of my projects. And Joy, Allyson, and Caroline (who promised me a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup when I finished the last two thousand words) continue to remind me what is most important in life.

Prologue

Every fall I walk into a large lecture hall filled with students for the first day of History 141: United States History Survey to 1865. Over the years, this course has become the bread and butter of my job as an American history professor. Students enroll in it to fulfill a "general education" requirement, and thus, for many of them, it will be the only history course that they take during their four-year college experience. A large percentage of them do not want to be there. They would rather be taking a more specialized course in their individual majors. But from where I stand in the cavernous surroundings of the tiered classroom, I realize that this will be the only chance I get to convince them that the study of history is important to their lives as citizens, Christians, and humans. My approach to the course is something akin to evangelism. Every now and then, I will get a convert—a student who decides to become a full-fledged history major—but in the end I am happy if, at the end of the semester, students have developed an appreciation for the past and how it has shaped their lives.

For many history professors in American colleges and universities, the United States survey course is something to avoid. They prefer to teach advanced classes in their areas of expertise. These courses take them out of the lecture hall and into the seminar room, complete with its long table and more relaxed atmosphere. Such courses are populated not by students trying to fulfill a general education requirement but by the advanced history majors who have signed up

for the class presumably out of a love for the subject. These kinds of courses are fun to teach, but History 141 remains my favorite. If for whatever reason I could no longer teach it, my pedagogical life would be less satisfying. I guess you could say that I am more of an evangelist and a preacher than a pastor and teacher.

A few Septembers ago I was chatting informally with a first-year student about how he was adjusting to his initial week of college classes. He observed that every professor in every course he was taking spent the first or second day of the semester delivering what he called a "What Is" lecture. After probing some more, I realized that the student had coined this phrase to describe the lecture that most professors give to general education students to introduce them to a particular field of study. This student said he had just sat through a week of lectures with titles such as "What Is Physics?," "What Is Sociology?," and "What Is Philosophy?" If you are a professor, I am sure you know exactly what this student meant. In History 141, I always devote some time to a "What Is History?" lecture. During this lecture, I get my students acquainted with the basics of the field, such as the difference between a primary and secondary source, the meaning of the word *historiography*, and the ways historians practice their craft. I talk briefly about how the past speaks to the present and how it is also a foreign country, where people tend to do things differently than we do today. And since I am a Christian who teaches history at a Christian university, I get the privilege of exploring questions about the integration of faith and historical thinking. What kinds of resources are available in the Christian tradition to help us gain a better understanding of the past? What is "providential history," and why will it not play a role in the course?

Sometimes I leave the lecture hall after the "What Is History?" lecture frustrated. I have only fifty minutes to make my pitch, and though I know that the meaning of history will come up again as we move through the course material for the semester, I wish I had the time to develop my thoughts more fully. This book is a response to my frustration. I hope you will read this book as an extended "What Is History?" lecture—a primer on the study of the past. My primary audience for the book is Christian college students who are studying history, but much of what I have to say is applicable to

history students with other religious affiliations or none at all and history students (or buffs) of any age. I also hope the book will be a resource for graduate students and college professors, especially those who are just starting to get their feet wet in the classroom or who are in the process of developing their own "What Is History?" lectures. Scholars, and especially those who specialize in historiography or the philosophy of history, will not find much that is new in this text, but I do think I have organized the material in a way that might prove useful for teaching.

I have deliberately made an effort to blend the theoretical and the practical in jargon-free, easily accessible prose. Much of the scholarly work in historiography is so impregnable to the undergraduate mind that I am afraid it turns students off to the discipline. While I have not avoided complex ideas at the intersection of history and theory, I have largely downplayed them in favor of an approach that students will find useful. I hope that readers will see the importance of thinking like a historian (chap. 1) and using the past responsibly in public life (chaps. 2 and 3). I have devoted considerable attention to the way Christians should think about the past (chaps. 4 and 5), how history can contribute to a healthy democratic society (chap. 6), how history can deepen our spiritual lives (chap. 7), and how the study of history prepares one for a variety of careers and vocations in an ever-growing and expanding marketplace (chap. 8). An epilogue contains some thoughts about how the study of history might enrich and strengthen the witness of the Christian church in the world. In the end, rather than writing a defense of historical knowledge against postmodern critiques or trying to decipher whether or not there is a distinctly "Christian" view of history, my focus is on the pursuit of history as a vocation.

I hope I am able to win some converts. Let's begin!

ONE

What Do Historians Do?

What is history? Anyone who types this question into an internet search engine will discover an array of answers attributed to famous figures. Henry Ford famously said, "All history is bunk." Voltaire, the eighteenth-century philosopher, believed that history is "the lie commonly agreed upon." The American satirist Ambrose Bierce wrote that history is "an account, mostly false, of events, mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers, mostly knaves, and soldiers, mostly fools." In a quote that warms the heart of many historians, the Irish writer Oscar Wilde said, "Anyone can make history; only a great man can write it." Are those who do not remember the past condemned to repeat it? The Spanish philosopher George Santayana thought so, and so do thousands of Americans when asked why students should study the subject. What is the purpose of studying history? What do historians do? Does everyone who conducts a serious study of the past qualify as a historian? "In my opinion," writes Pulitzer Prize–winning historian Gordon Wood, "not everyone who writes about the past is a historian. Sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and economists frequently work in the past without really thinking historically."[1] What does Wood mean?

1. Gordon S. Wood, *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 276.

History and the Past

Any introductory conversation about the vocation of the historian must begin by making a distinction between "history" and "the past." Most average people think that these two terms are synonymous. They are not. The past is the past—a record of events that occurred in bygone eras. The past is dates, facts, and things that "happened." The past is what probably turned many of us off to the subject of history during our school years. Perhaps some of you may recall the economics teacher in the popular 1986 film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. (If you don't recall, search for it on YouTube.) This teacher reinforces a common stereotype, made famous by Arnold Toynbee, that history is little more than "one damn thing after another." Played brilliantly by actor Ben Stein, the teacher stands before the class in a tweed sport coat, tie, and thick glasses, rattles off details about the Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act and "voodoo economics," and monotonously asks his bored students to finish his sentences:

> In 1930, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, in an effort to alleviate the effect of the . . . *anyone, anyone?* . . . the Great Depression, passed the . . . *anyone, anyone?* . . . the tariff bill, the Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act which . . . *anyone, anyone? . . . raised or lowered?* . . . raised tariffs in an effort to collect more revenue for the federal government. Did it work? . . . *anyone, anyone? . . . Anyone know the effects?* . . . It did not work and the United States sunk deeper into the Great Depression.

This teacher, with his knowledge of certain facts about economic life in America, might be a successful candidate on *Jeopardy*, but he is not teaching history.

We all have a past. So do nations, communities, neighborhoods, and institutions. At times we can be reasonably sure about what happened in the past. We know, for example, that the Battle of Lexington and Concord took place on April 19, 1775, or that Islamic terrorists attacked the first tower of the World Trade Center in New York City at 8:46 a.m. on September 11, 2001. But at other times, as the chronological distance from a particular moment in the past grows greater, our memory starts to fail us. Sometimes the documentary

or oral evidence that tells us what happened in the past is limited or untrustworthy. Whatever the case, the past is gone. Yet we would be foolish to suggest that it has not had its way with us—shaping us, haunting us, defining us, motivating us, empowering us. Enter the historian.

History is a discipline. It is the art of reconstructing the past. As historian John Tosh writes, "All the resources of scholarship and all the historian's powers of imagination must be harnessed to the task of bringing the past to life—or *resurrecting* it."[2] The past is messy, but historians make sense of the mess by collecting evidence, making meaning of it, and marshaling it into some kind of discernible pattern.[3] History is an exciting act of interpretation—taking the facts of the past and weaving them into a compelling narrative. The historian works closely with the stuff that has been left behind—documents, oral testimony, objects—to make the past come alive. As John Arnold has noted, "The sources do not 'speak for themselves' and never have done [so]. . . . They come alive when the historian reanimates them. And although the sources are a beginning, the historian is present before or after, using skills and making choices. Why *this* document and not another? Why *these* charters and not those?"[4] There is a major difference between a work of history and a book of quotations.

Historians are always driven by the sources—they cannot make things up—but they do have power to shape their narratives in a style that might be described as "artistic." Too often I have heard historians describe their work entirely in terms of research. They spend years in the archives combing ancient records, and once the research is complete, they describe the next phase of the historical task as "writing it up." This phrase implies that they will simply translate their research into prose form without paying any attention to the literary quality of what they are "writing up." Anyone who has read a scholarly history journal knows what I mean. This problem is not new. In 1939 historian Allen Nevins, a strong advocate of making history accessible to

2. John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 2002), 7.

3. John Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 13; Arthur S. Link, "The Historian's Vocation," *Theology Today* 19 (April 1962): 78.

4. Arnold, *History*, 77.

general audiences, said, "The worst examples of how history should never be written can be discovered in past files of *American Historical Review*."[5] (The *American Historical Review* was, and continues to be, the most important scholarly history journal in the world.) Such an approach to doing history is common when writing an academic paper, a master's thesis, or a doctoral dissertation, but too often the bad habits learned in graduate school stay with historians as they enter their professional careers. In the 1990s an academic journal staged an annual "Bad Writing Contest." One of the winning entries came from a scholarly article about the history of American imperialism. Here is a taste: "When interpreted from within the ideal space of the myth-symbol school, Americanist masterworks legitimized hegemonic understanding of American history expressively totalized in the metanarrative that had been reconstructed out of (or more accurately read into) these masterworks."[6]

While many historians *do* make an effort to write well, others do not. This is unfortunate because the effective and compelling dissemination of one's work is at the heart of the historian's vocation. Since the professionalization of history in the late nineteenth century (which we will discuss more fully in chap. 3), the literary quality of historical writing that defined an even earlier era has been largely lost, replaced by the accumulation of data and evidence in what professional historians call a "monograph."[7] While there is much to learn from the skills and practices of academic historians, and historical narratives build off of specialized research, this particular development in the history of the profession has been unfortunate. Whether it is through a book, article, website, exhibit, lecture, or lesson, all historians present their ideas to the public in some fashion and should do so in ways that are accessible.[8]

The best historians tell stories about the past—stories that have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Most stories end with a lesson or a

5. Allen Nevins, "What's the Matter with History?," *Saturday Review of Literature* 19 (February 4, 1939): 3–4, cited in Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 196.

6. "Bad Writing Contest Winners," accessed September 19, 2023, available at https://sites.radford.edu/~ibarland/Public/Humor/badAcademicWriting.

7. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 40.

8. Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 141, 50.

"moral." While a historian may not explicitly preach the moral of his or her story, if told in a compelling fashion, the moral will always be evident to the reader. We use narratives to make sense of our world. It is how we bring order to our own human experiences and the human experiences of others. Jonathan Gottschall, in his *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, reminds us that the mind "yields helplessly to the suction of story."[9] If a quick glance at the *New York Times* best-seller list over the course of the last decade is any indication, the history books that have reached the largest audience are written by narrative historians. Writers such as Jon Meacham, H. W. Brands, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and the late David McCullough have brought the past alive to ordinary readers through their gifted prose and storytelling abilities. They have proved that a book about the past, in the hands of a skillful historian-writer, can be a page-turner. This is because, as historian William Cronon writes, "As storytellers we commit ourselves to the task of judging the consequences of human actions, trying to understand the choices that confronted people whose lives we narrate so as to capture the full tumult of their world. In the dilemmas they faced we discover our own, and at the intersection of the two we locate the moral of the story. If our goal is to tell tales that make the past meaningful, then we cannot escape struggling over the values that define what meaning is."[10]

The Five C's of Historical Thinking

Historians are not mere storytellers. Not only do they have the responsibility of making sure that they get the story right; they are also charged with the task of analyzing and interpreting the past. In

9. Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 3. For a helpful analysis of Gottschall's work from the perspective of historical thinking, see Allen Mikaelian, "Historians vs. Evolution: New Book Explains Why Historians Might Have a Hard Time Reaching Wide Audiences, Getting a Date," *AHA Today*, May 9, 2012, https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/may-2012/historians-vs-evolution-new-book-explains-why-historians-might-have-a-hard-time-reaching-wide-audiences-getting-a-date.

10. William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *The Journal of American History* (March 1992): 1370.