

## *Afterword*



CHAPTER 14

*Ancient history in the eighteenth century*

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As imperceptibly one approaches ripe old age, time becomes an ever more problematic concept. One's relationship to events changes, for they lie in the past rather than the future: so time past overtakes time future, as one becomes truly an ancient historian. As a result I begin to feel more at home in the twentieth century, which is supposed to have passed away, than in either antiquity or the present. Does this mean that I can stand outside the relationship between these two polarities that we are considering? Certainly new ideas seem more and more to reflect old ones – and I mean reflect rather than repeat; for it is no criticism to see the renewal of past ideas in a modern guise.

My situation is of course the inverse of the theory proposed by François Hartog. For him the regimes of historicity move from the dominance of the past until the nineteenth century to the dominance of the future in the post-Darwinian age, and now to a form of presentism that, since the collapse of Marxism, sees all history as meaningless except in relation to the present, and therefore as relative to our current issues in a post-modern sense. This movement is the opposite of natural human experience, which progresses from a situation where the future is all that holds meaning, to a form of activity that embraces presentism in adult life, and finally to Shakespeare's sixth age of 'the lean and slipper'd pantaloon', where meaning is created by memories of the past, and where old friends, old books and old wine are better than new. Literature perhaps encapsulates this temporal movement better than history: none of our contributors mentions the greatest of all writers on this age of memory, Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*; and that is a pity, for he has much to teach us.

Above all this book celebrates the revival of eighteenth-century studies in classical history that was pioneered fifty years ago by Arnaldo Momigliano, who rightly saw that the foundations of modern historiography were established in this period. The same period is now acquiring a prominence

that directs us away from the easy assumption that we are the heirs of a nineteenth-century political and critical historiography. Indeed the eighteenth century is becoming an ever more complex area of research, as is shown by another contemporary book, *Reinventing History: The Enlightenment Origins of Ancient History*.<sup>1</sup> Among young historians it seems that a movement is being formed that will transform our understanding of the eighteenth century and the *Sattelzeit* that leads on to the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.

But not all the cards are yet on the table. To take one example, Giovanna Ceserani draws a complex picture of eighteenth-century histories of Greece; in the time since the Craven seminar, from which this book originated, was held I can already add a new discovery: the earliest critical histories of Greece were written not at the end of the century by William Mitford and John Gillies, but by the Irishman John Gast of Dublin, whose writing career began as early as 1753. Greek history turns out to be in advance of the mainstream of eighteenth-century historians, William Robertson, David Hume and Edward Gibbon. In the 1780s Gast was even set up by his publisher John Murray in a vain attempt to wrest the title of the historian of decline and fall from Edward Gibbon. This example shows how incomplete our picture of the eighteenth century is; but it also demonstrates the importance of Montesquieu, and especially his *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734) – not just for Roman but also for Greek history: Gast, a Huguenot refugee, was a close relative of Montesquieu, and it was Montesquieu who inspired both his positive conception of Athenian democracy and his vision of the decline and fall of Greece.<sup>2</sup>

Exemplarity is not of course a situation from which we can escape: every generation of historians is bound to pursue the myth of abstract historical truth with the tools of the modern age, and only present experience can illuminate the distant past. That is the ultimate revenge of contemporaneity, the fact that we are captured in a world where *vita historiae magistra est*: thus it needed Karl Marx to discover the ancient economy, and Jacob Burckhardt to see the centrality of the polis in Greek culture. All we can try to do, as we hunt the Snark of history with our modern tools, is to hope that it will not turn out to be a Boojum after all:

For then  
You will softly and suddenly vanish away  
And never be met with again!

<sup>1</sup> Moore, Macgregor Morris and Bayliss 2008. <sup>2</sup> See Murray forthcoming.

Hartog focuses our attention on periodisation. Here I have two problems. The first is that in the chapters in this book, notwithstanding Lianeri's brave attempt to evoke comparative studies in her introduction, most of our contributors prefer an immanentist or internal focus, resolutely based on the Western historical experience: in order to understand the various forms of periodisation we need to juxtapose Western and non-western heritages, to set out in Marcel Detienne's words 'a comparison of the incomparables'. Despite all his wisdom, so well recalled by many of our contributors, and despite his attempt to include Jewish and Persian history in the Western tradition, Momigliano's vision was perhaps limited by his insistence that the purpose of the study of historiography was methodological, to reveal the sources of our modern Western preconceptions. The historical world surely looks very different from an Indian, an Egyptian or a Chinese perspective. I recall a remark of the nonagenarian Chinese historian Lin Zhi-Chun at the First International Conference of Ancient World Historians in Tianjin in 1993: he said that he could not see what Western historians had to teach China, for they are continually losing their civilisations and having to reinvent them by means of Renaissances, while Chinese civilisation has been continuous for five thousand years. At the time, with typical Western arrogance, I thought that forgetting civilisations from time to time was perhaps an advantage, in that it allowed new forms to develop; but now I am not so sure. As Plato's Egyptian priests said: 'You Greeks are never anything but children, and there is not an old man among you.'

A second problem emerges from Giuseppe Cambiano's demonstration that the history of philosophy requires a quite different rhythm of periodisation from that of the common history of events – an observation that could indeed be repeated in relation to the history of many other forms of human thought, like medicine, art or science. Periodisation is relative to the phenomenon studied. As Hegel and most of his contemporaries and successors saw, as far at least as Nietzsche, the death of Socrates was the most important event in world history – a fact that Jacob Burckhardt missed completely.<sup>3</sup> And as Hartog sees clearly the history of religion offers many similar religious temporalities which cut across the history of events, from BCE/CE to pagan and Christian Roman empires. But I have always regarded periods like Burckhardt, as simply useful tools for the analysis of clusters of events: I once overheard two colleagues, one of whom was asked a historical question: he threw up his hands and replied, 'Not my period.'

<sup>3</sup> Murray 2002.

The eminent medievalist A. B. Emden, a venerable bachelor, rebuked him, saying, 'George, at your age you should have stopped having periods.'

In response to the chapters of this book and the discussions they provoked, let me outline what I believe to be the development of the historiography of the ancient world in the period from the late seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century.

The antiquarian interest in both Greek and Roman history that had been an important feature of the previous two centuries began to be more systematic with the foundation of the post-Renaissance learned academies in France and Italy, leading to a proliferation of antiquarian treatises on individual topics and the extension of the conception of the past into the study of ancient customs and material objects. It was Montesquieu who stimulated the idea of a more general narrative centred on the conception of 'grandeur et décadence'; and the French *philosophes* insisted that behind the individual epiphenomena must lie a general structure of society that could be elucidated by some form of narrative history. But it was in the British Isles that the conception of critical narrative history first emerged, beginning around the 1750s. The reasons I believe lie in the development of an educational system and a set of values that was both based on study of the ancient world, and also expected it to explain the problems of the modern. There is no one author who can be held responsible for this breakthrough, and it seems to have occurred almost simultaneously in both Roman and Greek history. Nor is it confined to ancient history. From the 1750s onwards there begins the great age of historical narrative that is associated with William Robertson, David Hume and Edward Gibbon. This form of narrative history rested on the assumption of a shared set of values in all periods and the notion of *historia magistra vitae*. The only element of doubt allowed to intrude is the conception of decline and fall: there must be reasons for the collapse of the Greek and Roman worlds, and these events might have a relevance to modern problems. Liberty was the highest value, and justified imperialism, because only the free and virtuous had a right to rule over others; free trade was an essential value of this historical universe, which explained the prosperity of the modern age, and perhaps distinguished it from the ancient world. In the final words of John Gast's *Rudiments of Grecian History in Thirteen Dialogues* of 1753:

Such are the Effects of *Upright* and of *Degenerate* Manners; the latter always ending in *Weakness* and *Servitude*; the former productive of *Liberty*, *Wealth* and *Empire*. Never, my *Eudoxus*, never my *Cleanthes*, may ye forget the instructive Lesson; *The*

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*Ways of Virtue are the Ways of Happiness.* Have it in remembrance. Make the trial. And certainly shall ye find the one, if ye sincerely pursue the other.<sup>4</sup>

Is it significant that attention appears to move towards the end of the eighteenth century from Roman to Greek history? Is it even true? Despite the thesis of *Athens on Trial*,<sup>5</sup> there were plenty of supporters of Athenian democracy in the eighteenth century; and the Roman Republic was a supreme example of the decline and fall of liberty into tyranny from Montesquieu's *Considérations* onwards.

The vision of Athens was that of a prosperous, liberal, imperial, naval power capable of offering examples to the growing power of Britain in the years of prosperity after the Glorious Revolution. This began to be questioned with the American War of Independence, which revealed a split between traditional values and modern progressive thought: what was liberty to some was anarchy and the dissolution of empire to others. In Britain an age of reaction set in with the French Revolution. This is the period of reactionary historians like John Gillies and William Mitford; Athens was a dangerous model, and the counter-example of Sparta came into greater prominence. Gillies has had a undeservedly high reputation, because of his interest in the history of Prussia and its relationship to the rise of Philip of Macedon; but his history is in fact rather pedestrian and unoriginal. In contrast Mitford is a highly original historian with a fully developed and wide-ranging comparativist approach; he has suffered unfairly from the ridicule of his style by Byron and his content by Macaulay, and from the attacks mounted on him for his anti-democratic views by the Radical historians Bulwer Lytton and George Grote, and by the scorn of their philosophical mentors, James and John Stuart Mill.

Romantic history begins with the example of Sir Walter Scott, as both Macaulay and Carlyle noted,

whose Historical Novels have taught all men this truth, which looks like a truism, and yet was as good as unknown to writers of history and others, till so taught: that the bygone ages of the world were actually filled by living men, not by protocols, state-papers, controversies and abstractions of men. Not abstractions were they, not diagrams and theorems; but men, in buff or other coats and breeches, with colour in their cheeks, with passions in their stomach, and the idioms, features and vitalities of very men. It is a little word this; inclusive of great meaning! History will henceforth have to take thought of it.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Gast 1753: 647 and 1793, 1: 537–8. <sup>5</sup> Roberts 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Carlyle 1869 [1838]: 71f.; Macaulay 1913 [1828]: 217. For France see especially Augustin Thierry's praise of Scott written in 1834, reprinted in Gauchet 2002: 53.

Scott's influence on French historical writing was enormous, and in Germany Hegel in his early drafts of the lectures on the philosophy of history in 1822 and 1828 regards him as an important if unsatisfactory influence on modern 'reflective history'.

B. G. Niebuhr's combination of romantic and imaginative history with an apparently scientific scholarship in the form of source criticism represents the transition from Romantic to Positivist history; in the next generation the reaction to Hegel's philosophical history of the liberty of the human spirit produced the school of C. O. Müller and August Boeckh. This strange and heady combination of 'scientific' history with Romantic narrative created the *Roman History* of Theodor Mommsen; and from the same source the German tradition of national history developed with the later positivist historians, whose vision of the ancient world, as Kostas Vlassopoulos has pointed out, represents the triumph of Nationalism in world history. The result was two 'World Wars' (in fact of course European wars) and a dark century of nationalism and ideological conflict, that is perhaps the worst age of intolerance since the seventeenth-century wars of religion. From this legacy we have plunged into an unnecessary and unwinnable 'War on Terror'. From such nightmares we are only slowly and painfully liberating ourselves in the early twenty-first century.

In this perspective it has to be admitted that history since 1750 has continually served the function of modern myth. Throughout the eighteenth century myth was indeed a significant part of history, in the sense that the truth or falsity of myth remained problematical, with many theories designed to reduce myth to history, or at least reduce its uncertainties. It is perhaps the most significant contribution of the nineteenth century that first Niebuhr for Roman history and then Grote for Greek history managed to separate out clearly *spatium mythicum* from *spatium historicum*. But their victories were only temporary, and myth soon returned as the truth that lies behind history. Today we have come to recognise that all history is indeed myth designed to validate the present, and we are not happy bunnies; for we object to national history as much as to Marxist history, and to the relativisation that is implied in the post-modern discourse of history. We still feel a desperate need for a philosophy of history to replace Marxism and the Whig interpretation of history, not just in their claims to determine the future, but also in their contributions to our ability to understand the past.