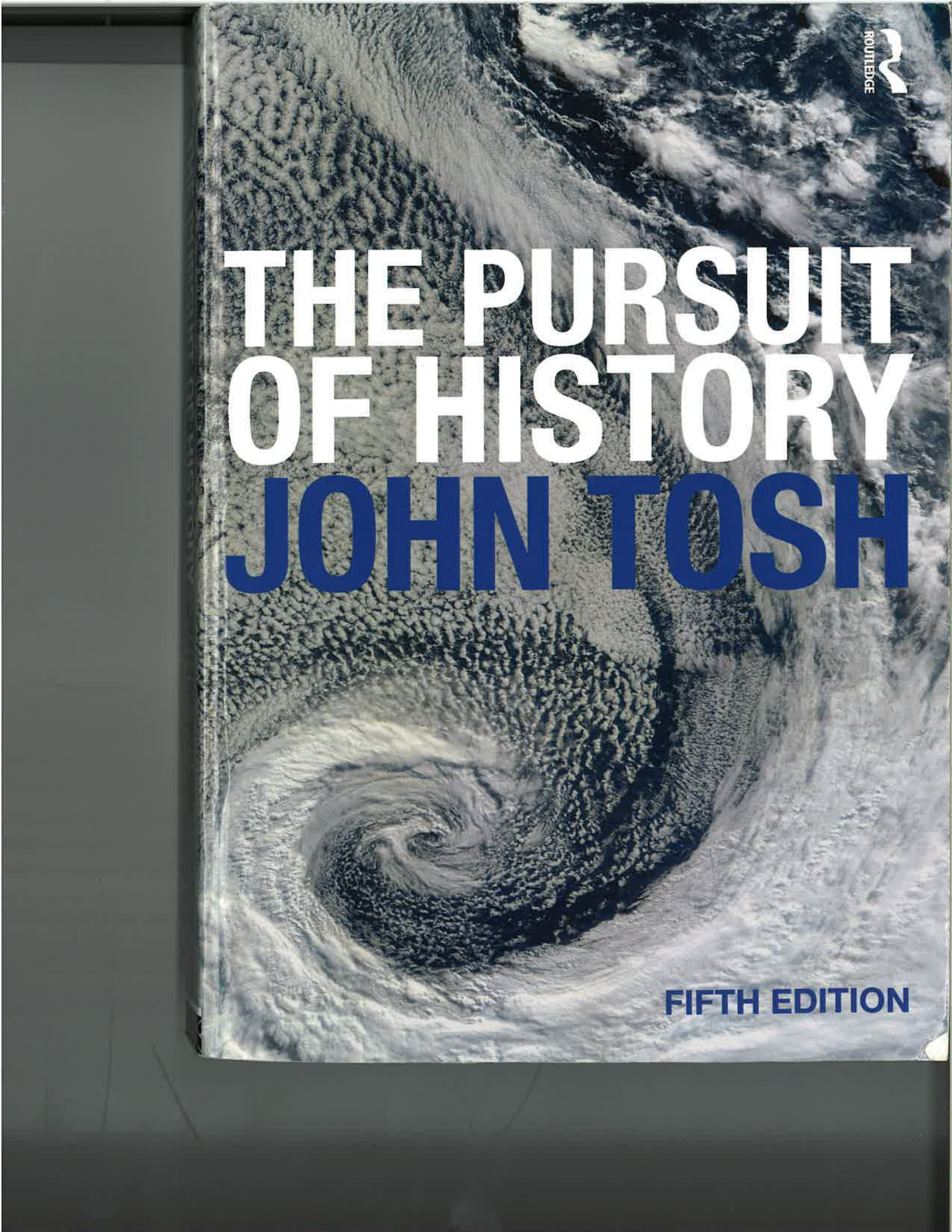

ROUTLEDGE
THE PURSUIT OF HISTORY
JOHN TOSH
FIFTH EDITION

CHAPTER FOUR

The raw materials

Students rarely work with historical sources in their original state. Examination papers and textbooks contain short, labelled extracts, which bear little resemblance to the originals. What sort of sources are available to the modern historian? How did they come to be made available, and how might this affect their usefulness? This chapter gives a fuller idea of the provenance of, and problems with, the sort of sources historians habitually use.

Such is the range of motives and the variety of interests that draw people to the past that history can be said to embrace the human experience of every place and period. No part of that past can be dismissed as falling outside the proper domain of historical knowledge. But how far it can be made the subject of well-founded research depends on the availability of historical evidence. Whether the historian's main concern is with re-creation or explanation, with the past for its own sake or for the light it can shed on the present, what he or she can actually achieve is determined in the first instance by the extent and character of the surviving sources. Accordingly it is with the sources that any account of the historian's work must begin. This chapter describes the main categories of documentary material, showing how they came into being, how they have survived down to the present, and in what form they are available to the scholar.

I

Specialist sources and skills

Historical sources encompass every kind of evidence that human beings have left of their past activities – the written word and the spoken word, the shape of the landscape and the material **artefact**, the fine arts as well as photography and film. Among the humanities and social sciences history is unique in the variety of its source materials, each calling for specialist expertise. The military historian of the English Civil War can examine the arms and armour surviving from the seventeenth century and the terrain over which the battles were fought, as well as the military dispatches of each side. A rounded picture of the **General Strike** of 1926 calls for a study of government and trade union records, the press and broadcasting, together with the collection of testimonies from survivors. The reconstruction of a pre-colonial kingdom in black Africa is likely to depend not only on the excavation of its capital but also on the contemporary observations of European or Arab visitors and the oral traditions handed down over many generations. No single historian can possibly master all these tools. The more technical of them have become the province of distinct specialisms. The excavation of ancient sites and the interpretation of the material remains found there is the business of the archaeologist, assisted these days by the aerial photographer and the chemical analyst. In the case of the visual arts the equivalent specialist is the art historian, though there is an increasing overlap with the discipline of history (considered in Chapter 9).

artefact
Any object left over from the past.

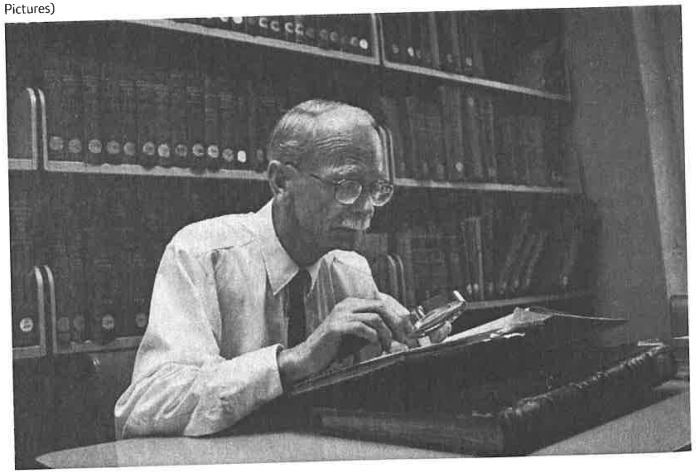
General Strike
A major industrial dispute that brought virtually all of Britain's industry to a halt in May 1926. The dispute began in the mining industry but spread when other trade unions came out in support of the miners.

During the past forty years the range of sources in which historians claim expertise has certainly increased. It now includes place-names, landscape patterns and – for recent history – film. Oral testimony is now fully established as a legitimate source for historians (see Chapter 11). The fact remains, however, that the study of history has nearly always been based squarely on what the historian can read in documents or printed material. That emphasis was confirmed when historical research was placed on a professional footing during Ranke's lifetime. For the majority of historians, research is an activity that goes on in libraries and archives.

The written word

The reason is not just academic conservatism. From the High Middle Ages (*c.*1000–1300) onwards, the written word survives in greater abundance than any other source for Western history. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries witnessed not only a marked growth in record-keeping by the state and other corporate bodies but also the rapid spread of printing, which encouraged literate production of all kinds and transformed its prospects of survival. Written sources are usually precise as regards time, place and authorship, and they reveal the thoughts and actions of individual men and women as no other source can do. One has only to read an account of a society for which virtually no written records exist – for example Iron Age Britain or **medieval Zimbabwe** – to see how lacking in human vitality history can be when denied its principal source material. Moreover, the written word has always served many different purposes – information, propaganda, personal communication, private reflection and creative release – all of which may have relevance for the historian. The interpretation of texts serving a variety of functions from an age whose habits of mind differed sharply from our own calls for critical abilities of a very

medieval Zimbabwe
The medieval kingdom of Zimbabwe was a major power in southern Africa in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. The impressive stone ruins of its royal palace at Great Zimbabwe posed a serious challenge to those white settlers who dismissed indigenous African culture as intrinsically inferior to that of Europeans.



Archival holdings are essential to historical scholarship. Not only do historians have to treat their sources carefully, they have to remember how it is that some sources made their way into the archives while others did not. (Getty Images/Time & Life Pictures)

high order. Written sources are at the same time the most rewarding and (in most cases) the most plentiful. Small wonder, then, that historians seldom look elsewhere.

The use of written materials as the principal historical source is complicated by the fact that historians communicate their findings through the same medium. Both in their choice of research topic and in their finished work, historians are influenced to a greater or lesser extent by what their predecessors have written, accepting much of the evidence they uncovered and, rather more selectively, the interpretations they put upon it. But when we read the work of a historian we stand at one remove from the original sources of the period in question – and further away still if that historian has been content to rely on the writings of other historians. The first test by which any historical work must be judged is how far its interpretation of the past is consistent with all the available evidence; when new sources are discovered or old ones are read in a new light, even the most prestigious book may end on the scrapheap. In a real sense the modern discipline of history rests not on what has been handed down by earlier historians, but on a constant reassessment of the original sources. It is for this reason that historians regard the original sources as *primary*. Everything that they and their predecessors have written about the past counts as a *secondary* source. Most of this book is concerned with secondary sources – with how historians formulate problems and reach conclusions, and how we as readers should evaluate their work. But first it is necessary to examine the raw materials a little more closely.

Primary and secondary sources

The distinction between primary and secondary sources, fundamental though it is to historical research, is rather less clear-cut than it might appear at first sight, and the precise demarcation varies among different authorities. By 'original sources' is meant evidence **contemporary** with the event or thought to which it refers. But how far should our definition of 'contemporary' be stretched? No one would quibble about a conversation reported a week or even a month after it took place, but what about the version of the same episode in an autobiography composed twenty years later? And how should we categorize an account of a riot written shortly afterwards, but by someone who was not present

contemporary
Literally 'at the same time as'. In historical terminology it usually refers to events or people from the period being studied.

and relied entirely on hearsay? Although some purists regard the testimony of anyone who was not an eyewitness as a secondary source,[1] it makes better sense to apply a broad definition but to recognize at the same time that some sources are more 'primary' than others. The historian will usually prefer those sources that are closest in time and place to the events in question. But sources more remote from the action have their own significance. The historian is often as much interested in what contemporaries *thought* was happening as in what actually happened: **British reactions to the French Revolution**, for example, had a profound influence on the climate of politics in Britain, and from this point of view the often garbled reports of events in Paris which circulated in Britain at the time are an indispensable source. As this example suggests, to speak of a source as 'primary' implies no judgement of its reliability or freedom from bias. Many primary sources are inaccurate, muddled, based on hearsay or intended to mislead, and (as the next chapter will show) it is a vital part of the historian's work to scrutinize the source for distortions of this kind.

The distinction between primary and secondary is further complicated by the fact that sometimes primary and secondary material appear in the same work. **Medieval chronicles** usually began with an account of world history from the Creation to the life of Christ, based on well-known authorities; but what modern historians value them most for is the entries that they recorded year by year concerning current events. Equally, a work can be primary in one context and secondary in another: **Macaulay's *History of England*** (1848–55) is a secondary source whose reputation has been much undermined by modern research; but for anyone studying the political and historical assumptions of the early Victorian elite, Macaulay's book, in its day a bestseller, is a significant primary source. These examples might suggest what is often assumed, that 'historical documents' are the formal, dignified records of the past. It is true that records of this kind are more likely to endure, but the term should carry the widest possible reference. Every day all of us create what are potentially historical documents – financial accounts, private correspondence, even shopping lists. Whether they actually become historical documents depends on whether they survive and whether they are used as primary evidence by scholars of the future.

In order to make sense of the vast mass of surviving primary sources, the first requirement is some system of classification.

British reactions to the French Revolution
When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, opinion in Britain was initially supportive. However, it quickly became implacably hostile as events in France descended into rule by violence and terror. A small group of political radicals, however, remained consistently supportive of the Revolution. These two responses continue to be mirrored in the attitudes of British historians of the period.

medieval chronicles
Medieval chronicles were written narratives, often skilfully crafted into a highly readable form. We do not know how much research went into their writing, though they were often consulted by later chroniclers and writers.

Macaulay's *History of England*
Although called a *History of England*, Macaulay's work in fact concentrates almost entirely on the important constitutional changes following the overthrow of King James II in 1688 and the accession of the first Hanoverian king, George I, in 1714.

Two types are in common use. The first draws a distinction between the published – which in the modern period has usually meant printed – and the unpublished or manuscript source. The second emphasizes instead the authorship of the sources, drawing a distinction between those produced by governments and those produced by corporations, associations or private individuals. Each of these methods lends itself to the precision required by the cataloguer, and bibliographies published by historians at the end of their works are normally arranged along these lines. But the criteria that historians actually apply in the course of their research, although related to these two types of classification, are rather less cut and dried. In the historian's hierarchy of sources those that carry most weight are the ones that arise directly from everyday business or social intercourse, leaving open the task of interpretation. In every recent age men and women have sought to make sense of their times, and to interpret the pattern of events through books, **broadsheets** and newspapers. Such statements offer valuable insights into the mentality of the age, but for the historian they are no substitute for the direct, day-to-day evidence of thought and action provided by the letter, the diary and the **memorandum**: these are the 'records' of history *par excellence*. Historians wish to be as nearly as possible observers of the events in question; they do not want to deliver themselves into the hands of a narrator or commentator. The most revealing source is that which was written with no thought for posterity. **Marc Bloch** called this 'the evidence of witnesses in spite of themselves';[2] it has all the fascination of eavesdropping.

II

Narratives and memoirs

We begin, however, with primary sources written for the benefit of posterity. These tend to be the most accessible because their survival was seldom left to chance. Often they have a literary quality that makes them a pleasure to read. They provide a ready-made chronology, a coherent selection of events, and a strong sense of period atmosphere. Their drawback is that they recount only what people found worthy of note about their own age – which may not be what interests us today. Prior to the Rankean revolution in the nineteenth century, it was on primary sources of

broadsheets
A form of early newspaper designed to be pinned up in a public place.

memorandum
An internal message or note sent within an office or institution. Memoranda from government offices can give a very detailed picture of the development of policy.

Marc Bloch (1886–1944)
French medievalist historian. He was one of the founders of the *Annales* school, which sought to link the study of history with an in-depth appreciation of the role of geography and other disciplines. He also wrote a perceptive study of *The Historian's Craft*. During the Second World War he fought in the French resistance, but was captured and shot shortly before the D-Day landings.



Vincenz of Beauvais, medieval polyhistorian. Although medieval chroniclers did consult documents and were sometimes able to speak with some of the major figures they wrote about, their priority was to provide a lively narrative. The historical discipline of measured analysis of source material was a much later, nineteenth-century development. (akg-images, London)

this kind that historians tended to rely. For Roman history they turned to Caesar, Tacitus and Suetonius, while medievalists drew on the **Anglo-Saxon Chronicle** and the works of men such as **Matthew Paris** in the thirteenth century and **Jean Froissart** in the fourteenth. Nor do modern historians disparage these narrative sources. They owe their continuing importance to the fact that they survive from periods that have left only a limited amount of record sources. In the Middle Ages most of the early chronicles were written by monks without personal experience of public affairs, but increasingly from the twelfth century they were joined by **secular clergy** who had served the king in responsible positions and could to some extent record political history from the inside. **Gerald of Wales** was a royal chaplain who became acquainted with **Henry II** towards the end of his reign in the 1180s. The following passage well conveys the restless energy of one of England's most remarkable kings:

> Henry II, king of England, was a man of reddish, freckled complexion with a large round head, grey eyes which glowed fiercely and grew bloodshot in anger, a fiery countenance and a harsh, cracked voice. His neck was somewhat thrust forward from his shoulders, his chest was broad and square, his arms strong and powerful. His frame was stocky with a pronounced tendency to corpulence, due rather to nature than to indulgence, which he tempered by exercise …
>
> In times of war, which frequently threatened, he gave himself scarcely a modicum of quiet to deal with those matters of business which were left over, and in times of peace he allowed himself neither tranquility nor repose. He was addicted to the chase beyond measure; at crack of dawn he was off on horseback, traversing waste lands, penetrating forests and climbing the mountain-tops, and so he passed restless days. At evening on his return he was rarely seen to sit down either before or after supper. After such great and wearisome exertions he would wear out the whole court by continual standing.[3]

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle
A detailed yearly chronicle of major events in Anglo-Saxon England compiled by monks at different monasteries and abbeys and brought together on the orders of King Alfred the Great. It was long thought to be an objective account of events, but historians now see it as heavily slanted in King Alfred's favour, possibly on his instructions.

Matthew Paris (c.1200–c.59)
Monk of St Albans and author of one of the most important chronicles of medieval England. Paris seems to have spoken to leading figures in the course of compiling his chronicle.

Jean Froissart (c.1335–c.1404)
French chronicler, he spent long periods in England at the court of King Edward III. His chronicle covers the early period of the Hundred Years' War between England and France. His early version was more sympathetic to the English than his later accounts.

secular clergy
Priests who do not belong to a monastic order.

Gerald of Wales (1146–1223)
Gerald de Barri, Bishop of St David's and writer of descriptions of Wales and Ireland. Frustrated ambition led him to turn against his English patrons and fight for Welsh independence against King Edward I.

Henry II (1135–89)
First of the Plantagenet Kings of England (also known as Angevins, from their native Anjou in France). Henry is best known for his disastrous feud with Archbishop Thomas à Becket, but he also instituted major reforms in the legal system.

The autobiography is essentially a modern variant of the chronicle, with the personality of the author brought to the front of the stage. Invented by the self-conscious Italians of the Renaissance,[4] this form is favoured by artists, writers and perhaps most of all by politicians. The fascination of autobiographies derives from the fact that they are the recollections of an insider. Indeed they often provide the only available first-hand account, because in all countries recent government records are closed to public inspection (see p. 113); in Britain former Cabinet ministers, when writing their memoirs, are permitted to consult official papers relating to their term of office, though they may not cite or quote from them. But the author's purpose is less to offer an objective account than to justify his or her actions in retrospect and to provide evidence for the defence before the bar of history. Autobiographies may be very revealing of mentality and values, but as a record of events they are often inaccurate and selective to the point of distortion. This was pre-eminently true of Winston Churchill who, even while he was Prime Minster, intended to write the definitive record of his wartime leadership. Through his voluminous memoirs, published soon after the Second World War, he successfully established his own somewhat self-aggrandizing version of events. It was many years before the extent of the distortion became clear to historians. Even today Churchill's popular image remains pretty much what he himself planted in the public mind during and after the war.[5]

At the same time it would be a mistake to think of the published memoir as an upper-class preserve. In Britain by the mid-nineteenth century it had become a recognized means of expression for the literate artisan as well. As David Vincent has shown, autobiographies were written in order to convey the

humanity of the working man (and, more rarely, the working woman), and also to challenge common misconceptions about working-class life. The pride and resentment are evident in the opening lines of the radical **Thomas Hardy**'s autobiography, published in 1832:

> As every man whose actions, from whatever cause, have acquired publicity, is sure, in many things, to be misrepresented, such a man has an undoubted right, nay, it becomes his duty, to leave to posterity a true record of the real motives that influenced his conduct. The following Memoir, therefore, requires no apology, and none is offered.[6]

Over 140 such works have survived from the period 1790–1850 alone.

Thomas Hardy (1752–1832)
Scottish radical. He was accused and acquitted of high treason in 1794, during the wars with Revolutionary France. Not to be confused with the novelist of the same name.

Official papers and newspapers

The chronicles and memoirs that people write for future generations are, of course, only a small minority of what is published in any period. Most publications are issued with little thought for posterity; they are rather intended to inform, influence, mislead or entertain contemporaries. The invention of printing in the fifteenth century greatly facilitated the dissemination of such writings, while the growth of literacy among the laity increased the demand for them. Governments were quick to profit from the revolution in communications, and by the nineteenth century statements of policy, propaganda and digests of information on trade, revenue and expenditure were flowing from the official presses. In Britain perhaps the most impressive of these publications were the **census reports** published every ten years from 1801, and the reports of **royal commissions** set up from the 1830s onwards to take evidence and make recommendations on major social problems such as public health and conditions of work. Another official publication of great interest is that of the reports of parliamentary proceedings. Thomas **Hansard** began publication of the debates in the Lords and Commons as a private venture in 1812 (though not quite the first of its kind). The series assumed its modern format in 1909, when the government, through His Majesty's Stationery Office, took it over; first-person, **verbatim** reporting became the rule. Few other sources convey so well the public face of political discourse.

But the most important published primary source for the historian is the press, which in Britain has a continuous history dating

census reports
The census has been held in Britain at regular ten-year intervals ever since 1801, except for 1941, when the demands of war made it impossible. Census reports include detailed commentary as well as statistical tables, which make them peculiarly useful to social historians.

royal commissions
A committee of inquiry set up at the command of the monarch (i.e. of the government) to investigate an issue. Commissions take evidence from witnesses and then produce detailed reports. Both the transcriptions of questioning of witnesses and the reports are usually published.

back to the early eighteenth century, the first daily newspaper having been founded in 1702. Newspapers have a threefold value. First, they record the political and social views that made most impact at the time; indeed the earliest newspapers, which had developed out of the vigorous tradition of pamphleteering during the Civil War and **Commonwealth** (1642–60), contained little else and are remembered now for the brilliant polemics of Addison, Steele and Swift. To this day the leaders and correspondence columns of the great London dailies offer the best entry into the current state of **establishment** opinion – provided due allowance is made for the editorial bias of the paper in question. Second, newspapers provide a day-to-day record of events. During the nineteenth century this function began to be filled much more fully, particularly when the development of the electric telegraph in the 1850s enabled journalists in distant postings to **file their copy** home as soon as it was written. W.H. Russell of *The Times* was one of the first to take advantage of this revolution in communications. His celebrated dispatches from the **Crimea** during the war of 1854–6, which provided shocking evidence of the disarray of the British forces, had a major impact on public opinion at home and still make compelling reading.[7] As sources of straight reporting, newspapers are likely to become even more valuable to historians in the future. For despite the vast archives that governments and corporations continue to amass, important decisions are increasingly communicated by telephone and e-mail rather than by letter, and information obtained informally by journalists at the time may provide the only contemporary written record of what has taken place. Lastly, newspapers from time to time present the results of more thorough enquiries into issues that lie beyond the scope of routine news reporting. The founder of this tradition was Henry Mayhew, an **impecunious** writer briefly employed by the *Morning Chronicle* in 1849–50. As 'Special Correspondent for the Metropolis' he wrote a series of articles exposing social conditions among the London poor in the aftermath of the great cholera epidemic of 1849, which later formed the basis of his book *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851). Few investigative journalists since then have equalled Mayhew in the thoroughness of his research or in his impact on contemporary opinion.[8]

Hansard
Named after its founder, Thomas Hansard (1776–1833), this is the name given to the daily written reports on proceedings in Parliament. In its early versions, the *Parliamentary History* wrote in reported speech ('He said he would . . .') and sometimes described the scene in the chamber rather than reproducing the exact word. The development of shorthand enabled reporters to reproduce the exact words spoken.

verbatim
Reported word for word.

Commonwealth
From 1649 to 1654 England was ruled as a republic, known as the Commonwealth, and from 1654 to 1659 as a Protectorate under Oliver Cromwell. The constitutional and political uncertainty of the period saw the production of a huge number of pamphlets laying out conflicting political and religious theories about the direction in which the country ought to move.

establishment
A term originally coined by young satirists and radical writers in the 1960s to denote all those persons, institutions and attitudes that do well out of the status quo and wish therefore to preserve it.

file their copy
'To file copy' is a journalistic term for submitting the text of an article.

Crimea
The Crimean War (1854–6), in which Britain fought alongside France and Turkey against Russia, was marked by serious administrative inefficiency and incompetence in British military administration. As a result, the figures who emerged with most credit from the war were those, like the journalist William Howard Russell or the nursing administrator Florence Nightingale, who exposed its shortcomings, and the ordinary British soldier who suffered from them.

impecunious
Poor, short of money.

Chaucer (c.1340–1400)
Geoffrey Chaucer, English poet and author of *The Canterbury Tales*. The tales cover a wide range of subjects and social classes, and are therefore heavily used by historians of the late Middle Ages.

'condition of England' question
A phrase used by the 1840s to denote the questions surrounding the problems of poverty, squalor and relations between the rich and the poor.

Literature as historical source material

There is one other kind of source intended for the eyes of contemporaries (and often for posterity too) that historians have to consider, though it is rather a special case; this is creative literature. Novels and plays cannot, of course, be treated as factual reports, however great the element of autobiography or social observation may be. Nor, needless to say, do historical novels – or Shakespeare's history plays for that matter – carry any authority as historical statements about the periods to which they refer. But all creative literature offers insights into the social and intellectual milieu in which the writer lived, and often vivid descriptions of the physical setting as well. The success of an author is often attributable to the way in which he or she articulates the values and preoccupations of literary contemporaries. So it makes good sense to cite **Chaucer** as a spokesman for the attitudes of the fourteenth-century laity to abuses in the Church, or Dickens as evidence of the frame of mind in which middle-class Victorians considered the **'condition of England' question**.

III

Record sources: memos, minutes and official correspondence

Because newspapers, official publications and parliamentary speeches are composed mostly with a view to their impact on contemporary opinion, historians attach greater weight to them than to the chronicles and memoirs written with the requirements of posterity in mind. But the very fact of publication sets a limit on the value of all these sources. They contain only what was considered to be fit for public consumption – what governments were prepared to reveal, what journalists could elicit from tight-lipped informants, what editors thought would gratify their readers, or MPs their constituents. In each case there is a controlling purpose which may limit, distort or falsify what is said. The historian who wishes, in Ranke's phrase, 'to show how things actually were' (see pp. 19) must go behind the published word, and that is why the greatest advances in modern historical knowledge have been based on research into 'records' – confidential documents such as letters, minutes and diaries. It is in these forms that men and women record their decisions, discussions and sometimes their innermost thoughts, unmindful of the eyes of future historians. Time and again, historians have found that a careful study of the record sources reveals a picture very different from the confident generalizations of contemporary observers. In nineteenth-century England the medical writer William Acton declared that respectable women experienced no sexual feelings of any kind, and his view has been much cited as evidence of Victorian repression; only when the letters and diaries between spouses were examined did it become clear that a much wider range of sexual responses existed among married women.[9] Whether the question at issue is the motives of the participants in the English Civil War, or the impact of the Industrial Revolution on standards of living, or the volume of the Atlantic slave trade, there is no substitute for the painstaking accumulation of evidence from the record sources of the period.

In most countries the largest single body of unpublished records is that belonging to the state, and since Ranke's day more research has been devoted to government archives than to any other kind of source. In the West the oldest surviving state archives took shape during the twelfth century, which saw a marked advance in the sophistication of government organization all over Europe. In England a continuous series of revenue records – the Pipe Rolls of the Exchequer – extends back to 1155, and the records of the royal courts (King's Bench and Common Pleas) to 1194. The beginning of systematic record-keeping can be dated precisely to 1199. In that year King John's Chancellor, Hubert Walter, began the practice of making copies on parchment rolls of all the more important letters dispatched from **Chancery** in the king's name. Even after the emergence of other departments in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Chancery remained the nerve centre of royal administration, and its enrolments are the most important archival source for the Middle Ages in England.

Chancery
The royal secretariat in medieval times, administered by the King's Chancellor.

The records of bureaucracy

During the period 1450–1550 the medieval system was superseded by a more bureaucratic administrative structure controlled by the Privy Council. The most powerful single official within this structure was the King's Secretary (later called the Secretary of State), and from the reign of Henry VIII his records, known as the State Papers, become the most rewarding source for the policies

and actions of the government. In contrast to Chancery records the State Papers, to quote Galbraith,

> are not the routine products of an office, but the intimate and miscellaneous correspondence of an official whose duties knew no fixed limits ... The veil that separates us from character and personality in the Middle Ages is torn aside.[10]

Among the State Papers for 1536 there survives this letter summoning an unfortunate priest from Leicestershire to an interrogation, probably in connection with treason; the menacing tone is unmistakable:

> I commend me unto you. Letting you wit the King's pleasure and commandment is that, all excuses and delays set apart, ye shall incontinently upon the sight hereof repair unto me wheresoever I shall chance to be, the specialties whereof ye shall know at your coming. Without failing thus to do, as ye will answer at your peril. From the Rolls, the 8th day of July. **Thomas Crumwell** [*sic*].[11]

Thomas Cromwell (c.1485–1540)
Secretary successively to Cardinal Wolsey and to King Henry VIII. Cromwell oversaw the dissolution of the monasteries, which involved rigorous examination of the internal affairs of monasteries, convents and abbeys.

It is this category of document that proliferated in the following centuries, as additional Secretaries of State were appointed to run new departments that could keep abreast of the expanding scope of government. By the nineteenth century each department of state was keeping a systematic record of letters and papers received, copies of letters sent out and memoranda circulating within the department. At the apex of this complex bureaucratic structure stands the Cabinet. For the first 200 years of its existence, its deliberations were entirely 'off the record', but since 1916 the Cabinet Secretariat has kept minutes of the Cabinet's weekly meetings and prepared papers for its use.

Another aspect of the enlargement of government under the Tudors was the beginning of routine diplomacy conducted by resident ambassadors. The Italian states set the pattern in the 1480s and 1490s; other countries soon followed, and England's diplomatic network had taken shape by the 1520s. The Venetian ambassador who, in the course of twelve months in 1503–4, sent back from Rome 472 dispatches, was more industrious than most,[12] but regular reporting home was from the start an essential part of the ambassador's duties. These reports not only document the conduct of foreign policy more fully than ever before; they also record the diplomat's appraisal of the court and country to which he was accredited. Ranke relied on them heavily for both political and diplomatic history, and there have been many

historians since whose expertise is almost entirely limited to diplomatic documents. By the late nineteenth century – often thought of as the 'golden age' of diplomatic history – the documentary record is so full that the historian can reconstruct every stage in a diplomatic initiative from the first tentative proposal of a ministry official to the completed report on the negotiations.

The nineteenth century was also the period when government began to make systematic records of the entire population. The census aims to list all the members of a country or community alive at any one time; without it absolute numbers cannot be determined, nor whether the population is increasing or declining. In Britain a census has been taken at ten-yearly intervals since 1801, and it is generally conceded that after 1841 (when the name of each individual was noted for the first time), errors in the totals are statistically insignificant. Other listings survive from earlier periods – tax returns, returns of church communicants, declarations of political loyalty and the like. But, though comprehensive in intent, these were seldom so in practice, and the margin of error is very uncertain and inconsistent. At the same time as the census was being developed, Britain set up a comprehensive system of civil registration to record all 'vital' events, i.e. births, marriages and deaths, on the basis of which much more accurate demographic projections could be made. Since then, the range and volume of data amassed by government about the population as a whole has steadily increased.

Church records

Two other types of record share the official character of central government records. First, during the Middle Ages the Church wielded as much, if not more, authority than the state, and in most European countries it retained many of its powers in the secular sphere until the early nineteenth century. Its history is fully documented by the immense quantity of Church records that are available to historians today, many of them still virtually untouched. Royal charters granting land and privileges to the Church have been preserved from the early Middle Ages, and copious records document the efficiency of **episcopal** and monastic administration. The records of the **Church courts** are more interesting than might seem likely at first glance, because so many moral misdemeanours of ordinary people came within their

episcopal
Pertaining to bishops.

Church courts
Church courts dealt with offences against canon (i.e. Church) law, rather than civil offences, which were dealt with in the king's courts. Church courts often dealt with cases of sexual immorality.

laity
'Lay' people, i.e. those who are not members of the clergy.

jurisdiction. In sixteenth and early seventeenth-century England, for example, when the established Church's position vis-à-vis the Puritan sects was under threat, strenuous efforts were made through the Church courts to discipline the **laity**, and the records of these courts are therefore an important source for the social historian, particularly as regards sexual misdemeanours and sexual defamation.[13] The Church courts also retained jurisdiction over wills in England until 1858, and from Elizabeth I's reign onwards they insisted on detailed inventories of all movable property, which can now tell the historian a great deal about wealth, status and standards of living.

Local government and private firms

Second, there are the records of local government. During the thirteenth century in England lords of the manor began to follow the king's example and keep records – and particularly judicial records, since they had legal jurisdiction over their tenants and servants. One result is that changes in landholding are relatively well documented for rich and poor alike. The first Justices of the Peace were commissioned by the Crown in the fourteenth century, and under the Tudors they were saddled with a mounting load of responsibility – for matters as various as policing, poor relief, wage regulation and military recruitment. Much of this burden was discharged during quarter sessions held at three-monthly intervals in each county, and recorded by a Clerk of the Peace. This remained the basis of local government in England until the modern system of county and borough councils was established during the nineteenth century. Until that time a high proportion of local records are legal: the same individuals – whether lords of the manor or Justices of the Peace – were charged with judicial as well as administrative duties. Of all public records, the court records of everyday and often trivial disputes and misdemeanours shed most light on the wider society beyond the small world of government.

The records of the Church and local administration might seem to be of marginal interest. In fact they are crucial to the prospects of social history. The limited scope of the first ventures in social history is partly explained by the tendency of historians to take the line of least resistance and follow the trail through the records of institutions with an avowedly 'social' function – schools,

hospitals, trade unions and such; the result was all too often work of a narrowly institutional character. But social history as it is now understood demands a great deal more. Social groups do not leave corporate records. Their composition and their place in the social structure have to be reconstructed from a broad range of sources composed for quite different and usually much more mundane reasons. This is especially true of the history of the common people. Their conditions and opinions became the subject of systematic social surveys only during the nineteenth century. Until then, the picture that we form of them is inevitably dominated by those activities that brought down on them the attention of the authorities: destitution, litigation, sedition, and – most of all – common crime and offences against Church discipline. At times of popular discontent this attention was particularly intrusive, and whole areas of society which normally remain 'invisible' may be illuminated by legal and police records. The riots that periodically broke out in eighteenth-century London are a case in point.[14] Equally, fear of revolution may intensify official surveillance of lower-class activities, as in England during the Napoleonic Wars: 'But for spies, narks and letter-copiers, the history of the English working class would be unknown', wrote E.P. Thompson, with only a little overstatement.[15] Such opportunities are all the more precious because at other times information about the common people is usually much thinner. Court records are still useful, but in more settled conditions judicial activity was less intense, and it is therefore much more difficult to build up the profile of a local community. Before any generalization can be made with confidence, a vast quantity of court records has to be sifted, usually in conjunction with other local sources such as manorial records, tax registers, wills and the records of charitable institutions.

Church and state are the oldest record-keeping institutions in Western society. But from the fifteenth century onwards the historian can supplement them with an ever-increasing volume of records generated by private corporations and associations – guilds, universities, trade unions, political parties and pressure groups. Of particular interest are the records of businesses and firms. Their beginnings are shrouded in obscurity. The only major documentary archive of a medieval English trading firm which has come down to us is the papers of the Cely family, who were prominent in the export of wool to the Low Countries in the 1470s and 1480s.[16] By the eighteenth century commercial records

become really plentiful, and they are an essential source for historians of the Industrial Revolution. For example, the papers of the Stockport textile manufacturer Samuel Oldknow were discovered quite by chance in a disused mill in 1921; covering the period 1782–1812, they provide vivid documentation for the transition from the domestic to the factory system of production.[17] Many companies today have cash-books, inventories and ledgers dating back to the same period or earlier; the historian of England's brewing industry recalls:

> The family continuity in the industry has been such that in most cases I found myself working on the letters and the accounts of the ancestors of the present owners and managers of the concerns, reading their records on the same site where they had brewed in the eighteenth century.[18]

The records he examined included those of such well-known names as Whitbread, Charrington and Truman.

IV

Private papers

As a general rule, those activities which leave most evidence behind are *organized* activities, and especially those controlled by bodies that have a life-span beyond the careers of the individuals who happen to staff them at any one time – whether they be governments, religious bodies or businesses. For the greater part of recorded history, literate people have probably done most of their writing in the course of their professional or official duties. Nevertheless, there survives a vast mass of written material that has been set down by men and women as private individuals, outside the office or the counting house. Much the largest proportion is accounted for by private correspondence, and from the seventeenth century this becomes available in considerable quantities. For example, the Verneys were Buckinghamshire gentry who wrote copiously and were careful to preserve their correspondence. For the period between the 1630s and the mid-eighteenth century more than 30,000 letters survive. Through such letters, says Susan Whyman,

> We can see how individuals coped in a society based upon lineage, custom and manners. We can uncover a family's social code, and note whether they accepted or evaded its norms … We can see how people brought stability to their lives by constructing networks, maintaining friendships, and communicating with absent loved ones. Through letters we can watch how people dealt with anxiety, illness, and isolation.[19]

Nor should it be supposed that the gentry had a monopoly on letter-writing. Working-class people wrote fewer letters and preserved fewer still. But the letters of far-flung family members were sometimes kept, and they survive in considerable numbers from the nineteenth century. Irish emigrants to Australia treasured letters from home as 'oceans of consolation'; David Fitzpatrick has reconstituted the narratives of fourteen such families, drawing on a total of 111 surviving letters.[20] Such material gives a human face to a story more often presented in dry statistics.

There are no other sources that bring to life so clearly the family and social relationships of people in the past. Without private correspondence the biographer must be content with the public or business life – which indeed is all that medieval biographies can usually attain. One of the main reasons why it is possible to give a relatively full account of the private lives of the Victorians is that an efficient and frequent postal service enabled them to conduct a voluminous correspondence: an upper-class woman whose marriage took her away from her own family might write more than 400 letters in a single year.[21] This pattern remained common until the spread of the telephone after the First World War. But private letters are an essential source for historians of politics as well. This is because government records are more concerned with decisions and their implementation than with the motives of the people who made them. The private correspondence of public figures reveals much that is scarcely hinted at in the official record. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the great age of personal correspondence, when close colleagues in public life wrote to each other daily. Much of this correspondence by-passed official channels and was intended to be seen by none but the recipient. Some politicians confided to a remarkable degree in friends who were without any formal position in politics at all. For three of the years (1912–15) during which he was Prime Minister, **H.H. Asquith** wrote once or twice a day to a young lady called Venetia Stanley. In these letters he could frankly express all his political anxieties and frustrations (as well as many more trivial reflections), confident that his remarks would go no further. Here, in a letter of March 1915,

H.H. Asquith (1858–1928)
Liberal Prime Minister before and during the First World War, 1908–16.

is his assessment of Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty:

> As you know, like you, I am really fond of him; but I regard his future with many misgivings ... He will never get to the top in English politics, with all his wonderful gifts; to speak with the tongue of men & angels, and to spend laborious days & nights in administration, is no good, if a man does not inspire trust.[22]

Diaries

Private letters are associated with another source that is in some ways even more revealing of personality and opinion – the diary. Diary-keeping began in the sixteenth century and soon became a common literary accomplishment among the educated, especially in England, which in **John Evelyn** and **Samuel Pepys** produced two of the greatest masters of the art. Unlike chroniclers or annalists, diarists are as much preoccupied with their own subjective response as with the external events that they have witnessed. The considerations that induce someone to devote several hours each week to keeping up a diary are anything but frivolous. For creative writers the diary satisfies the compulsion to observe and reflect, free of the constraints imposed by the formal requirements of the novel, poem or play. Of politicians it is sometimes assumed that a diary serves as little more than an *aide-mémoire* to be drawn on when the time comes to compose an autobiography. But for most political diarists this is a secondary consideration compared with the release from the intense pressures of life in the public eye that a diary affords. The diary that **Gladstone** kept from 1825 to 1896 has almost the character of a confessional: the record of daily engagements and political commentaries is broken up by long passages of painful self-analysis, an unremitting quest for purity of soul.[23] No historian who has not read the diary can hope to understand the personality of this giant among Victorian statesmen. In the case of the Labour politician, **Hugh Dalton**, diary-writing seems to have filled a psychological need directly related to his political performance. As Ben Pimlott explains, the diary, which spans the years 1916 to 1960, acted both as a 'soundingboard for ideas' and as a safety-valve for Dalton's 'very strong instinct towards political self-destructiveness', being fullest for those times when he was consumed by feelings of resentment or irritation against his closest political associates.[24]

John Evelyn (1620–1706)
Although active in politics after the Restoration, Evelyn is best known for his diary.

Samuel Pepys (1633–1703)
As well as keeping his celebrated diary, which includes an account of the Fire of London, Pepys was also, as Secretary to the Admiralty, a central figure in the development of British naval power.

Gladstone 1809–98)
William Ewart Gladstone was a towering figure in Victorian politics, serving as Prime Minister four times. His diary is a detailed account of his daily engagements, including, obscured behind a special code, his sexual practices.

For the historian of twentieth-century politics, letters and diaries are of particular significance, despite the almost limitless volume of official records. In the course of the last two generations ministers and civil servants have tended to become more discreet in their official correspondence. During the nineteenth century such correspondence was occasionally published by authority, for example in the **Blue Books** laid by British ministers before Parliament; but this was usually done almost immediately, for pressing propaganda reasons, and the published dispatches had in some cases been composed with that express purpose. In the 1920s, however, the select publication of official records grew out of all proportion, as governments strove to excuse themselves, and blame others, for responsibility for the First World War, often with scant regard for the reputation of individual officials twenty or thirty years earlier. Ministers and civil servants, especially those concerned with foreign policy, became much more inhibited in their official correspondence; what they wrote to each other privately, or recorded in their diaries, therefore gains in interest. Moreover, much that politicians *do* say in the course of their ministerial duties does not find its way into the official record. The civil servants who compile Cabinet minutes, for example, are primarily concerned with the decisions reached; the heated political arguments, which are what interest the historian most about Cabinet meetings, go largely unrecorded. **Richard Crossman**, who served as a Cabinet minister under Harold Wilson from 1964 to 1970, kept a weekly diary which was intended, as he put it, to do something towards 'lighting up the secret places of British politics', among which the Cabinet featured prominently.[25] Crossman's diary is unusual in that, almost from the outset, he envisaged its publication within a few years; his work bears comparison with 'memoirs' in the sense understood by great eighteenth century memoirists such as Saint-Simon or Hervey. By contrast, the vast majority of the diaries and letters available to the historian were written without thought of a wider readership. Of all sources they are the most spontaneous and unvarnished, revealing both the calculated stratagems and the unconscious assumptions of public figures.

Hugh Dalton (1887–1962)
Labour politician. As Chancellor of the Exchequer in Clement Attlee's 1945 government, Dalton played a central role in the postwar nationalization of heavy industry.

Blue Books
Reports of Victorian parliamentary committees and commissions were published – often selling surprisingly well – and were known as Blue Books after the colour of their covers.

Richard Crossman (1907–74)
Labour politician. Under Harold Wilson he was Minister of Housing and the first ever Secretary of State for Health and Social Security. The posthumous publication of his diaries in 1975–9 created something of a sensation because of their revelations about the in-fighting and internal politics at the heart of Wilson's government.

V

Why do sources survive?

From this discussion about the different categories of source material it will be apparent that a variety of factors have contributed to the survival of so much documentation from the past. Private letters and diaries have owed their survival to the writer's desire for posthumous fame, or the family piety of the heirs, or perhaps their inertia in leaving trunks and drawers undisturbed. In the case of public records the reasons are more straightforward and more compelling: they arise from the central role of written precedent in law and administration since the High Middle Ages. To put it bluntly, governments needed an accurate record of what was due to them in taxes, dues and services, while the king's subjects cherished evidence of privileges and exemptions that had been granted to them in the past. As the royal bureaucracy grew bigger and more unwieldy, it became increasingly necessary for officials to have a record of what their predecessors had done. As the practice of diplomacy became more formalized from the fifteenth century onwards, ministers could review the earlier relations of their governments with foreign powers and be briefed on their obligations and entitlements under foreign treaties. What was true of governments applied ***mutatis mutandis*** to other corporate bodies such as the Church, or the great trading companies and financial houses. The only way in which institutions with this sort of permanence could have a 'memory' was if a careful record of their transactions was preserved.

mutatis mutandis
(Latin) 'Those things needing to be changed having been changed'; in other words, when due allowance has been made for differences.

But practical motives are not everything. Written documents are also fragile, and the fact that they have weathered the hazards of fire, flood and sheer neglect in such profusion also requires explanation. Continuity of government and of basic law and order are vital. Throughout most of Europe the fabric of literate civilization has endured without a break since the early Middle Ages. Within Europe the distribution of the surviving documentation is largely explained by the incidence of warfare and revolutionary upheaval. It is because England has had little of either that English medieval public records are so plentiful. Last but not least, the growth of historical consciousness itself has had important consequences in minimizing the destruction of documents once they have ceased to be of practical use. Here the Renaissance was the turning point. Curiosity about classical antiquity bred an antiquarian mentality which valued the relics of the past for their own sake – hence the beginning of both archaeology and the systematic conservation of manuscripts and books. It is the combination of these factors that accounts for the uniquely rich documentation for the history of Western society and distinguishes it from the other great literate cultures of China, India and the Muslim world, where the survival of written sources has been much more patchy.

Conservation and publication

Only relatively recently, however, has it become a reasonably simple matter to locate the sources and secure access to them. Without the coming of age of historical studies in the mid-nineteenth century and the growing political awareness of the need to preserve the raw materials of a national past, historians today would face a much more daunting prospect. Their task is easiest in the case of published sources. In England there is a good chance that the researcher, assisted by bibliographies and catalogues, will find what he or she wants in one of the great **'copyright' libraries**, which by Act of Parliament are entitled to a free copy of every book and pamphlet published in the United Kingdom; the most complete is the British Library (until 1973 the British Museum), whose entitlement dates back to 1757 and has been rigorously enforced since the 1840s. Today more and more historic publications are appearing on the Internet, where they can be accessed much more easily and searched for specific data. A fine example is the *Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, covering the period 1674 to 1913, and featuring nearly 200,000 criminal trials, in many cases in great detail: the editors of the website are almost certainly correct in describing it as 'the largest body of texts detailing the lives of non-elite people ever published'.[26]

copyright libraries
Other copyright libraries, in addition to the British Library, are Cambridge University Library, the Bodleian Library, Oxford, the National Libraries of Wales and Scotland, and the Library of Trinity College, Dublin.

But what of the unpublished sources? The conservation of public and private documents, many of them written with no thought for the requirements of storage and reference, presents a considerable challenge. In some cases the problems have been partially solved by publication. An immense effort was devoted to this task during the nineteenth century, when the historical value of records gained common acceptance for the first time. The pattern was set by the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* series, which began publication with government support in 1826 under the direction of the best historians of the day; by the 1860s most

of the raw materials for medieval German history were in print.[27] Other countries quickly followed suit, including Britain, where the equivalent Rolls Series began to appear in 1858. The original promoters of these projects intended to publish *all* the extant primary sources. Even for the medieval period this was an ambitious goal; for later, more lavishly documented periods it was an obvious impossibility. In the late nineteenth century, therefore, attention was increasingly switched to the publication of 'calendars', or full summaries of the records. Calendars are an immense help to the researcher, but only because they indicate which documents are relevant to his or her purpose; they are no substitute for perusal of the documents in full. Here too the Internet has an increasingly vital role to play. Although it is hard to imagine a time when all archives will be accessed in this way, whole collections have been put online, thus raising their profile with researchers. In Britain the original enumerators' books for the census of 1901 and 1911 are available online; though primarily exploited by people tracing their ancestors, they also provide raw material for a wide range of social history applications.[28]

Archives

In most countries the historian's task is greatly eased by an elaborate archive service. But this is a relatively recent development, and the survival of documents from the remote past has often owed more to luck than good management. Many archival collections have perished by accident: the Whitehall fire of 1619 destroyed many of the Privy Council papers, and the fire that swept the Palace of Westminster in 1834 took with it most of the records belonging to the House of Commons. Other holdings have been deliberately destroyed for political reasons: a prominent feature of the agrarian revolts which broke out in the French countryside in July 1789 was the burning of manorial archives that authorized the exaction of heavy dues from the peasantry.[29] In Africa during the 1960s departing colonial officials sometimes destroyed their files for fear that sensitive material would fall into the hands of their African successors.

In England, as elsewhere in Europe, the conservation of archives by the state dates back to the twelfth century. But until the nineteenth century each department of government retained its own archives. They were housed all over London in a variety of



When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, many villagers took the opportunity to attack the châteaux of their local landowners and destroy all documents recording the feudal taxes and services they owed. Many other documents went up in smoke at the same time, a major blow to future historians of French history.
(Mary Evans Picture Library)

buildings, many of them highly unsuitable. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Chancery records in the Tower were kept above the Ordnance Board's gunpowder stores,[30] while other repositories were exposed to the ravages of damp and rodents. These conditions not only frustrated private litigants (and the occasional historian) wishing to track down precedents but were also an embarrassment to the government itself: it was not unknown for the original of an important treaty to elude the most diligent search.[31] The mid-nineteenth century was a period of reform in this as in so many other spheres of administration. The Public Record Office was set up by Act of Parliament in

1838, and within twenty years it had gained custody of all the main classes of government record (it was renamed the National Archives in 2003). Without that reorganization the immense progress made in the study of English medieval history – the greatest achievement of British historians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – would scarcely have been possible. Today the National Archives in Britain is the largest archive in the world (with over 100 miles of shelving) and offers probably the most up-to-date facilities to be found anywhere. In the course of the nineteenth century the archives of most other European countries were reorganized and made available to researchers. A comparable process has taken place in the new states of Asia and Africa which won independence between the 1940s and 1970s. The consolidation of the records of colonial administration into a national archive was one of the first tasks undertaken in pursuit of a properly documented national past.

As the interests of historians have been enlarged to cover social and economic themes (see Chapter 3), the conservation and organization of local records have been increasingly taken in hand. This has been a formidable undertaking which has won scant public recognition. Under legislation passed in 1963 every county in England and Wales is required to maintain a county record office, whose job is to gather together the different categories of local record – quarter sessions, parish, borough and manorial records, etc. Many of the record offices originated in local initiatives taken before the Second World War, and they have extended their search well beyond the semi-official categories to include the records of businesses, estates and associations. Today the holdings of all the county record offices almost certainly exceed those of the National Archives. Local and regional studies have become a practicable proposition for professional historians for the first time.

Restrictions on access

Nowhere, however, have historians been granted complete freedom of access to public records. If historians were allowed to inspect files as soon as they had ceased to be in current use, they would be reading material that was only a few years old. All governments, whatever their political complexion, depend on a measure of confidentiality, and they tend to interpret this requirement very

rigorously. Civil servants expect to be reasonably secure in the knowledge that what they set down officially shall not be publicly discussed in the foreseeable future. In Britain the 'closed period' laid down for public records varied considerably according to the department of origin until it was standardized at fifty years in 1958. Nine years later, after a vigorous campaign by historians, this period was reduced to thirty years. France followed suit in 1970, but in some countries, for example Italy, fifty years is still the rule. Everywhere governments do not hesitate to withhold indefinitely documents that relate to particularly sensitive episodes – for example the **Irish crisis of 1916–22** and the **abdication** of 1936 in Britain, and in France several issues that arose during the **decline of the Third Republic in the late 1930s**. In the United States the Freedom of Information Act of 1975 allows both historians and the general public much wider access, but elsewhere the reduction of the closed period to thirty years is probably as far as the liberalization of access to public records is likely to go. Clearly this has major implications for the study of contemporary history, where historians are forced to rely much more than they would like on what was made public at the time, or what has been disclosed retrospectively in memoirs and diaries.

Yet, however galling these restrictions may seem, in Britain government archives are at least centralized and accessible. The same broadly applies to local public records. The case is entirely different with records in private hands. These are widely dispersed and subject to varying – and sometimes perverse – conditions of access; and while governments have usually acknowledged the need for some kind of archive conservation, however rudimentary, family and business records, which may serve no practical function, have often been completely neglected. Nor can the historian whose interest is confined to official documents afford to ignore these private collections. Until the Cabinet Secretariat laid down firm guidelines after 1916, it was common for retiring ministers and officials to keep official papers in their possession; from the sixteenth century onwards, a steady flow of State Papers passed out of public custody in this way,[32] and to this day most of the State Papers dating from **Robert Cecil**'s tenure of office (1596–1612) are at Hatfield House.

In most European countries one of the functions of the national libraries that were set up during the nineteenth century has been to secure possession of the most valuable private manuscript

Irish crisis of 1916–22
The Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 against British rule in Ireland triggered a long period of guerrilla warfare between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the British security forces, which culminated in the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922.

abdication
The accession of King Edward VIII in 1936 proved problematic because of objections to his proposed marriage to Mrs Wallis Simpson, an American woman soon to divorce her second husband. Rather than give up Mrs Simpson, the king decided to abdicate in favour of his brother the Duke of York, who thus became King George VI.

decline of Third Republic in 1930s
In the 1930s France went through a period of internal conflict, strikes and political crisis that at times seemed to mirror contemporary Spain's descent into civil war. The divisions in French society came into the open when the country fell to the Germans in May 1940.

Robert Cecil (1563–1612)
Son of Queen Elizabeth I's minister, Sir William Cecil, Robert Cecil served as Secretary of State under both Elizabeth and James I. Hatfield House is the Cecil family home.

collections. Britain's national library dates back to the foundation of the British Museum in 1753. Of its foundation manuscript collections, the most important from the historian's point of view is that of Sir Robert Cotton, the early seventeenth-century collector and antiquarian; this numbered among its treasures a great many State Papers, one version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and two of the four surviving 'exemplifications' of Magna Carta (i.e. copies made at the time of the agreement between King John and the barons in 1215). Purchases and bequests since then have made the British Library far and away the largest repository of historical manuscripts in Britain outside the National Archives. Even so, the number of important documents held elsewhere is incalculable. Many private collections have been given or loaned indefinitely to public libraries, or to the county record offices. But many more remain in the hands of private individuals, companies and associations. For over a hundred years the Historical Manuscripts Commission has promoted the care of manuscripts privately held in Britain and located their whereabouts, but there is still scope for the historian with a nose for detective work. Several of the collections of private papers on which Namier relied for his studies in eighteenth-century English politics were discovered during what he called his 'cross-country paper-chases'.[33]

Unearthing source material

The position is worst in the case of the personal and ephemeral materials in the hands of ordinary people – the account books of small businesses, the minute books of local clubs, everyday personal correspondence and the like. Neither the local record offices nor the Historical Manuscripts Commission cast their net as widely as this, yet the recovery of everyday documentation is important if historians are ever to make good their oft-stated aspiration to treat the masses and not just their masters. This is a task for historians with a local focus everywhere, and exciting finds are sometime made by apprentice researchers. Since people are usually unaware that they hold material that might be historically significant, historians cannot wait for documents to be brought forward; they need to engage in propaganda and go out in search of them.

It might be supposed that a clear division of labour exists between archivists and historians, with the former locating the materials and the latter putting them to use. These examples show that historians cannot in practice leave the task of tracking down documentation to others. The first step in any programme of historical research, then, is to establish the full extent of the sources. Considerable perseverance and ingenuity may be required even at this early stage.

Roman historians

Roman history poses a problem for the historian because we are so heavily dependent on the accounts of Roman historians about whose sources we know very little. Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE) wrote detailed accounts of his campaigns in Gaul and against his political rival Pompey which are generally regarded as valuable but heavily one-sided. Cornelius Tacitus (AD 55–120) seems to have used his access to senatorial records to write his histories of the early years of the empire. Tacitus took a gloomy view of the growth of imperial power, but without access to his own sources we have no yardstick against which to check his version of events. Gaius Suetonius (AD 69–140) wrote a series of short sketches of the first twelve Roman Emperors which became the model for biographical writing, but his habit of recording accurate detail alongside gossip and hearsay, without any attempt to distinguish between the two, makes him a particularly problematic source.

Satire as a source

Satire is a potent but difficult source for historians. It dates very quickly and is often full of allusions and references to people and events that have sunk into obscurity. Its reliance on irony, in which writers say the opposite of what they mean, can mislead the unwary student. It is also easy to fall into the trap of assuming wrongly that the satirists' views were universally held. There was a thriving market in eighteenth-century England for satirical journals, like *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. Jonathan Swift's famous *Gulliver's Travels* was originally a scathing satire on Whig politics and society, though it has survived as a fantasy tale for children in a way Swift could never have anticipated.

'Namierism'

Sir Lewis Namier (1888–1960) was a historian of eighteenth-century politics who developed a new approach to political

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history through exhaustive documentary study. His 1929 work *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* was based upon the accumulation of biographical details of every single MP and member of the House of Lords in 1760. This comprehensive approach to the study of institutions is properly known as *prosopography*. He adopted a similarly exhaustive approach to his study of the Duke of Newcastle (Prime Minister 1754–6 and 1757–62), whom he once said he felt he knew better than he knew his own wife. Namier's work led to the setting up of the multi-volume *History of Parliament*, which contains detailed studies of individual MPs and constituencies.

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