

Looking-Glass House

By Lewis Carroll

From *Through the Looking-Glass*, Chapter 1

One thing was certain, that the *white* kitten had had nothing to do with it:—it was the black kitten's fault entirely. For the white kitten had been having its face washed by the old cat for the last quarter of an hour (and bearing it pretty well, considering); so you see that it *couldn't* have had any hand in the mischief.

The way Dinah washed her children's faces was this: first she held the poor thing down by its ear with one paw, and then with the other paw she rubbed its face all over, the wrong way, beginning at the nose: and just now, as I said, she was hard at work on the white kitten, which was lying quite still and trying to purr—no doubt feeling that it was all meant for its good.

But the black kitten had been finished with earlier in the afternoon, and so, while Alice was sitting curled up in a corner of the great arm-chair, half talking to herself and half asleep, the kitten had been having a grand game of romps with the ball of worsted Alice had been trying to wind up, and had been rolling it up and down till it had all come undone again; and there it was, spread over the hearth-rug, all knots and tangles, with the kitten running after its own tail in the middle.

'Oh, you wicked little thing!' cried Alice, catching up the kitten, and giving it a little kiss to make it understand that it was in disgrace. 'Really, Dinah ought to have taught you better manners! You *ought*, Dinah, you know you ought!' she added, looking reproachfully at the old cat, and speaking in as cross a voice as she could manage—and then she scrambled back into the arm-chair, taking the kitten and the worsted with her, and began winding up the ball again. But she didn't get on very fast, as she was talking all the time, sometimes to the kitten, and sometimes to herself. Kitty sat very demurely on her knee, pretending to watch the progress of the winding, and now and then putting out one paw and gently touching the ball, as if it would be glad to help, if it might.

'Do you know what to-morrow is, Kitty?' Alice began. 'You'd have guessed if you'd been up in the window with me—only Dinah was making you tidy, so you couldn't. I was watching the boys getting in sticks for the bonfire—and it wants plenty of sticks, Kitty! Only it got so cold, and it snowed so, they had to leave off. Never mind, Kitty, we'll go and see the bonfire to-morrow.' Here Alice wound two or three turns of the worsted round the kitten's neck, just to see how it would look: this led to a scramble, in which the ball rolled down upon the floor, and yards and yards of it got unwound again.

'Do you know, I was so angry, Kitty,' Alice went on as soon as they were comfortably settled again, 'when I saw all the mischief you had been doing, I was very nearly opening the window, and putting you out into the snow! And you'd have deserved it, you little mischievous darling! What have you got to say for yourself? Now don't interrupt me!' she went on, holding up one finger. 'I'm going to tell you all your faults. Number one: you squeaked twice while Dinah was washing your face this morning. Now you can't deny it, Kitty: I heard you! What's that you say?' (pretending that the kitten was speaking.) 'Her paw went into your eye? Well, that's *your* fault, for keeping your eyes open—if you'd shut them tight up, it wouldn't have happened. Now don't make any more excuses, but listen! Number two: you pulled Snowdrop away by the tail just as I had put down the saucer of milk before her! What, you were thirsty, were you? How do you know she wasn't thirsty too? Now for number three: you unwound every bit of the worsted while I wasn't looking!

‘That’s three faults, Kitty, and you’ve not been punished for any of them yet. You know I’m saving up all your punishments for Wednesday week—Suppose they had saved up all *my* punishments!’ she went on, talking more to herself than the kitten. ‘What *would* they do at the end of a year? I should be sent to prison, I suppose, when the day came. Or—let me see—suppose each punishment was to be going without a dinner: then, when the miserable day came, I should have to go without fifty dinners at once! Well, I shouldn’t mind *that* much! I’d far rather go without them than eat them!’

‘Do you hear the snow against the window-panes, Kitty? How nice and soft it sounds! Just as if some one was kissing the window all over outside. I wonder if the snow *loves* the trees and fields, that it kisses them so gently? And then it covers them up snug, you know, with a white quilt; and perhaps it says, “Go to sleep, darlings, till the summer comes again.” And when they wake up in the summer, Kitty, they dress themselves all in green, and dance about—whenever the wind blows—oh, that’s very pretty!’ cried Alice, dropping the ball of worsted to clap her hands. ‘And I do so *wish* it was true! I’m sure the woods look sleepy in the autumn, when the leaves are getting brown.’

‘Kitty, can you play chess? Now, don’t smile, my dear, I’m asking it seriously. Because, when we were playing just now, you watched just as if you understood it: and when I said “Check!” you purred! Well, it *was* a nice check, Kitty, and really I might have won, if it hadn’t been for that nasty Knight, that came wiggling down among my pieces. Kitty, dear, let’s pretend—’ And here I wish I could tell you half the things Alice used to say, beginning with her favourite phrase ‘Let’s pretend.’ She had had quite a long argument with her sister only the day before—all because Alice had begun with ‘Let’s pretend we’re kings and queens;’ and her sister, who liked being very exact, had argued that they couldn’t, because there were only two of them, and Alice had been reduced at last to say, ‘Well, *you* can be one of them then, and *I’ll* be all the rest.’ And once she had really frightened her old nurse by shouting suddenly in her ear, ‘Nurse! Do let’s pretend that I’m a hungry hyaena, and you’re a bone.’

But this is taking us away from Alice’s speech to the kitten. ‘Let’s pretend that you’re the Red Queen, Kitty! Do you know, I think if you sat up and folded your arms, you’d look exactly like her. Now do try, there’s a dear!’ And Alice got the Red Queen off the table, and set it up before the kitten as a model for it to imitate: however, the thing didn’t succeed, principally, Alice said, because the kitten wouldn’t fold its arms properly. So, to punish it, she held it up to the Looking-glass, that it might see how sulky it was—‘and if you’re not good directly,’ she added, ‘I’ll put you through into Looking-glass House. How would you like *that*?’

‘Now, if you’ll only attend, Kitty, and not talk so much, I’ll tell you all my ideas about Looking-glass House. First, there’s the room you can see through the glass—that’s just the same as our drawing room, only the things go the other way. I can see all of it when I get upon a chair—all but the bit behind the fireplace. Oh! I do so wish I could see *that* bit! I want so much to know whether they’ve a fire in the winter: you never *can* tell, you know, unless our fire smokes, and then smoke comes up in that room too—but that may be only pretence, just to make it look as if they had a fire. Well then, the books are something like our books, only the words go the wrong way; I know that, because I’ve held up one of our books to the glass, and then they hold up one in the other room.’

‘How would you like to live in Looking-glass House, Kitty? I wonder if they’d give you milk in there? Perhaps Looking-glass milk isn’t good to drink—But oh, Kitty! now we come to the passage. You can just see a little *peep* of the passage in Looking-glass House, if you leave the door of our drawing-room wide open: and it’s very like our passage as far as you can see, only you know it may be quite different on beyond. Oh, Kitty! how nice it would be if we could only get through into Looking-glass House! I’m sure it’s got, oh! such beautiful things in it! Let’s pretend there’s a way of getting through into it, somehow, Kitty. Let’s pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through. Why, it’s turning into a sort of mist now, I declare! It’ll be easy enough to get through—’ She was up on the chimney-piece while she said this, though she hardly knew how she had got there. And certainly the glass *was* beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist.

In another moment Alice was through the glass, and had jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room. The very first thing she did was to look whether there was a fire in the fireplace, and she was quite pleased to find that there was a real one, blazing away as brightly as the one she had left behind. 'So I shall be as warm here as I was in the old room,' thought Alice: 'warmer, in fact, because there'll be no one here to scold me away from the fire. Oh, what fun it'll be, when they see me through the glass in here, and can't get at me!'

Then she began looking about, and noticed that what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was as different as possible. For instance, the pictures on the wall next the fire seemed to be all alive, and the very clock on the chimney-piece (you know you can only see the back of it in the Looking-glass) had got the face of a little old man, and grinned at her.

'They don't keep this room so tidy as the other,' Alice thought to herself, as she noticed several of the chessmen down in the hearth among the cinders: but in another moment, with a little 'Oh!' of surprise, she was down on her hands and knees watching them. The chessmen were walking about, two and two!

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AFTER A marked recession in the nineteenth century, "eyewitness history"—history written by persons who themselves took part in the events they record—has undergone a revival in the later twentieth century. This revival has met with a certain skepticism and resistance from professional historians. Yet it may well be related to deeper tendencies within modern society; and, since these tendencies will only intensify in the foreseeable future, we may expect eyewitness history to continue to spread among us for some time to come. For this reason the phenomenon deserves examination.

Let us begin with some distinctions. The term eyewitness history, I have suggested, covers historical accounts written by those who directly observed at least some of the events described. Such observation may take place at a high or a low level. Plainly the historian who participates in decisions at the summit will have one kind of knowledge; but it is an error, I think, to suppose that the historian who served, say, as an infantryman in the Second World War was not affected by that experience and would not write, as a historian, about the war with insight he might not otherwise have had. Eyewitness history is obviously a branch of that larger field, contemporary history, by which one means historical accounts written by persons alive in the time in which the events take place.

Eyewitness history must be distinguished from memoirs, which are eyewitness accounts *not* written from the historical viewpoint. There is something distinctive, one assumes, about the historical temperament and the historical approach; the historian surely brings to the observation and analysis of events a perspective different from that brought by the nonhistorian. Bernal Diaz, Saint-Simon, Boswell, Caulaincourt, U. S. Grant, for example, were all

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formidable participant-observers or memoirists, but they cannot be said to have perceived events as historians would have perceived them. Memoirs are part of the raw material of history, but they are written for their own purposes—to set down one man's experience or to chronicle notable events or to discharge vanities or rancors—rather than to discern causation in the flow of events over time. Thus memoirs were produced in steady volume through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while eyewitness history, on the other hand, rose and fell, and now has risen again.¹

For there is nothing new, of course, in the idea that historians should write from their own direct experience. “Of the events of the [Peloponnesian] war,” observed Thucydides, “I have described nothing but what I either saw myself, or learned from others of whom I made the most careful and particular enquiry.” Confident that the war “would be great and memorable above any previous war,” Thucydides, he tells us, began work on his history when the Athenians and the Peloponnesians first took up arms against one another. As an Athenian, he was soon swept up in the conflict himself; and it seems unlikely that he would have carried his history as far as he did had it not been for his failure as a commander in the field. The twenty year exile imposed by his native city after the disaster of Amphipolis liberated him to visit battlefields, interview veterans, verify or disprove second-hand tales, and reconcile conflicting testimony; “the task was a laborious one, because eye-witnesses of the same occurrences gave different accounts of them, as they remembered or were interested in the actions of one side or the other.”²

It would be wrong to conclude that only failed soldiers could become effective eyewitness historians; Xenophon and Caesar are contrary examples. It would also be wrong to suppose that most classical history was contemporary history. The eyewitness historian Flavius Josephus of Jerusalem (another failed soldier, who collected the materials for his history of the Judaeo-Roman war during his years as a Roman captive) complained that the later Hellenic historians had ignored the events of their own country and age, turning instead to the remote history of Assyria and Media. Josephus much preferred their predecessors who had “devoted themselves to writing the history of their own times, in which their personal participation in events gave clarity to their presentment and every falsehood was certain of exposure by a public that knew the facts.”³

When the Renaissance revived traditions of secular history, his-

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torians felt free to write about the present as well as the past. Nor was there prejudice against participants. Guiccardini and Machiavelli were eyewitness historians of sixteenth-century Florence, as was Clarendon of seventeenth-century England. When historians could not take part in the events they were writing about, they often took part in such events as were available to them and believed that such participation benefited them as historians. "The discipline and evolution of a modern battalion," wrote Gibbon, "gave me a clearer notion of the phalanx and the legions, and the captain of the Hampshire grenadiers (the reader may smile) has not been useless to the historian of the Roman empire."⁴ Until the later nineteenth century, most of the great historians were, in one way or another, captains of the Hampshire grenadiers—from Bacon and Raleigh to Macaulay, Tocqueville, Guizot, Carlyle, Bagehot, Bancroft, Parkman, Henry Adams. They were all involved in the public world; they were not men just of the study and the lamp.

In the later nineteenth century, however, a new question arose, I think for the first time—the question whether participation in public events might not disqualify the participant from writing about these events as a historian; whether, indeed, experience in the public world might not be incompatible with the ideal of historical objectivity. Such questions were a direct consequence of the professionalization of history. Historians were now increasingly segregated in universities, enshrined in academic chairs, surrounded by apprentices; and the crystallization of this distinct and specific status brought with it a tendency to reject, first, historians who participated in the events they described and, soon, historians who participated in anything beyond the profession of history. Indeed, it may have been unconsciously felt that eyewitness history, by involving the historical profession in ongoing conflicts, might raise threats to the hard-won new status. As Sir Walter Raleigh, one of the few historians to suffer the ultimate criticism of the executioner's ax, had warned two and a half centuries before, "Whosoever, in writing a modern history, shall follow truth too near the heels, it may haply strike out his teeth."⁵

Professionalization conceived historical research and writing as a self-sufficient, full-time, life-long vocation. Felix Gilbert has recalled to us Meinecke's heartfelt statement:

We must be aware of the inner difficulties with which a rising historian has to struggle today. At first, he will have to concentrate on studies in

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a very narrow and isolated area. He is confronted by tasks and problems of a professional character and he must tackle them in a prescribed manner. Editions and specialized documentary studies—usually not chosen by himself but assigned to him or recommended to him—will usually absorb the first decade of his scholarly life. Today scholarship, having become an organized large-scale enterprise, presses most heavily on the individual scholar in the most susceptible years of his development.⁶

Professionalization meant rigorous training in the techniques of the craft; it meant specialization; it meant bureaucratization; it meant a stern insistence on critical methods as the guarantee of objectivity; it meant a deep pride in the independence and autonomy of the historical guild and an ardent conviction that the new professional techniques were winning history unprecedented new successes. “The historians of former times,” wrote Acton, “unapproachable for us in knowledge and in talent, cannot be our limit. We have the power to be more rigidly impersonal, disinterested and just than they.”⁷

Such severe standards created the image of the historian as a monastic scholar, austere removed from the passing emotions and conflicts of his own day. From this viewpoint, participation in the public world meant the giving of hostages—to parties, to institutions, to ideologies. In retrospect, it seemed that Macaulay was too deeply a Whig, Bancroft too deeply a Jacksonian, Henry Adams too deeply an Adams. The view arose that not only participant-historians but even historians who wrote about contemporaneous events were too deeply compromised to fulfill the pure historical vocation.

As late as the days before the Second World War, a professional historian who carried his lectures up to his own time was deemed rash and unhistorical; a professional historian who wrote on contemporary events was considered to have lapsed into journalism; a professional historian who took part in events and wrote about them later was a rarity. Most scholars still felt that a generation or so was required before current affairs underwent the sea change into history. Today, however, few American universities would hesitate to offer courses which start with the Second World War and end with yesterday's newspaper. Only the most ascetic scholars now object to attempts to write serious accounts of the very recent past. And contemporary history has inevitably brought along with it eyewitness history as a vital component.

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How to account for this unexpected emergence of contemporary history into academic respectability? The fundamental explanation lies, I think, in the acceleration of the rate of social change—an acceleration produced by the cumulative momentum of science and technology. Each decade generates both more innovations and more effective ways of introducing innovations into the social process. This acceleration, which Henry Adams was first among historians to understand, has meant, among other things, that the “present” becomes the “past” more swiftly than ever before in the history of man. If Rip Van Winkle had made a habit of coming back from the Catskills every twenty years, he would find each new visit more perplexing and more incredible. This steady increase in the velocity of history inevitably affects the psychology of the historian. What historians perceive as the “past” is today chronologically much closer than it was when historical change was the function, not of days, but of decades. In the twelfth century, the historian’s “past” was centuries back; in the nineteenth century it was a generation or two back. Now it is yesterday.

At the same time, the emergence of a more extensive educated public than the world has ever known has increased the popular demand for knowledge about the problems that torment modern man—especially when, with the invention of nuclear weapons, these problems, if not brought under control, might rush civilization on to the final catastrophe. History becomes an indispensable means of organizing public experiences in categories conducive to understanding. And the popular appetite for knowledge is further whetted by the development of television, bringing with it new experiences and new stimuli as well as creating the unprecedented situation in which history-in-the-making is now made, or at least observed, in every living room. Moreover, the fear of dehumanization so pervasive in the high-technology society, the felt threats to individual identity, also doubtless invite the effort to rehumanize the historical process produced by eyewitness history.

Along with these developments, there have been novel happenings within the historical field itself. Great manuscript collections, in the United States, at least, now tend to be open to scholars sooner than ever before. Franklin D. Roosevelt, in leaving his papers to the National Archives of the United States and providing for their early accessibility to students, set a salutary example which all subsequent Presidents have followed. Where the Adams papers, for example, were closed for decades, where the papers of even so

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recent a President as Herbert Hoover were impounded for a generation, the Roosevelt precedent will make it difficult for public men of the future—again, at least in the United States—to lock up their manuscripts indefinitely. Hereafter the presumption will surely be in favor of making papers available to scholars as speedily as prudent standards of security and discretion permit. The alternative presumption will be that the deponent has something to hide.

Yet the very accessibility of contemporary manuscript collections has had another and somewhat paradoxical effect: it has demonstrated to scholars the inadequacy of documents by themselves as sources for twentieth-century history. In the early nineteenth century, if a public figure had a message to send, paper was the only means, save face-to-face conversation, of communication. Moreover, quill pen in hand, he could write only a limited number of letters. Historians studying these good old days can relax fairly comfortably in the archives, confident that the documents will not only be competent sources but will not be too numerous to be read by a single student.

Those days, alas, are gone forever. The revolution in the technology of communications—especially the invention of the typewriter and the telephone—has depreciated the value of the document. While the typewriter has increased the volume of paper, the telephone has reduced its importance. Far more documents are produced, and there is far less in them. If a contemporary statesman has something of significance to communicate, if speed and secrecy are of the essence, he will confide his message, not to a letter, but to the telephone. Until the Federal Bureau of Investigation opens up its library of wire taps, we must assume that these vital historical moments will elude the documentary record.

Ironically the rise of contemporary history has itself doubtless contributed to the condition of documentary impoverishment. The growing insistence that papers should, as a matter of right, be immediately opened to scholars may lead to a dilution and distortion of the written record. Public officials, fearing next decade's graduate students, become reluctant to put in writing the real reasons behind some of their actions. Theodore Roosevelt was not the last politician to take the precaution of writing memoranda for the files or letters to friends in order to present his own version of public events or decisions. Yet this very condition of documentary impoverishment serves as a further stimulus to contemporary history; for, if the eyewitness is part of the cause, he

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can also be part of the cure. As Flavius Josephus pointed out nearly two thousand years ago, a primary justification of the eyewitness historian is the evidence he preserves. "To place on record events never previously related and to make contemporary history accessible to later generations," Josephus wrote, "is an activity deserving of notice and commendation. Genuine research consists not in the mere rearrangement of material that is the property of others, but in the establishment of an original body of historical knowledge."⁸

This variety of factors helps explain the comeback this century of the historian who writes out of his own direct experience. The revival began outside the guild when participants who lacked the professional badge but possessed the historical temperament began to write the history of events they themselves had witnessed. Winston Churchill's *The World Crisis* (1923-1929) was an early and influential example, followed, of course, by *The Second World War* (1948-1954). In the meantime the two world wars brought professional historians themselves into the public arena, whether as soldiers, diplomats, intelligence analysts, political advisers, or official historians; and many were tempted to apply their craft to the dramatic events unfolding before their eyes. Some even may have had the illusion they could influence affairs; Johannes von Müller was not the last historian in search of a hero.

Yet the traditional case of the professional historian against contemporary history remained. That case derived essentially from the ancient proposition *veritas temporis filia*. Truth was seen as the daughter of time: written history became better the farther away the historian was from the events he was describing. So Sir Herbert Butterfield analyzed the stages of historiographical growth:

If we consider the history of the historical writing that has been issued, generation after generation, on a given body of events, we shall generally find that in the early stages of this process the narrative which is produced has a primitive and simple shape. As one generation of students succeeds another, however, each developing the historiography of this particular subject, the narrative passes through certain typical stages until it is brought to a high and subtle form of organisation.⁹

History, in this view, regularly passed from the "heroic" phase, in which contemporary writers portrayed personal goodness and badness as dominant motives and employed melodrama as the dominant tone, into the "technical" phase, when later historians

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could at last see men as trapped in a structural predicament with right and wrong on both sides and the dominant tone one of tragedy.

The technical historian, recollecting in tranquility, was presumed to have solider knowledge, clearer perspective, and surer freedom from emotion and prejudice. "That history which is most liable to large-scale structural revision," Professor Butterfield argued, "is contemporary history—the first version of events as they appear from the special platform of particular actors in the drama, often indeed a version used for militant purposes in the conflicts of the time." When historians studied the conflicts of the past, they should therefore give little credence to "the contemporary ways of formulating that conflict."¹⁰ And, of all forms of contemporary history, eyewitness history logically contained more pitfalls than any other, was more vulnerable to interest, bias, illusion, and wishful thinking.

There is plainly great force in this argument. It seems plausible that historians coming along later should have access to a wider range of materials than eyewitness historians could have had. It seems plausible that they should be more free of passion and prepossession. It seems plausible that, with their knowledge of the way things have come out, they could more accurately identify the critical factors in the process. One can see the evolution described by Professor Butterfield at work today, for example, in the movement from "heroic" to "technical"—from melodramatic to tragic—renditions of the origins of the Cold War.

The traditional argument for the inferiority of contemporary history, and especially of eyewitness history, thus rests on alleged deficiencies in both the collection and the interpretation of historical facts. But is this all there is to be said? Certainly if eyewitnesses are going to write an increasing amount of modern history, it is perhaps appropriate to reexamine this traditional case.

One may start by inquiring whether the superiority supposedly possessed by the technical historian in the collection of historical facts is all that self-evident. Guiccardini's caution—"Documents are rarely falsified at the start. It is usually done later, as occasion or necessity dictates"¹¹—suggests one advantage enjoyed by the eyewitness historian: he has the chance of seeing evidence before it is cooked. Probably Guiccardini's warning has less application in the xerox age, where the ease of immediate duplication complicates

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the task of subsequent falsification. But one can never be sure, as when one hears President Johnson read Walter Cronkite a memorandum claiming to direct the Defense Department in February 1968 to prepare alternatives to further escalation in Vietnam—a document directly contrary in sense to the one that the Secretary of Defense says he then received from the White House.

Moreover, personal participation in a historical episode may well make the historian more critical of his materials. In writing about the past, the technical historian often is tempted to use letters, diaries, memoranda, newspapers as if they were reliable forms of evidence. When such evidence is construed under the pressure of direct experience, however, it may become more apparent that A's letters are his own self-serving versions of events, that B's diaries are designed, consciously or not, to dignify the diarist and discredit his opponents, that C's memoranda are written to improve the record and that the newspapermen recording the transactions had only the dimmest idea what was really going on.

The technical historian is inevitably the prisoner of the testimony that happens to survive. He cannot, like Thucydides, cross-examine witnesses; nor, like Flavius Josephus, does he expose himself to a public that knows the facts. Mr. Dooley well summed up the truth of the matter: "Th' further ye get away fr'm anny peeryod th' betther ye can write about it. Ye are not subject to interruptions be people that were there."¹² Hence one vital importance of eyewitness history for the future technical historian: it can, as Josephus suggested, help meet the need to supplement documents if we are to recover the full historical transaction.

Tocqueville, in the notes for his unwritten second volume on the French Revolution, discriminates between facts available to technical historians and facts reported by eyewitness historians:

We are still too close to these events to know many details (this seems curious, but it is true); details often appear only in posthumous revelations and are frequently ignored by contemporaries. But what these writers know better than does posterity are the movements of opinion, the popular inclinations of their times, the vibrations of which they can still sense in their minds and hearts. The true traits of the principal persons and of their relationships, of the movements of the masses are often better described by witnesses than recorded by posterity. These are the necessary details. Those close to them are better placed to trace the general history, the general causes, the grand movements of events, the spiritual currents which men who are further removed may no longer find.¹³

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Tocqueville's point about the grand movements applies equally to people. "It is not true," said Santayana, "that contemporaries misjudge a man. Competent contemporaries judge him . . . much better than posterity, which is composed of critics no less egotistical, and obliged to rely exclusively on documents easily misinterpreted."¹⁴ Charles Francis Adams made a related point in this introduction to his grandparents' letters. "Our history," he wrote, "is for the most part wrapped up in the forms of office . . . Statesmen and Generals rarely say all they think." They are seen for the most part "when conscious that they are upon a theatre," and in their papers "they are made to assume a uniform of grave hue."

The solitary meditation, the confidential whisper to a friend, never meant to reach the ear of the multitude, the secret wishes, not blazoned forth to catch applause, the fluctuations between fear and hope that most betray the springs of action,—these are the guides to character, which most frequently vanish with the moment that called them forth, and leave nothing to posterity but those coarser elements for judgment, that are found in elaborated results.¹⁵

Moreover, the controversy produced by exercises in what has been acrimoniously called "instant history"—the claims and counter-claims made by participants while they are still around—indispensably enrich the historical record.

It may further be the case that eyewitness historians often have a more realistic judgment about the operative facts. Practical experience may yield qualities of insight hard to achieve in the library; historians who *know* how laws are passed, decisions made, battles fought are perhaps in a better position to grasp the actuality of historical transactions. Thus Woodrow Wilson, praising Tocqueville and Bagehot, remarked that they were great analysts because they "were not merely students, but also *men of the world*, for whom the only acceptable philosophy of politics was a generalization from actual daily observation of men and things."¹⁶

Participation may not only sharpen the historian's judgment; it may also stimulate and amplify what might be called the historian's reconstructive imagination. To take part in public controversy, to smell the dust and sweat of conflict, to experience the precariousness of decision under pressure may help toward a better understanding of the historical process. When I was a very young historian, a so-called revisionist school used to write about the coming of the American Civil War on the assumption that the burning

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emotions of the day, especially those seizing the abolitionists, were somehow artificial and invalid. But personal immersion in a historical experience leaves the historian no doubt that mass emotions are realities with which he no less than statesmen must deal. Far from being gratuitous and needless, as the revisionist historians once tried to tell us, the way people think and feel is an organic part of history.

This is something that the technical historian misses, as Professor Butterfield has noted: "The reader of technical history learns too little from it of the hopes and fears of the majority of men, too little of their joy in nature and art, their falling in love, their family affection, their spiritual questings, and their ultimate vision of things." Since this is so, Professor Butterfield himself has wondered "whether technical history can claim to give us the mirror of life any more than modern physics provides us with an actual picture of the universe."¹⁷ If technical history cannot claim to give us the mirror of life, can one be so certain about the advantages allegedly provided by the stages of historiographical growth? If I may cite a personal example, I have no question that, by writing *A Thousand Days* the year after President Kennedy's death, I was able to suggest something about the mood and relationships of the Kennedy years which no future historian could ever get on the basis of the documents—indeed, which I myself could not have reproduced, with the fading of memory, the knowledge of consequences, and the introduction of new preoccupations and perspectives, had I tried to write the book ten or twenty years later. Page Smith (in *The Historian and History*) argues persuasively that, for historians writing years after the fact, "the difficulty of re-creating faithfully the events and their causes will be greater and demand a more powerful effort of the will and the creative imagination than that demanded of the participant-historian."¹⁸

The case against the eyewitness historian in the domain of facts thus seems on examination less compelling than the arguments of the technical historian at first suggest. Against the doctrine that truth is the daughter of time one may perhaps place Emerson's dictum: "Time dissipates to shining ether the solid angularity of facts."¹⁹

Are the traditional arguments against eyewitness history in the domain of interpretation any more satisfactory? The theory of the stages of historiographical growth assumes the purifying effects of

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the passage of time, with distance steadily removing distortions of interest and emotion until a final version can be attained, or at least approached. Professor Butterfield has well stated the ideal: "I should not regard a thing as 'historically' established unless the proof were valid for the Catholic as well as the Protestant, for the Liberal as well as the Marxist."²⁰

But little appears more wistful in retrospect than the confidence of technical historians that the deepening of research and the lengthening of perspective will ineluctably produce scholarly consensus on the large historical questions. It is not obvious in practice that time has been, in fact, the father of truth, if by truth we mean the agreement of historians. We know now that time cannot be counted to winnow out prejudice and commitment and leave the scholar, all passion spent, in tranquil command of the historical reality.

The passage of time does not, for example, liberate the historian from his deepest values and prepossessions. Posterity, in Santayana's phrase, is "composed of critics no less egotistical." "Historians of every period," David Butler has well said, "seem able to acquire equally deep emotions about their subject matter," and he recalls that his grandfather, A. F. Pollard, the noted scholar, "expressed far more vehement views about Martin Luther than I have ever ventured about any contemporary politician."²¹ The major difference on the question of bias is that the bias of the eyewitness historian is infinitely easier to detect and thus to discount. Wherever vital issues are involved, whether the events are as close to us as the war in Vietnam or as remote as the fall of the Roman Empire, distance will not insure convergence. All interesting historical problems may be said to be in permanent contention; that is why they are interesting. One comes to feel that historians agree only when the problems as well as the people are dead.

As long as the problems are still alive, the passage of time only offers new possibilities for distortion. The present, as historians well know, re-creates the past. This is partly because, once we know how things have come out, we tend to rewrite the past in terms of historical inevitability. And it is partly because each new generation in any case projects its own obsessions on the screen of the past. But, despite E. H. Carr, hindsight may not be the safest principle on which to base the writing of history. What Hamilton in the 70th *Federalist* called "the dim light of historical research"²² is not always an x-ray beam, penetrating to the underlying structure

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of reality; it is more often a flickering candle, revealing only those surfaces of things a time-bound historian is able to see.

"Every true history," said Croce, summing up the epistemological issue, "is contemporary history."²³ So a religious age interprets political conflicts in religious terms and an economic age interprets religious conflicts in economic terms, and so on until one must conclude that, if truth is the daughter of time, it takes a wise father to know his own children. In the words of Dewey, "We are committed to the conclusion that all history is necessarily written from the standpoint of the present, and is, in an inescapable sense, the history not only of the present but of that which is contemporaneously judged to be important in the present."²⁴ One must ask forgiveness for summoning high authority to labor so elementary a point, except that the point is all too rarely applied to the validity of eyewitness history. If eyewitness history lacks perspective, so does technical history and in much the same sense.

If history thus provides an infinite regression of historical interpretations, how then are we to say that one interpretation is "truer" than another?—if truth is to mean more than felt relevance to a climate of opinion. And, if there is no obvious answer to this question, can it be that eyewitness history not only offers an essential supplement to technical history but may—at least in some ways and certain circumstances—supply a more satisfying and enduring version of events?

Far from historical truth being unattainable in contemporary history, it may almost be argued that in a sense truth is *only* attainable in contemporary history. For contemporary history means the writing of history under the eye of the only people who can offer contradiction, that is, the witnesses. Every historian of the past knows at the bottom of his heart how much artifice and extrapolation go into his reconstructions; how much of his evidence is partial, ambiguous, or hypothetical; and how safe he is in his speculations because, barring recourse to spirit mediums, no one can easily say him nay, except other historians, and all they have to put up is other theories.

Once men are dead, the historian can never really know whether his reconstruction bears much relation to what actually happened. As Lionel Trilling observed in an essay on Tacitus, "To minds of a certain sensitivity 'the long view' is the falsest historical view of all, and indeed the insistence on the length of per-

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spective is intended precisely to overcome sensitivity—seen from sufficient distance, it says, the corpse and the hacked limbs are not so very terrible, and eventually they even begin to compose themselves into a ‘meaningful pattern.’”²⁵ “*Restored history*,” wrote Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice*, “is of little more value than restored painting or architecture . . . The only history worth reading is that written at the time of which it treats, the history of what was done and seen, heard out of the mouths of the men who did and saw.”²⁶

To reject the testimony of men and women as to the significance of their own actions and lives, to say that, while they *thought* they were acting on such-and-such motives, we, so much wiser, *know* they were acting on quite other motives, is to commit the sin of historical reductionism. It is, as Page Smith well says, to “deprive these lives of their meaning by judgments imposed long after the event,” and this is “to deny our forebears their essential humanity.” In doing this, we not only diminish them; we diminish ourselves. We tie ourselves to reductionist theories which subsequent generations have every right to turn against us. We surrender, Page Smith warns, “our belief in ourselves, in the integrity of our own lives.”²⁷

Professor Butterfield himself has made much this same point in his brilliant critique of Sir Lewis Namier for draining “the intellectual content out of the things that politicians do” and for refusing to realize the operative force of ideas” and thereby divesting history of “the ideas and intentions which give [policies] so much of their meaning.”²⁸ The denial that people in the past understood why they were doing things can lead only to the conclusion that we don’t know why we are doing things either; and the difficulty of sustaining this position may well be an important reason for the failure of a great deal of historical revisionism. After much theorizing through the years, American historians today (like Bernard Bailyn) have come to a position about the causes of the American Revolution not too far from that taken in 1789 by David Ramsay in his *History of the American Revolution*; so historians today, instead of dismissing the rhetoric of Jacksonian democracy as “campaign claptrap” (the phrase is Lee Benson’s),²⁹ are returning to the view that the Jacksonians may have meant what they said; so historians today, after a long pursuit of other causes, generally agree with those who personally fought the American Civil War that it was more “about” slavery than about anything else. Of

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course these current historical judgments are time-bound too and undoubtedly will be revised; but one feels that historians will return more often to contemporaneous interpretations than to subsequent reinterpretations. If the actors themselves gave lucid and urgent testimony as to why they lived, struggled, died, is it not a form of intellectual arrogance for historians to come along later and pretend to know better?*

This argument assumes, of course, the reality of a certain measure of human choice and self-determination. It rejects philosophies of historical determinism. This does not imply extravagant claims about the extent of human freedom. One may accept Tocqueville's formulation of the problem: "It is true that around every man a fatal circle is traced beyond which he cannot pass; but within the wide verge of that circle he is powerful and free."³⁰

In short, the insight generated by participation is not confined to perceptions and interpretations of specific episodes. It goes, I would argue, to very general conceptions of history. For historians

* This argument is, of course, incomplete. There are some things the future historian *can* know better; and the problem of the conflict between contemporaneous consciousness of reality and the facts as determined later is too much a digression to go into at length here. A couple of examples, however, may suggest the issue. Thus Bernard Bailyn has argued that a major cause of the American Revolution was the theory held by leading colonists that George III was carrying out a conspiracy against the English constitution—a theory which Sir Lewis Namier has shown to be an illusion. Or consider the question of the profitability of slavery in the United States. The new economic historians, especially Alfred Conrad and John Meyer, employing refined tools of economic analysis, have demonstrated persuasively that—contrary to the contemporaneous impression—the slavery system was profitable. The contemporaneous impression had important historical consequences, but it was apparently wrong.

In other words, contemporaneous perceptions may well be misperceptions, which is doubtless why Professor Butterfield warns against yielding to "the contemporary ways of formulating . . . conflict." Still the misconceptions of the American colonists in the 1770's or of the slaveholders in the 1850's are a vital segment of the historian's story; and, while it is part of the historian's job to test the validity of contemporaneous perceptions, he must always take care not to replace the categories of the actors by his own latter-day categories when he discusses the motives of action. Full historical reconstruction requires attention to Sorel's reminder in *Reflections on Violence*: "We are perfectly aware that the historians of the future are bound to discover that we laboured under many illusions, because they will see behind them a finished world. We, on the other hand, must act, and nobody can tell us today what these historians will know; nobody can furnish us with the means of modifying our motor images in such a way as to avoid their criticisms." Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), p. 149.

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are frequently the victims, if more often in a small than a grand way, of what James has called “our indomitable desire to cast the world into a more rational shape in our minds than the shape into which it is thrown there by the crude order of experience.” The historian’s compulsion is the passion for pattern. Reconstructing events in the quiet of his study, he likes to tidy things up, to find interconnections and unities. “The form of inner consistency,” to borrow James’s language, “is pursued far beyond the line at which collateral profits stop.”³¹

If, however, the historian has taken part in great events, he has learned that things rarely happen in a tidy, patterned, rational way. General George Marshall used to say that battlefield decisions were taken under conditions of “chronic obscurity”—that is, under excessive pressure on the basis of incomplete and defective information. This is probably the character of most critical decisions in the field of public policy. The eyewitness historian tends to preserve the felt texture of events and to recognize the role of such elements as confusion, ignorance, chance, and sheer stupidity. The technical historian, coming along later, revolts against the idea of “chronic obscurity” and tries to straighten things out. In this way, he often imputes pattern and design to a process which, in its nature, is organic and not mechanical. Historians reject the conspiratorial interpretation of history; but, in a benign way, they sometimes become its unconscious proponents, ascribing to premeditation what belongs to fortuity and to purpose what belongs to accident.

Participation may, of course, breed its own deformations. Again we may look to Tocqueville to suggest the appropriate distinctions:

I have come across men of letters, who have written history without taking part in public affairs, and politicians, who have only concerned themselves with producing events without thinking of describing them. I have observed that the first are always inclined to find general causes, whereas the others, living in the midst of disconnected daily facts, are prone to imagine that everything is attributable to particular incidents, and that the wires they pull are the same that move the world. It is to be presumed that both are equally deceived.

For himself, Tocqueville added, he detested those “absolute systems” which represented all events as depending on first causes and linked by the chain of fatality—systems which, as it were, “suppress men from the history of the human race.” Many important facts, he continued, can only be explained by accidental circumstances; many others remain totally inexplicable. “Chance, or

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rather that tangle of secondary causes which we call chance, for want of the knowledge how to unravel it, plays a great part in all that happens on the world's stage; although I firmly believe that chance does nothing that has not been prepared beforehand."³²

This is an accurate account of the play of events as eyewitness historians tend to see it; and it is why such historians would probably agree with a couple of Emerson's aphorisms (and urge that they be framed above every historian's desk):

In analysing history, do not be too profound, for often the causes are quite superficial.

And:

I have no expectation that any man will read history aright who thinks that what was done in a remote age, by men whose names have resounded far, has any deeper sense than what he is doing today.³³

History infused by this spirit has its own distinctive character. Without prolonged philosophical digression, one can refer to James's insistence in "The Dilemma of Determinism" on the reality of the idea of chance and the argument against historical inevitability developed so brilliantly in our own day by Isaiah Berlin. My impression is that the experience of participation tends to inoculate historians against what James called "a temper of intellectual absolutism, a demand that the world shall be a solid block, subject to one control."³⁴ The inoculation does not always take; Marx—a contemporary historian and a participant in events if never an eyewitness historian—remains a monumental exception. But, in the main, historians who have been immersed in the confusion of events seem less inclined to impose an exaggeratedly rational order on the contingency and obscurity of reality.

I am not contending that eyewitness history, or contemporary history in general, are "better" than technical history, whatever such a judgment might mean. Obviously we need both, and the dialectic between them is a major part of the historical exercise. I would only suggest that the conventional reasons for professional disdain may not be so impressive as historians once thought—that eyewitness history has its own and distinctive strengths and advantages.

In any case, eyewitness history appears to meet significant intellectual and social needs and therefore will be with us for some time to come. If this is so, then let eyewitness historians abide by the

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highest standards of their peculiar trade and write always in the spirit of Clarendon:

And as I may not be thought altogether an incompetent person for this communication, having been present as a member of Parliament in those councils before and till the breaking out of the Rebellion, and having since had the honour to be near two great kings in some trust, so I shall perform the same with all faithfulness and ingenuity, with an equal observation of the faults and infirmities of both sides, with their defects and oversights in pursuing their own ends; and shall no otherwise mention small and light occurrences than as they have been introductions to matters of the greatest moment; nor speak of persons otherwise than as the mention of their virtues or vices is essential to the work in hand: in which as I shall have the fate to be suspected rather for malice to many than of flattery to any, so I shall, in truth, preserve myself from the least sharpness that may proceed from private provocation or a more public indignation; in the whole observing the rules that a man should, who deserves to be believed.³⁵

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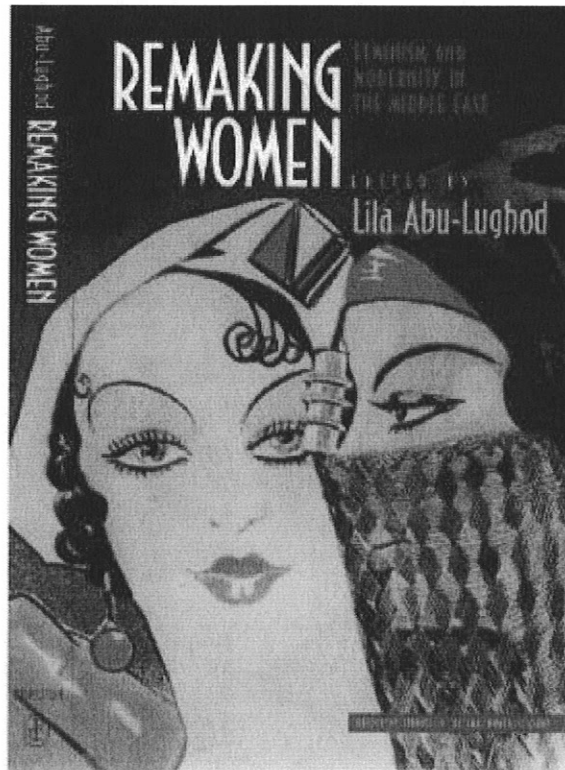
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Attitudes Toward Muslim Women in the West

From an interview with Lila Abu-Lughod by the Asia Society
(<http://asiasociety.org/lila-abu-lughod-attitudes-toward-muslim-women-west>)



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Lila Abu-Lughod has worked on women's issues in the Middle East for over twenty years. She has authored and edited several books on the topic, including *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), and *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). She is Professor of Anthropology and Women's and Gender Studies at Columbia University in New York.

In this interview, Professor Abu-Lughod discusses women and Islam in the wake of the American war in Afghanistan.

Following the events of September 11th, the American public sphere has been saturated with discussions of what is unique about "Muslim" societies. To what extent is the character of Muslim societies determined by Islam? How can we begin to think about these societies, and what distinguishes them from our own?

Many aspects of societies around the world cannot be understood without reference to the history and influences of the major religions in terms of which people live their lives. This is just as true for people living in the Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia and other Muslim regions as it is for those living in Europe and the United States, where Christianity has historically dominated. The point to stress is that despite this, it is just as unhelpful to reduce the complex politics, social dynamics, and diversity of lives in the U.S. to Christianity as it is to reduce these things to Islam in other regions. We should ask not how Muslim societies are distinguished from “our own” but how intertwined they are, historically and in the present, economically, politically, and culturally.

Muslim women have of course figured prominently in this public discussion. You have suggested recently that “understanding Muslim women” will not serve to explain anything. Could you elaborate on this claim?

Many of us have noticed that suddenly, after 9/11 and the American response of war in Afghanistan, the hunger for information about Muslim women seems insatiable. My own experience of this was in the form of an avalanche of invitations to appear on news programs and at universities and colleges. On the one hand I was pleased that my expertise was appreciated and that so many people wanted to know more about a subject I had spent twenty years studying. On the other hand, I was suspicious because it seemed that this desire to know about “women and Islam” was leading people away from the very issues one needed to examine in order to understand what had happened.

Those issues include the history of Afghanistan—with Soviet, U.S., Pakistani, and Saudi involvements; the dynamics of Islamist movements in the Middle East; the politics and economics of American support for repressive governments. Plastering neat cultural icons like “the Muslim woman” over messier historical and political narratives doesn’t get you anywhere. What does this substitution accomplish? Why, one has to ask, didn’t people rush to ask about Guatemalan women, Vietnamese women (or Buddhist women), Palestinian women, or Bosnian women when trying to understand those conflicts? The problem gets framed as one about another culture or religion, and the blame for the problems in the world placed on Muslim men, now neatly branded as patriarchal.

The British in India and the French in Algeria both enlisted the support of women for their colonial projects (i.e., part of the colonial enterprise was ostensibly to “save” native women). Do you think the current rhetoric about women in Afghanistan suffers from the same problem? Is there something about the colonial/neo-colonial context that lends itself to this kind of representation (which would explain why such rhetoric cannot be employed for, say, African American women in this country)?

Yes, I ask myself about the very strong appeal of this notion of “saving” Afghan women, a notion that justifies American intervention (according to First Lady Laura Bush’s November radio address) and that dampens criticism of intervention by American and European feminists. It is easy to see through the hypocritical “feminism” of a Republican administration. More troubling for me are the attitudes of those who do genuinely care about women’s status. The problem, of course, with ideas of “saving” other women is that they depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by westerners.

When you save someone, you are saving them from something. You are also saving them to something. What violences are entailed in this transformation? And what presumptions are being made about the superiority of what you are saving them to? This is the arrogance that feminists need to question. The reason I brought up African American women, or working class women in the U.S., was that the smug and patronizing assumptions of this missionary rhetoric would be obvious if used at home, because we've become more politicized about problems of race and class. What would happen if white middle class women today said they needed to save those poor African American women from the oppression of their men?

You mentioned that the veil or burqa has been spoken of and defended by Muslim women as “portable seclusion” and that veiling should not be associated with lack of agency. Can you explain why this is the case?

It was the anthropologist Hanna Papanek, working in Pakistan, who twenty years ago coined this term of “portable seclusion.” I like the phrase because it makes me see burqas as symbolic “mobile homes” that free women to move about in public and among strange men in societies where women's respectability, and protection, depend on their association with families and the homes which are the center of family lives.

The point about women's veiling is of course too complicated to lay out here. But there were three reasons why I said it could not so simply be associated with lack of agency. First, “veiling” is not one thing across different parts of the Muslim world, or even among different social groups within particular regions. The variety is extraordinary, going from headscarves unselfconsciously worn by young women in rural areas to the fuller forms of the very modern “Islamic dress” now being adopted by university women in the most elite of fields including medicine and engineering. Second, many of the women around the Muslim world who wear these different forms of cover describe this as a choice. We need to take their views seriously, even if not at face value. Beyond that, however, we need to ask some hard questions about what we actually mean when we use words like “agency” and “choice” when talking about human beings, always social beings always living in particular societies with culturally variable meanings of personhood. Do we not all work within social codes? What does the expression we often use here “the tyranny of fashion” suggest about agency in dress codes?

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