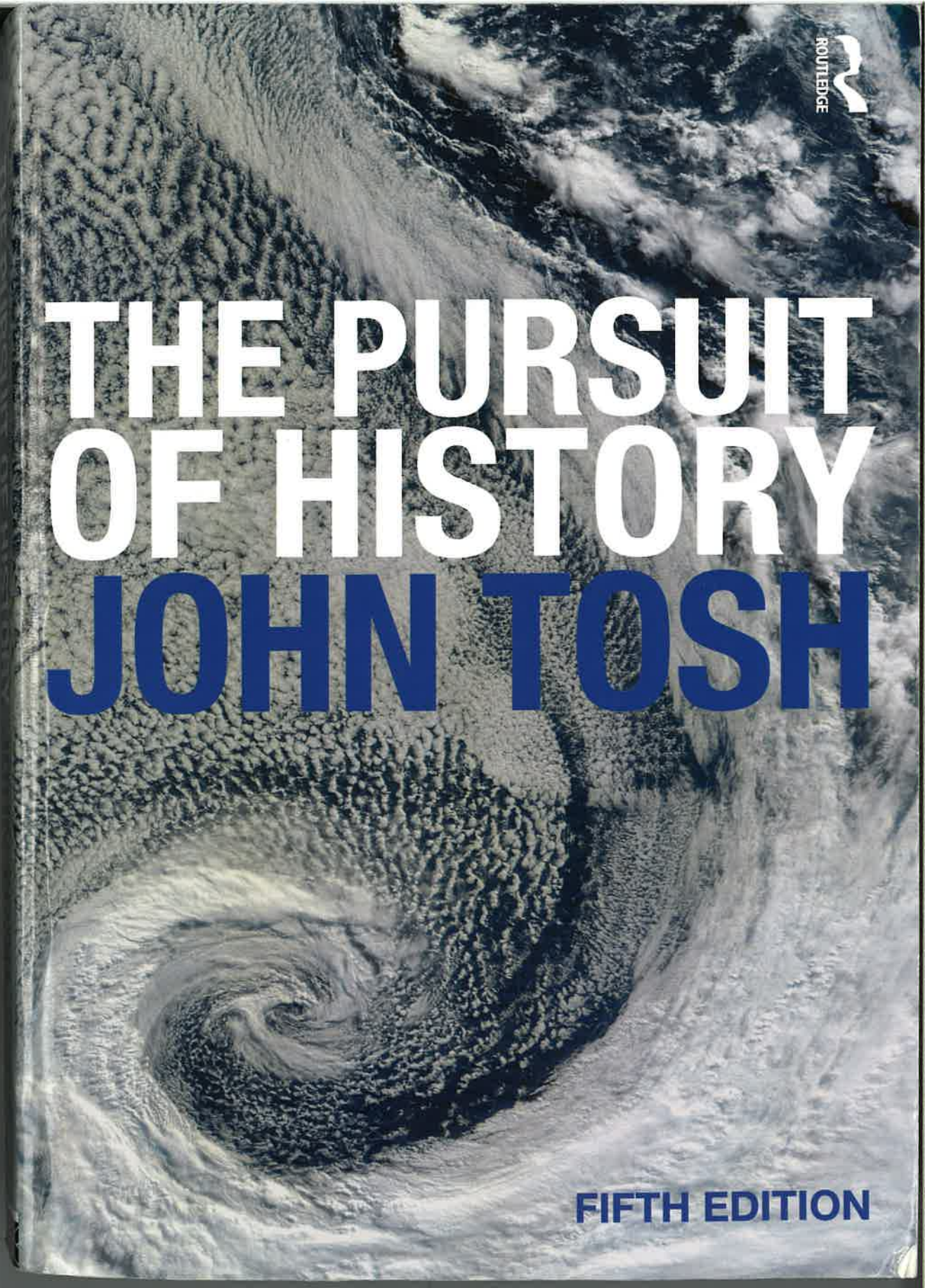

ROUTLEDGE
THE PURSUIT OF HISTORY
JOHN TOSH
FIFTH EDITION

CHAPTER THREE

Mapping the field

Much of the history students encounter is concerned with political events, but that is far from the limit of the historian's interest or concerns. Historians have greatly widened the range of their studies since the heyday of Victorian constitutional history. Today no aspect of human thought and activity is excluded from the scope of historical study. Economy, society, mentality and culture all have their place in the curriculum. This chapter describes and classifies this richness.

Whether history is studied for practical purposes or on account of its intrinsic value as a cultural resource, it is almost impossible to set limits on its scope. The implications are truly formidable if history is defined as the study of the entire past of humankind; they are only marginally less so if we limit this definition to the periods and places for which there is a written record. All history has some claim on our attention, but making sense of history demands that we categorize the very wide range of approaches that can be taken in studying the past. Nearly all historians accept a defining label; even those who call themselves world historians or global historians are not claiming omniscience, but are foregrounding one perspective at the expense of a great many others. Several labelling schemes are in use. Historians have for a long time identified themselves by the period they study, as for example, 'medievalists', '**early modernists**' or 'contemporary historians', and in practice the period for which they have an acknowledged expertise is likely to be limited still further – to a century perhaps in the case of a medievalist, and often no more than a decade in the case of a specialist in the nineteenth

early modern
Usually taken to mean the period from the Renaissance to the French and Industrial Revolutions, equating roughly to the Tudor, Stuart and Hanoverian periods in English history.

or twentieth centuries. Then there is specialization by locality. Particular periods are generally studied in relation to one country or region only. The specialist in the English Revolution of the seventeenth century, for example, would naturally be interested in those countries of Western Europe which, like France and the Netherlands, experienced their own political crises at the same time, but his or her knowledge of them would probably not be founded on anything more than a reading of the secondary literature – and regrettably in many cases only the literature in English and one other European language. Those historians with first-hand research experience in more than one country or period are a small minority (see below, pp. 160).

In addition to the specialization of time and place, there is also the specialization of theme. Whereas modern historical scholarship achieves a more or less steady output for all the periods and countries that are reasonably well documented, its choice of theme is much more subject to changing fashion. The claims of social relevance, the development of new techniques of research, and the theoretical insights of other disciplines all influence historians in determining which aspects of the past should enjoy research priority. For these reasons, choice of theme gives a much clearer indication of the actual content of historical enquiry than does choice of period or country. It is also much the best way of conveying the richness of contemporary scholarship, since the range of historical themes has greatly expanded over the past fifty years. I begin with what might be regarded as the senior branch of historical study, though it is no longer the dominant one.

I

Political history

Political history is conventionally defined as the study of all those aspects of the past that have to do with the formal organization of power in society, which for the majority of human societies in recorded history means the state. It includes the institutional organization of the state, the competition of factions and parties for control over the state, the policies enforced by the state, and the relations between states. To many people, the scope of history would appear to be exhausted by these topics, mainly because that was what they had studied in school. In recent years both the

National Curriculum and television programmes have reflected a broader range of interest. But political history has not lost its appeal, and it capitalizes on its central place in historical scholarship since ancient times.

The reasons for this traditional dominance are clear enough. Historically the state itself has been much more directly involved in the writing of history than with any other literary activity. On the one hand, those who exercised political power looked to the past for guidance as to how best to achieve their ends. At the same time, political elites had an interest in promoting for public consumption a version of history that legitimized their own position in the body politic, either by emphasizing their past achievements, or by demonstrating the antiquity of the constitution under which they held office. Moreover, political history has always found an avid **lay readership**. The rise and fall of statesmen and of nations or empires lends itself to dramatic treatment in the grand manner. Political power is intoxicating, and for those who cannot exercise it themselves, the next best thing is to enjoy it vicariously in the pages of a gifted writer. The consequences of pandering to this popular preference have long been deplored. **Arthur Young**, the English agronomist famous for his descriptions of the French countryside on the eve of the Revolution, was blunt:

> To a mind that has the least turn after philosophical inquiry, reading modern history is generally the most tormenting employment that a man can have: one is plagued with the actions of a detestable set of men called conquerors, heroes, and great generals; and we wade through pages loaded with military details; but when you want to know the progress of agriculture, or commerce, and industry, their effect in different ages and nations on each other ... all is a blank.[1]

lay readership
Readers outside the academic historical profession.

Arthur Young (1741–1820)
English writer and agriculturalist, and author of detailed accounts of tours through the agricultural areas of England, Ireland and France. He visited France each year between 1787 and 1790, and his accounts therefore provide historians with an invaluable account, from an intelligent and informed outside observer, of the state of French rural society on the eve of the Revolution.

Voltaire (1694–1778)
François Marie Arouet de Voltaire, one of the most celebrated writers of the French eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Voltaire was best known for his witty satires on contemporary manners and ideas, but he also wrote historical works, including studies of Louis XIV and of the Swedish King Charles XII, and a treatise on Newtonian physics.

faction
A political grouping, usually held together by patronage or personal, rather than party, loyalty.

Political history in turbulent times

In fact, during the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, a 'philosophical' turn of mind was rather more evident than Young allowed for. **Voltaire**'s historical works ranged over the whole field of culture and society, and even Gibbon did not confine himself to the dynastic and military fortunes of the Roman Empire. But the nineteenth-century revolution in historical studies greatly reinforced the traditional preoccupation with statecraft, **faction** and war. German historicism was closely associated with a school of political thought, best represented by Hegel, which endowed the concept of the state with a moral and spiritual force beyond the material interests of its subjects; it followed that the state was the main agent of historical change. Equally, the nationalism that inspired so much historical writing at this time led to an emphasis on the competition between the great powers and the struggles of submerged nationalities for political self-determination. Few historians would have quarrelled with Ranke when he wrote, 'the spirit of modern times ... operates only by political means'.[2] The Victorian historian, E.A. Freeman, put it more simply: 'History is past politics'.[3] The new university professors in the Rankean mould were essentially political historians.

What should political history be about?

Yet, as the definition given earlier would suggest, political history can mean different things, and its content has been almost as varied and as subject to fashion as any other branch of history. Ranke himself was chiefly interested in how the great powers of Europe had acquired their strongly individual characters during the period between the Renaissance and the French Revolution. He looked for explanations less to the internal evolution of those states than to the unending struggle for power between them. One of Ranke's legacies, therefore, was a highly professional approach to the study of foreign policy. *Diplomatic history* has been a staple pursuit of the profession ever since, its appeal periodically reinforced as historians have responded to a public demand to understand the origins of the latest war. In the aftermath of the First World War especially, much of this work verged on nationalist propaganda and it was too heavily dependent on the archives of a single country. At times, diplomatic history has been reduced to scarcely more than a record of what one diplomat or foreign minister said to another, with little awareness of the wider influences that so often shape foreign policy – financial and military **factors**, the influence of public opinion, and so on. Nowadays the best diplomatic history deals with international relations in the most comprehensive sense, rather than the diplomacy of a particular nation. In her book *Peacemakers* (2001) Margaret Macmillan provides a masterly account of the six months of negotiation that led up to the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Her account revolves around the intense negotiations between the three key players: Woodrow Wilson of the United States, Clemenceau



The 'Big Four' at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919: seated left to right: Orlando (Italy), Lloyd George (Britain), Clemenceau (France) and Woodrow Wilson (United States). Most of the business of the conference was settled in meetings between them. They were subject to incessant lobbying by the many other powers represented at the conference. (Getty Images/Time & Life Pictures)

of France, and Lloyd George of Britain. But Macmillan shows how their decisions were conditioned not only by the disposition of forces at the end of the war, but by the strength of popular feeling in their respective countries.

Many of Ranke's contemporaries and followers emphasized instead the internal evolution of the European nation-states, and *constitutional history* was largely their creation. This emphasis was most pronounced in Britain, where history became an academically respectable subject during the 1860s and 1870s almost entirely on the strength of constitutional history. Its central theme was of course the evolution of Parliament, considered by the Victorians to be England's most priceless contribution to civilization, and thus the appropriate focus for a national history. England's constitutional history was seen as a sequence of momentous conflicts of principle, alternating with periods of gradual change, stretching back to the early Middle Ages; it was enshrined in a succession of great state documents (Magna Carta and the like) which required disciplined textual study. For fifty years after the publication of Stubbs's three-volume *Constitutional History of England* (1873–8), constitutional history carried the greatest academic prestige in Britain, and major

revisionist work continues to be done to this day. In the hands of Stubbs's followers – most of them medievalists, as he was – the subject was diversified to encompass two closely related specialisms: the history of law and administrative history. Legal history attracts relatively little interest today, but administrative history shows every sign of enjoying a new lease of life as historians seek to interpret the massive increase in the functions and personnel of government that has taken place in all Western societies during the last century.

The fine grain of politics

It would be very misleading, however, to suggest that the practice of political history remains wedded to the categories marked out in the nineteenth century. In Britain especially, reaction against the traditional forms of political history has turned on the contention that none of them directly confronts what ought to be a central issue in any study of politics, namely the acquisition and exercise of political power and the day-to-day management of political systems. From this perspective, the Stubbs tradition, with its emphasis on constitutional principles and the formal institutions of government, seems unhelpful.

The most influential spokesman for this reaction was L.B. Namier, whose writings on eighteenth-century England marked something of a turning point. What interested Namier was not primarily the great political issues of the time or the careers of the leading statesmen, but the composition and recruitment of the political elite as revealed by the personal case-histories of ordinary MPs. In *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (1929) and later works Namier asked why men sought a seat in the Commons, how they obtained one, and what considerations guided their political conduct in the House. He cut through the ideological pretensions with which politicians clothed their behaviour (aided and abetted by later historians), and neither their motives nor their methods emerged with much credit. As a result, most of the accepted picture of eighteenth-century English politics was demolished – the two-party system, the packing of the Commons with government placemen, and the assault on the constitution by the young George III. Namier's method was quickly taken up by historians working on other periods, and towards the end of his life he enshrined it in the officially sponsored *History*

of Parliament, which will eventually comprise biographies of everyone who sat in the House of Commons between 1485 and 1901: twenty-eight volumes have so far been published.[4]

Such an approach, in which the analysis of motive and manoeuvre is allowed full play, makes for a fascinating study in the psychology of political conflict. But it illuminates the surface only. As soon as it is conceded that politics is not only about personalities but also about the clash of competing economic interests and rival ideologies, then the wider society outside the rarified atmosphere of court or Parliament becomes critically important. This is self-evident in the case of periods of revolutionary change



One of the most significant ideas to come out of the French Revolution was the concept of the nation as a focus for group identity, instead of loyalty to a dynastic ruler. Nationalism was often linked to liberalism, although it was also taken up by illiberal conservatives. Nineteenth-century Europe saw a number of revolutionary nationalist risings, although Italy and Germany, the two main examples of nineteenth-century states established along nationalist lines, both owed their existence more to the manoeuvres of statesmen than they did to revolutionaries. The nation-state was at the heart of President Woodrow Wilson's policy of national self-determination at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. (Mary Evans Picture Library)

when the political system broke down as a result of changes in the structure of economy or society. In more stable political situations the dimensions of class and ideology may not be so clearly articulated, but they are present nonetheless, and any analysis of political trends beyond the short term demands that they be understood. At the very least, historians have to be aware of the social and economic background of the political elite and the role of public opinion. More than any other branch of history, political history depends for its vitality on a close involvement with its intellectual neighbours, and particularly with the fields of economic and social history.

II

History beyond the elite

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that for Ranke's generation economic and social history did not exist. By the late nineteenth century, however, Western Europe and the United States were emerging from a major economic and social transformation which historical study as then practised was manifestly incapable of explaining. Although Marx's thought has been rigorously applied to historical research in the West on a large scale only during the past fifty years (see Chapter 8), his emphasis on the historical significance of the means of production and of relations between classes had already gained wide currency among politically literate people by the early twentieth century. Moreover the effect of the rise of organized labour and the mass socialist parties was to push issues of economic and social reform more insistently on to the centre of the political stage than ever before. Developments in the early twentieth century pointed in the same general direction. For many, the First World War dealt a fatal blow to the ideal of the nation-state, whose rise had been the great theme of nineteenth-century **historiography**, while the recurrent slumps and depressions in the world economy confirmed the need for a more systematic grasp of economic history.

historiography The study of the writing of history, although the term is sometimes also used to denote the range of historians' writings on a particular theme.

Around the turn of the century the narrowly political focus of academic history came under increasing attack from historians themselves. Manifestos calling for a new and broader approach were launched in several countries – most self-consciously in the United States, where they sailed under the flag of the 'New

History'. In Britain the connection between historical study and current social issues was particularly evident in the careers of **Sidney and Beatrice Webb**, social reformers and historians of the British Labour movement; economic history featured from the start in the curriculum of the London School of Economics, which they founded in 1895.

Sidney (1859–1947) and Beatrice (1858–1943) Webb
British social historians and reformers, prominent in the 1910s and 1920s. They took a leading role in the socialist Fabian Society and in the trade union movement. Convinced of the importance of social and economic history, they published a *History of Trade Unionism* and in 1895 they helped to found the London School of Economics.

Learning from other disciplines: the *Annales* school

It was, however, in France that the implications of broadening history's scope were most fully worked out. This was the achievement of Marc Bloch, a medievalist, and Lucien Febvre, a specialist in the sixteenth century, whose followers today probably command greater international prestige in the academic world than any other school. In 1929 Bloch and Febvre founded a historical journal called *Annales d'histoire sociale et économique*, usually known simply as *Annales*.[5] In the first issue they demanded of their colleagues not just a broader approach but an awareness of what they could learn from other disciplines, especially the social sciences – economics, sociology, social psychology and geography (a particularly strong enthusiasm of the *Annales* historians). While conceding that the practitioners of these disciplines were primarily concerned with contemporary problems, Bloch and Febvre maintained that only with their help could historians become aware of the full range of significant questions that they could put to their sources. And whereas earlier reformers had called for an inter-disciplinary method, it was systematically put into practice by the *Annales* historians in a formidable corpus of publications, of which Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society* (1940) is probably the best known outside France. From this basic premise, historians of the *Annales* school have continued to broaden and refine the content and methodology of history, with the result that many of the new directions that the discipline has taken in the past fifty years owe much to their contribution. At the same time, the *Annales* school heaped considerable scorn on the traditional pursuit of political narrative – a reaction that was shared by many economic and social historians in Britain: in R.H. Tawney's words, politics was 'the squalid scaffolding of more serious matters'.[6]

It is mainly because of the initiatives taken by the *Annales* historians and their contemporaries that the range of history writing is today so vast. The vitality of economic, social and cultural history is testimony to those efforts. Meanwhile new specialisms continue to be added, like global history, environmental history, the history of the body and the history of the book, and nothing seems to be abandoned. An inventory of what historians do can easily read like a dizzying catalogue in which all coherence is lost. The confusion is compounded when we recognize that work in one area may be divided by theoretical approaches, and these same theories may be found in other areas (Marxism being an obvious example). In this chapter I pursue the metaphor of 'field' by taking three different cross-sections; each is composed of paired opposites. Together they capture something of the range of historical study, and they provide a grid on which any individual historical work can be placed. The first cross-section contrasts the individual with society or the mass of the people. The second contrasts the material world with the mental or cultural aspects of experience. And the third juxtaposes the local with the global, reflecting the very different spatial frames employed by historians.

III

Biography

The common factor behind the new histories that came to the fore during the twentieth century was that they were about 'society'. The traditional conventions of academic history stood condemned for their concern with small elites and with individuals – the makers of foreign policy, the statesmen who promoted or resisted constitutional change, and the leaders of revolutionary movements. Yet such figures continued to attract both academic study and a popular readership. This human curiosity has been indulged by historians in the form of *biography* for as long as history has been written. It has, however, often been overlaid by intentions that are inconsistent with a strict regard for historical truth. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance many biographies were frankly **didactic**, designed to present the subject as a model of Christian conduct or public virtue. In Victorian times the characteristic form of biography was commemorative: for the heirs and admirers of a public figure the most fitting memorial was a large-scale 'Life', based almost exclusively on the subject's own papers (many of them carefully preserved for this very purpose)

didactic
With an overtly educational purpose.

warts-and-all
Honest, showing the bad points as well as the good. The term comes from a portrait of Oliver Cromwell by the painter Sir Peter Lely. Cromwell, who had one or two warts on his face, told Lely he did not want a falsely flattering portrait, but wanted to be painted 'warts and all'.

Lytton Strachey (1880–1932)
British writer and member of the famous group of literary figures known from the area of London where many of them lived as the Bloomsbury group. Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) shocked many readers by taking a satirical, sarcastic approach to four revered figures from the previous century, including Florence Nightingale and General Gordon.

and so taking the subject at his or her own valuation. Figures in the more distant past were treated hardly less reverently. Honest, '**warts-and-all**' biography was practised by only a few brave spirits. The Victorian reader of biographies was therefore confronted by a gallery of worthies, whose role was to sustain a respect for the nation's political and intellectual elite.

For historians, the essential requirement in a biography is that it understands the subject in his or her historical context. It must be written by someone who is not merely well grounded in the period in question but who has examined all the major collections of papers that have a bearing on the subject's life – including those of adversaries and subordinates as well as friends and family. A historical biography is, in short, a major undertaking. Yet even biography that meets the requirements of modern scholarship is not without its critics. Many historians believe that it has no serious place in historical study. The problem of bias cannot be lightly disposed of. Although there has been a vogue for debunking biography ever since **Lytton Strachey** exposed the human frailties of his ironically named *Eminent Victorians* (1918), anyone who devotes years to the study of one individual – something that Strachey never did – can hardly escape some identification with the subject and will inevitably look at the period to some extent through that person's eyes. Furthermore, biographical narrative encourages a simplified, linear interpretation of events. Maurice Cowling, a leading specialist in modern British political history, argued that political events can only be understood by showing how members of the political establishment reacted to one another. 'For this purpose', he wrote:

> biography is almost always misleading. Its refraction is partial in relation to the [political] system. It abstracts a man whose public action should not be abstracted. It implies linear connections between one situation and the next. In fact connections were not linear. The system was a circular relationship: a shift in one element changed the position of all the others in relation to the rest.[7]

It is hard to deny that, with the best will in the world, biography nearly always entails some distortion, but there are good grounds for not dismissing it. First, Cowling's objection carries much less weight in the case of political systems where power is concentrated in one man. Ian Kershaw, author of the most substantial biography of Hitler, has recounted how reluctant he was initially to attempt the task, since in his previous work he had focused on the structure of Nazi power in German society. But he came to realize that a structural approach required 'increased reflection on the man who was the indispensable fulcrum and inspiration of what took place, Hitler himself'.[8] Second, at the other extreme, biographies of people who were in no way outstanding can sometimes, if the documentation is rich enough, illuminate an otherwise obscure aspect of the past. Linda Colley has written the life of an obscure eighteenth-century woman called Elizabeth March. Because her experiences included capture in Morocco and marriage in India, as well as visits to many far-flung ports, the narrative sheds light on a global maritime world that featured trade, migration, and slavery; the book is 'a biography that crosses boundaries'.[9]

Lastly, and perhaps most important of all, biography is indispensable to the understanding of motive and intention. There is much dispute among historians as to how prominently matters of motive – as distinct from economic and social forces – should feature in historical explanation, and they certainly receive less emphasis now than they did in the nineteenth century; but plainly the motives of individuals have *some* part to play in explaining historical events. Once this much is conceded, the relevance of biography is obvious. The actions of an individual can be fully understood only in the light of his or her emotional make-up, temperament and prejudices. Of course in even the best documented lives a great deal remains a matter of conjecture: the writings of public figures especially are often coloured by self-deception as well as deliberate calculation. But the biographer who has studied the development of his or her subject from childhood to maturity is much more likely to make the right inferences. It is for this reason that during the present century biographers have increasingly stressed the private or inner lives of their subjects as well as their public careers. From this perspective the personal development of important individuals in the past is a valid subject of historical enquiry in its own right.

IV

What is social history?

No branch of history proclaims its indifference to the individual more clearly than *social history*. That label always indicates a focus on society as a whole – even if only a small fragment has actually been investigated. In fact the full ambition of social history was not immediately apparent. There was, first, the history of social problems such as poverty, ignorance, insanity and disease. Historians focused less on the experience of people afflicted by these conditions than on the 'problem' that they posed to society as a whole; they studied the reforming efforts of private **philanthropy**, as seen in charitable institutions such as schools, orphanages and hospitals, and the increasingly effective intervention of the state in the social field from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The limitations of this genre of social history can be illustrated in the case of Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt's two-volume study, *Children in English Society* (1969, 1973); they documented in detail the achievements of organized charity and government concern over a period of four hundred years, but the recipients of all this care and attention are only occasionally heard, while children who were not in need are entirely absent from their account.

philanthropy
Charitable work.

Social history meant, second, the history of everyday life in the home, the workplace and the community. As **G.M. Trevelyan** put it, 'Social history might be defined negatively as the history of a people with the politics left out'.[10] His *English Social History* (1944), for long a standard work, took little account of economics either, and much of it reads like a catch-all for the miscellaneous topics that did not fit into his earlier (and largely political) *History of England* (1926); there is a great deal of descriptive detail, but little coherence of theme. Much of this kind of writing has an **elegiac** tone: a regret for the passing of the pre-industrial order when everyday life was on a human scale and geared to natural rhythms, and a revulsion from the anomie and ugliness of modern urban living.

G.M. Trevelyan (1876–1962)
George Macaulay Trevelyan, British historian and great-nephew of the celebrated historian Thomas Babington Macaulay. A prolific writer, he is best known for his popular *English Social History*, which reflected a wartime regret for the passing of a more stable society.

elegiac
Lyrical, poetic evocation of times past.

Labour history and history from below

Lastly, there was the history of the common people, or working classes, who were almost entirely absent from political history.

In Britain this kind of social history was from the end of the nineteenth century dominated by historians sympathetic to the labour movement. Although often passionately committed to the workers' cause, their writings were at this stage hardly affected by Marxist influence. Their main concern was to furnish the British labour movement with a collective historical identity, and they sought it not through a new theoretical framework (for which Marxism was of course well suited), but in the historical experience of the working class itself during the preceding century – the material and social deprivation, the tradition of self-help, and the struggles for improved wages and conditions of employment. For G.D.H. Cole, the leading British labour historian during the 1930s and 1940s, nothing seemed more important than that 'as the working class grows towards the full exercise of power, it should look back as well as forward, and shape its policy in the light of its own historic experience'.[11] Labour history tended to live in a world of its own, with only a limited impact on those not involved in the labour movement.

This tradition of social history was revived and expanded during the 1960s under the banner of *history from below*. But whereas labour history was characterized by a strong institutional bias, history from below concentrates on the unorganized and the marginal who have been least visible in the historical record. Seeing history from the bottom up does not just mean recreating the rhythms of everyday life. It means seeing the past from the point of view of ordinary people and identifying with their politics. Above all, history from below contests the passivity to which ordinary people have been consigned by so many historians. Popular agency and resistance are its hallmarks. An early exponent of this approach was George Rudé, who studied the urban crowd in both eighteenth-century London and revolutionary Paris; he rejected the use of the word 'mob', and instead reconstructed the motives and methods of those who took to the streets to voice their grievances. His study of the Gordon Riots of 1780, when the government lost control of the streets of London for an entire week, is a classic of its kind.[12] Rudé's agenda was broadened still further in the 1970s by the History Workshop movement. Though based at Ruskin, the trade-union-sponsored college at Oxford, History Workshop quickly extended its range from organized workers to encompass all groups in society that stood outside – or 'below' – the elites on which traditional

histories had focused. Women's history and the history of immigrant communities soon made their appearance.[13] History Workshop has been particularly notable in drawing in amateur and community historians, alongside the left-wing academics who form its core.

History and social structure

But none of the approaches mentioned so far entirely explains why social history, for so long the poor relation, now enjoys such prominence. What happened in the 1960s and 1970s was that its subject matter was redefined in a much more ambitious manner. Social history now aspires to offer nothing less than the history of social structure. The notion of 'social structure' is a sociological abstraction of a conveniently indeterminate kind, which can be – and has been – clothed in any number of theoretical garbs. But what it essentially means is the sum of the social relationships between the many different groups in society. Under the influence of Marxist thought, class has had the lion's share of attention, but it is by no means the only kind of group to be considered: there are also the cross-cutting ties of age, gender, race and occupation.

Social structure may seem to be a static, timeless concept, partly because it has been treated in this way in the writings of many sociologists. But it need not be so, and historians tend naturally to adopt a more dynamic approach. As Keith Wrightson, a leading social historian of early modern England, puts it:

> Society is a process. It is never static. Even its most apparently stable structures are the expression of an equilibrium between dynamic forces. For the social historian the most challenging of tasks is that of recapturing that process, while at the same time discerning long-term shifts in social organization, in social relations and in the meanings and evaluations with which social relationships are infused.[14]

Against the background of a durable social structure, those individuals or groups who move up or down are often particularly significant, and social mobility has been much studied by historians. Beyond a certain point, social mobility is incompatible with the maintenance of the existing structure, and a new form of society may emerge, as happened most fundamentally during the Industrial Revolution. Urbanization, in particular, needs to be studied not just in its economic aspects, but as a process of social change, including the assimilation of immigrants, the

emergence of new forms of social stratification, the hardening distinction between work and leisure, and so on; important work along these lines has been pioneered in America, and urban history is a significant specialism in Britain too.[15] The analysis of social structure and social change can have major implications for economic and political history, and social historians in recent years have staked out large claims in these areas. The long drawn out '**gentry controversy**' was mainly a dispute about the connection between changing social structure and political conflict in England during the hundred years before the Civil War.[16] The origins of the Industrial Revolution are now sought not only in economic and geographical factors, but in the social structure of eighteenth-century England – especially the 'open aristocracy', with a two-way flow of men and wealth into and out of its ranks.[17] At this point, social history begins to approximate to the 'history of society' in its broadest sense which, it has been argued, is its proper domain.[18]

Much of the earlier, less ambitious social history is relevant to this new concern, provided its terms of reference are revised. The new social historians include many who started within the more limited horizons of one or other of the established categories. **E.P. Thompson**, the best-known social historian during the 1960s and 1970s, had his roots deep in the labour history tradition, but in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) he stepped outside it; the growth of a working-class awareness during the Industrial Revolution is placed in the widest possible context, including religion, leisure and popular culture, as well as the factory system and the origins of trade unionism; and, so far from politics being 'left out', the presence of the state is both constant and menacing, as an instrument of class control.

As well as being formative in the social history of Britain, the period covered by Thompson was rich in distinguished individuals. Thompson's own last published work was a study of the visionary painter and poet, William Blake.[19] Historians do not divide neatly between students of the mass and students of the individual. Biography and social history may represent sharply divergent perspectives, but both are needed, and both feature prominently in contemporary historical practice.

gentry controversy
A long-running argument in academic circles about the development of social change in early seventeenth-century England and its bearing on the origins of the English Civil War. The argument was over whether the lesser landowning class (the gentry) was 'rising' in social and economic status at the expense of the older landed aristocracy, or whether the opposite was true. The argument raged for many years and was a staple feature of undergraduate essays; however, since it is not easy to come up with a clear-cut definition of 'gentry' and 'aristocracy', or exactly what is meant by a class 'rising', no clear conclusion was ever reached.

E.P. Thompson (1924–93)
British Marxist historian. Thompson was also active in socialist politics. His *Making of the English Working Class* was the first attempt to tell the story of the development of a distinctive working-class culture and identity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

V

Economic history

My second pairing contrasts the material and mental worlds. The one deals with the external requirements of life; the other probes the internal world of thought and emotion. Both must feature in a comprehensive recovery of the past. *Economic history* focuses on 'earthly necessities' – the title of an outstanding economic history of early modern England.[20] It seeks to reconstruct production, exchange and consumption. Such activities are for the most part a matter of external observation, and in many cases they can be measured. This approach can be contrasted with one that seeks to reconstruct mental processes, including formal thought, religious belief and emotional states. These cannot be measured or observed, and they call for a considerable degree of empathy and an ability to tease out the possible meanings of texts and images.

Economic history was the first specialism to gain recognition outside political history. By 1914 it had emerged as a sharply defined area of study in several countries, including Britain. The relevance of economic history to contemporary problems largely explains its head-start over other contenders; indeed, in many universities, especially in America, economic history was studied not as part of general history, but in conjunction with economics, a discipline whose own claims to academic respectability had only just won general recognition by the end of the nineteenth century. Both in Britain and in the rest of Europe, much of the pioneer work concerned the economic policies of the state – an approach that required the minimum adaptation on the part of historians schooled in political history. But this was clearly an inadequate base on which to come to grips with the historical phenomenon of industrialization, which from the start loomed large on the agenda of economic historians. It resulted in a special emphasis on Britain, the first country to experience an industrial revolution, and attracted continental as much as British historians. Their work was particularly strong on local studies of particular industries, such as Lancashire cotton textiles or Yorkshire woollens, and it highlighted individual initiative and technical innovation. A pale reflection of this approach is still to be seen in those old-fashioned textbooks which chronicle Britain's Industrial Revolution as a sequence of inventions made in the late eighteenth century.

The difficult interplay of economic and political history

In many ways economic history offers about the biggest contrast to political history that can be imagined. Its chronology is quite different. It often makes light of differences of political culture and national tradition, particularly in studies of the modern global economy. And it gives minimal scope to personality and motive, the classic preoccupations of historians; instead 'impersonal' forces such as inflation or investment tend to hold the centre of the stage. Furthermore, economic historians delight in undermining the bedrock assumptions of their non-specialist colleagues – most provocatively in several works that deny that Britain experienced an industrial revolution at all.[21] For all these reasons many political historians would prefer to hold economic history at arm's length. But in practice their own agenda has been influenced by the findings of economic history in very positive ways. For example, the financial predicament of Tudor governments – and the political difficulties with Parliament that this brought in its train – cannot be grasped without an understanding of the great inflation of the sixteenth century.[22] Similarly, interpretations of the origins of the Boer War, which broke out in 1899 between Britain and the gold-rich Transvaal, have been modified in the light of precise information about the vicissitudes of the international gold standard at that time.[23]

Enterprise and economic growth

Two trends stand out in current writing on modern economic history, though they do not define its entire scope. The first one is business history – the systematic study of individual firms on the basis of their business records. The source materials are usually manageable, and firms that allow access to them sometimes foot the bill for research as well. Whether or not the historian identifies with the values of capitalist entrepreneurship, what comes out best from these studies is a keener understanding of the mechanisms of economic expansion, often at a critical juncture in the history of an industry. The implications of research in business history can be wider still. How far the beginning of Britain's economic decline in the period 1870–1914 was caused by a failure of entrepreneurship is a major issue on which business historians have much to contribute.

Business history may be regarded as economic history on the ground. The second approach, by contrast, seeks to explain the dynamics of growth or decline for an entire economy. This is quite simply the biggest issue in economics today, both for professional economists and for the lay public; and since it has been present in a recognizably modern form since the onset of industrialization 200 years ago, it is hardly surprising that historians should be interested too. But in seeking to contribute to a wider debate they have been compelled to sharpen their analytical tools. The older economic histories such as J.H. Clapham's *Economic History of Modern Britain* (1926–38) were essentially descriptive: they reconstructed the economic life of a particular period, sometimes in vivid detail, but in explaining how one phase gave way to the next they showed little interest in the actual mechanisms of economic change. The current debates are very largely about those mechanisms, and they are conducted in the context of the highly sophisticated theoretical work on growth that economists have been carrying out since the 1950s. If historians are to do justice to their material in this area, they have to be much more versed in the competing theoretical explanations than they used to be; and since the testing of these theories depends on the accurate measurement of indices of growth, historians must also become quantifiers. In this field the breaking down of those inter-disciplinary barriers which the *Annales* school called for half a century ago has been more complete than in any other.

VI

Getting into the mind of the past

Economic history, with its emphasis on externally observed behaviour, can be contrasted with the study of intellectual, emotional and psychological states. It is one thing to categorize people according to their place in a given structure by indicating their occupation, status and wealth. It is quite another to enter into their assumptions and attitudes, to see them as 'sentient reflecting beings'.[24] This approach includes themes as varied as political thought, religion and mass psychology. They have never been brought together under a single label, but what they have in common is a concern with mental process. Individual and collective behaviour still count, but as a basis for making inferences about mentality or belief.

Given the political orientation of historical scholarship as it matured during the nineteenth century, it comes as no surprise that the history of political thought has the longest pedigree. The works of writers like Plato, Machiavelli and Hobbes were seen as building blocks in a single Western tradition. Today, however, scholars place much more emphasis on understanding these thinkers in their historical context – forming their ideas in response to the events unfolding around them, restricted by the cultural resources available to them. A much keener awareness is also shown of the fact that the intellectual landscape of a period is not primarily composed of the handful of great works that have inspired posterity; almost by definition, these were inaccessible to all but a few. The common wisdom of the day against which the great names were judged (and in many instances condemned) was what contemporaries had retained, often selectively and incoherently, from earlier traditions of thought. For the political historian especially, what counts is the set of ideas within which people with no claims to intellectual originality operated, and from this perspective the diffusion of new ideas through derivative and ephemeral literature is as important as their genesis in the mind of a great thinker. The intellectual context of periods of revolutionary change when ideas are often particularly potent can be properly understood in no other way. In *The Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (1967), for example, Bernard Bailyn reconstructed the political culture of ordinary Americans from 400 or so pamphlets bearing on the Anglo-American conflict which were published in the thirteen colonies between 1750 and 1776. His research revealed the influence of not only the New England Puritan tradition and the thought of the Enlightenment, which had long been taken for granted, but also the anti-authoritarian political thought of the Civil War period in England, kept alive by English radical pamphleteers of the early eighteenth century and transmitted across the Atlantic. At this point the history of ideas enters the market-place, as it were, and becomes part of the common culture of the day.

The history of religion

Comparable issues are raised by the history of religion. At one level, this is about the life and writings of great religious leaders like **Martin Luther** or **Ignatius Loyola**. There is also a strong

Martin Luther (1483–1546)
One of the most influential figures in the history of Christianity. His protest against the authority of the Pope in 1517 began the Protestant Reformation and the split in the Western Church. His ideas rapidly spread under the patronage of rulers in Germany and elsewhere.

Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556)
Founder of the Jesuit order, based on spiritual discipline and missionary work. His life and achievements symbolized the resolve of the Catholic Church to reinvigorate itself against the Protestant challenge (known as the Counter-Reformation).

tradition of studying the history of religious institutions, given the immense power of the Christian Churches throughout most of their history. But increasingly historians have turned to the study of popular religion: what did people believe, and how did their beliefs affect their lives? Conversion is a promising place to start. In *Pulling the Devil's Kingdom Down* (2001) Pamela Walker examines the Salvation Army in late Victorian Britain. At the heart of her account is the conversion experiences of early Salvationists recruited from the poorest neighbourhoods of London, based on their published biographies and on the *War Cry* (the Army's journal). At the same time, organized religion has often had to co-exist with unofficial belief systems. In *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) Keith Thomas assessed the ebb and flow of witchcraft, prophecy and astrology during the era of the Reformation and the English Revolution. 'I hope', says Thomas, 'to have contributed to our knowledge of the mental climate of early modern England.'[25]

Some works of history can be clearly allocated to either the 'material' or the 'mental' camp. An economic study based on statistics is clearly in a different category from an investigation of popular magic based on the close reading of court depositions. But it is important to stress that the material and the mental are not irreconcilable opposites. They are better regarded as compass points, around which we can take our bearings when placing a work of history. In fact some of the most illuminating work places the material and the mental on a continuum and brings them together in an integrated analysis. For example, in the case of the rise of secular thought during the nineteenth century, it is not easy to distinguish the Churches' defence of the faith from the securing of their corporate power. One of the most buoyant strands of recent economic history is the history of consumption. Modern historians see shopping as more than the satisfaction of material wants; by the late nineteenth century middle-class women in the major cities could experience shopping as romance and glamour, promoted by the new department stores: *Shopping For Pleasure*, as the title of one study aptly puts it.[26]

VII

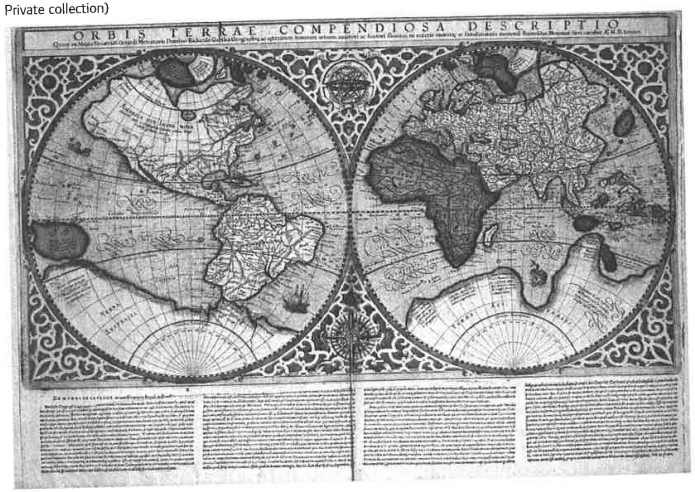
World history

Finally, historians deploy a variety of spatial perspectives, ranging from the local at one extreme to the global at the other. Once again, the two ends of the spectrum may seem to have little in common, but both are a reaction against the traditional assumption that history is about the nation-state and nothing else. Both local history and world history question the nation-state as the default framework for historical enquiry – the first on the grounds that it fails to engage with the communities in which ordinary people lived; the second because it ignores the global networks that have explained – and constrained – many aspects of the nation's development.

At first glance *world history* sounds like an impossibility. How could anyone 'know everything' about what has happened on the planet? But world history is not about piling up detail. More than any other branch of history, it depends on selection, and the principle of selection is dictated by themes and developments which have occurred in different parts of the world, and in some cases all over the world. Examples include the spread of world religions like Christianity and Islam; the diffusion of New World food crops; and the rise and fall of global commercial systems. Two important general points can be made here. First, world history breaks the identification of academic history with the history of the West; to employ a global perspective means taking seriously the history of Third World societies – recognizing indeed that prior to the late eighteenth century regions like India and China were at least as powerful and as sophisticated as their Western counterparts (see Chapter 10). Second, because world history involves juxtaposing societies and cultures that are usually studied in separate compartments, it makes considerable use of the comparative method (discussed more fully in Chapter 6). For example, to ask why Christianity expanded more rapidly than Islam in the second half of the nineteenth century (or why the balance between them was reversed in the second half of the twentieth century) requires a highly demanding comparative approach, encompassing not just the distinctive features of each faith but the society in which believers lived.

Globalization

Further precision is added to world history when its subject matter is defined as the origins of today's increasingly globalized world. Globalization refers to the processes whereby our world has become more integrated and uniform, shrinking both time and distance, and absorbing production and trade into a single international capitalist system. National histories can cast only a fitful light on this theme. *Global history* signifies an effort to make sense of our globalizing world (though it can also mean world history in a broader sense). This is all the more necessary as a topic for historians because contemporary comment often overplays the novelty of globalization, with its single market, rapid communications and homogenized culture. Like nearly everything else in the modern world, globalization has evolved over a considerable period. Critical features can be traced back to the period of British ascendancy in the nineteenth century, to the earlier maritime empires of the Dutch, the Portuguese and the Spanish, and even to the 'world economy' linking all the lands between China and Western Europe in the thirteenth century.[27] It is seldom



Mercator's map of the world, 1587. The circumnavigation of the globe enabled European map-makers to represent the world as a whole. But there were still limits to their knowledge, as the depiction here of Antarctica shows. The eighteenth century was the watershed in accurate map-making. (Bridgeman Art Library/ Private collection)

recognized that in some ways global integration is less complete now than in the past. Historians refer to the late nineteenth century as the period of 'high globalization', when the telegraph and the steamship had transformed communications, when all the major currencies were convertible at a fixed rate, and when – a significant variation from today – there was little impediment to the free movement of labour across the oceans.[28]

One of the most impressive works of global history to date is C.A. Bayly's *The Birth of the Modern World* (2004). His declared aim is to rescue history from the nation and to bring to light the multi-centred character of modernity. This means seeing the world beyond the West not as passive recipients of European expansion, but as dynamic societies which made their own adjustments to changing global conditions. Before the nineteenth century Europe was just one region, along with Japan, China, Mughal India, Persia and the Ottoman Empire, whose worldwide links Bayly calls 'archaic globalization'.[29] Europe's lead over the rest of the world became clear in the course of the nineteenth century, especially in the spheres of technology and production. But today's world is also to be explained by creative reactions in the Third World: in religion, and also (more surprisingly perhaps) in national identity and social organization. Modernity, in short, was a truly global phenomenon, requiring a global reach of scholarship such as Bayly possesses in full measure.

VIII

Local history

Like world history, *local history* has until relatively recently been disdained by the academic profession, but for different reasons. The greatest interest in a specific locality is felt by those who live there. Hence, especially in England, local history used to be dominated by local amateurs who were prepared to work at the sources without necessarily being able to recognize their wider significance. Typically they were preoccupied by the doings of the squire and the parson, to the exclusion of the rest of the population. Their publications were dismissed as being of antiquarian rather than academic interest.

The past fifty years have seen a complete reversal of this outlook. Local history in England has become a kind of in depth

microcosmic social history. During the 1950s the 'Leicester school' of historians, led by W.G. Hoskins, reinterpreted English local history as the reconstruction of historic communities. Hoskins laid special emphasis on visual evidence, such as field patterns, abandoned settlement sites and vernacular architecture. Other historians pursued every scrap of evidence in order to follow the fortunes of individual households over a century or more. Intensive study of this kind assumed a small unit with a maximum population of 2,000, in other words a village. But in the best-documented cases the outcome was a study that brought together every dimension of community life: land use, economy, social structure and religion. Hoskins was drawn to pre-industrial villages, which approximated to his nostalgic pastoralism. But the method is equally valuable as a means of investigating the human realities of social change. *The Making of an Industrial Society* by David Levine and Keith Wrightson shows how the Tyneside village of Whickham adapted to the requirements of coal-mining during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[30]

Microhistory and total history

In community studies knowing the names does not necessarily mean knowing the people: family size, occupation and church membership often do little more than enable us to categorize the inhabitants of a village. But in exceptional cases the surviving sources bring individuals to life, allowing us the illusion of a direct encounter, like in a novel. Work of this kind is usually known as *microhistory* – a term coined by the Italian scholars who pioneered it in the 1970s.[31] The most celebrated example is Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's account of life in fourteenth-century Montaillou. Drawing mainly from the records of the Inquisition, Ladurie was able to reconstruct the everyday life of the peasants of Montaillou – their social relationships, their religious and magical observances, and not just their attitudes to sex but much of their actual sex life. We are able to follow individuals through the book, notably the parish priest, Pierre Clergue, whose ready access to people's homes enabled him to engage in many extramarital liaisons. This is a 'microhistory' in the sense that it fills out in small-scale and human detail some of the social and cultural features that are otherwise known only as generalizations.[32]

Local history not only breathes life into abstractions; it can also bring together on a single canvas the varied themes that are usually treated separately by specialists. The proliferation of approaches described in this chapter presents a major problem of integration: how can we see a society in the round if historians give us only partial perspectives on economy or religion? Focusing on a single community of a few hundred people enables the researcher not only to investigate every dimension of life, but to see how they were linked together as a whole experience. The many local histories that have travelled some way along this road have acted as a powerful solvent of the rigidities to which conventional specialists working on a larger canvas are so prone. For political historians particularly, local history serves as a reminder that their subject is about not only the central institutions of the state, but also the assertion of authority over ordinary people. As W.G. Hoskins put it, 'The local historian is in a way like the old-fashioned G.P. of English medical history, now a fading memory confined to the more elderly among us, who treated Man as a whole'.[33] This has important implications for the goal of historians to integrate their specialist studies into a fully integrated picture of the past. On a grand scale it is an impossible task. But it is possible within the confines of town or village. Paradoxically, 'total history' turns out to mean local history. That explains its high academic standing today.

IX

In many ways the local historian and the global historian stand further away from each other than any of the other specialists discussed in this chapter; but even here there are illuminating links to be made. It is a mistake to suppose that the village community was ever completely isolated. Economic and cultural influences always impinged from the outside. Perhaps the most striking demonstration of the links between the local and global is Donald Wright's book, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa* (2004). The subject is the tiny West African kingdom of Niumi at the mouth of the Gambia river. Wright analyses the impact of its global links from the trans-Saharan trade of the late medieval era up to the drive for development in independent Gambia. His study demonstrates that it makes little sense for historians or anthropologists to study small communities as if they were cut off from the outside world.

Every work of history strikes some kind of balance between the individual and society, between the material and the mental, and between the local and the global. Where that balance is struck is the choice of the researcher. Academic fashion often influences the outcome since historians are keen to ride the crest of a wave, or better still to anticipate it. It is also more common today for researchers to be recruited into teams with a collective brief and research funding to match. Even so, the range of options is still extraordinarily wide, reflecting the fact that history knows no disciplinary bounds. More than ever before, the generic occupational label gives little clue as to what an individual historian actually does. The range of possibilities is sometimes experienced as overwhelming. It is also what makes the study of history such a stimulating pursuit.

Hegelian dialectic

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) was the leading German philosopher of the early nineteenth century. He argued that human events in history were determined by the operation of dialectic – the clash of opposing forces or ideas out of which emerged a synthesis, which would in its turn be challenged by an opposing antithesis. Hegel believed that this process would lead eventually to a state of harmony based upon Christian ethics and morality. Karl Marx, who was much influenced by Hegel, 'turned him on his head' by divorcing Hegel's ideas from their Christian framework and applying the dialectic model to the clash of class interests throughout history, leading ultimately to the control of economy and society by the working class.

Tudor inflation

Across sixteenth-century Europe there developed a steady and alarming rise in prices which caused considerable hardship. The reasons for the inflation were not clear to contemporaries, who blamed anything from human greed to the enclosure of common land to graze sheep. The English government of Edward VI responded by debasing the coinage in order to put more money into circulation, but this simply led people to put their prices up still higher. Historians long thought the inflation was caused by the influx of gold and silver bullion from the Americas, but nowadays it is thought to be a result of the huge rise in population during the period.

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