

Why Study History

Department of History

Tennessee Technological University

We often ask the question, Why study history? The answer we hear is that we have to. Yet we study history for a variety of reasons--to understand people who thought and acted differently than we do in our own time, to seek self knowledge, to make sense of a time radically different from our own time, to find a sense of distance from the present to aid us in placing our own times in perspective, to help us understand how we got to where we are now, and a whole host of other reasons. One of the many things we learn about the human condition through the study of the past is the very contingency of human society, how little human life is predetermined and how much people actively have shaped times passed. Some would find this frightening to contemplate in the modern world; others find it consoling. The question has intrigued philosophers of history for eons.

Perhaps the best explanation for studying history was given by the blind Czech historian Milan Hubl to the novelist Milan Kundera:

"The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history, Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster."

Source: Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

Why Study History?

Department of History

Mercer University

Studying history trains students to think and write clearly, to organize and interpret evidence, and to confront complex issues in informed and insightful ways. These skills build the confidence and versatility that our fluid economy rewards, and equip majors for graduate programs in law, medicine, education, and business. Far from devaluing liberal arts like history, today's information and service economy increasingly depends the habits that studying history promotes. As a major or minor, history complements especially well the more specialized fields of mathematics, economics, computer science, the natural sciences, and foreign languages.

Yet history majors abound at elite schools due not to history's practicality, but because understanding our world and ourselves requires a sense of regional, national, and global development. Only an historical outlook can give the daily news coherence, make sense of things foreign, and reveal the varied threads of group and individual identities. The "lessons of history" are fewer and less clear than many claim, but a broader "sense of history" surely exists, and its traits are clear enough: an eye for patterns, stories, and meaning behind historical "facts"; an awareness that changes and continuities reflect the specific interests, ideals, choices, and oversights of various and often contending groups; and a feel for the unforeseen and sometimes ironic consequences of human actions.

Civically speaking, the importance of this sense of history is hard to overstate. Local, national, and global citizenship need historical senses of common achievement and purpose to become more than good feelings, and to raise politics above the simplistic sloganeering that modern democracies invite. Racial politics, religion's public role, taxation and public spending, environmental stress, cultural flux, NATO's expansion, global anti-Americanism--among many other issues--can be understood and sensibly discussed only in historical terms. History's power to instruct does not decrease simply because respectable Americans often manage to ignore it.

Why Study History?

Professor Constance H. Berman

University of Iowa, Department of History

The study of history remains the centerpiece of education in the humanities, of what once was called the liberal education. History is far from the mere listing of names and dates that made it so deadly for many of us in high school. The study of history is about problem-solving, about gathering evidence from likely and unlikely sources, about how evidence fits together to make a picture of what happened (or didn't happen.) It is about understanding that what happened may be viewed differently depending on whose viewpoint we are taking. Historians monitor how individual efforts add up to a whole, indeed about how the slow moving resistance of those who are not necessarily empowered nonetheless can change the course of affairs.

While historians today stress the inability to ever arrive at a precise knowledge of exactly what happened in the past, our aim is to approach that many-faceted "truth" with ever-increasing understanding and to take into consideration the viewpoints of as many different participants as possible. History research includes much that is "scientific" in our approach to the use of such material as censuses and voting records, and the UI History Department has been a leader in such "quantitative" methods. Yet, undergraduate courses in History at UI are rarely filled with discussions of theory and methodology. Instead we spend time describing what happened in the past, how we know that it happened, and how that knowledge varies as our viewpoints shift.

Not only does studying history provide us with the opportunities to understand the rhetorical power of the written word, but it hones our rhetorical skills in important ways and develops our analytical thinking—abilities that carry over well into the business world, to the study and practice of law or medicine, or into our actions as citizens. History also provides an opportunity to develop skills in expository writing. Those of us teaching history at The University of Iowa make a point of having written work be part of our courses.

Historians are trained to weigh and evaluate sources, learning to know which chronicler of the Norman conquest is most likely to be reliable on which particular points, or which radio network is most likely to be able to give a balanced account and when we should expect exceptions to that balance to occur. Historians seek a deep understanding of some past or previous phenomena or society. They act as sleuths, solving mysteries by evaluating written and material evidence. They create order out of disorder by how they write up that evidence to tell stories. These skills transfer to a variety of occupations, but are important for all of us in the development of skills necessary for an enlightened citizenry. They are essential for the exercise of political life in a real democracy. Everyone in our society, as in any society, needs to know how to evaluate a newspaper account, asking what has been said and whether it has been accurately reported, as well as what has been left out. We are deluged with information both on paper and on electronic sources, and it is too easy to conclude that the media, both print and electronic, purvey "truth," until we see how often those sources contradict one another.

While history cannot solve the problems of our present age or the future, it can provide a wider view of how things have been done and could be done by a variety of human beings. Studying history is thus neither the dry bones of dates and battles, nor the memorization of methods and jargon, but an approach to the past in which we can discern real people not so different from those of the present. Indeed, even at the beginning of the last millennium, there were recognizable types. More overpowered by medical catastrophes, not as technologically advanced as they would eventually become, they were nonetheless people much like people today. They had the same range of emotions, abilities, and behaviors. It is the study of such women and men, famous and unimportant, saints and sinner, dullards and manipulators, peace-makers and peace-breakers, and the institutions they created, that we call history.

Why Study History?

*Professor Dermot Keogh
University College Cork, Ireland*

History is often mistakenly viewed as a test of memory, a mere listing of dates, battles and political events. This is an impoverished view of the demanding discipline my colleague, Joe Lee, has called the "record of the lives of men and women in all their infinite variety over time and place, spanning centuries, continents and cultures, entrancing or appalling us with the evidence of man's humanity and inhumanity, with the heights scaled and the depths plumbed, by the human race."

In the final stages of the cold war at the end of the 1980s, there were those misguided enough to proclaim 'the end of history.' The events of the last decade have shown that the death of history has been grossly exaggerated. It is foolhardy to embark on a study of conflict in the Balkans, the Middle East, Iran, Iraq and in other parts of the world without a solid historical grounding. Knowing the history of a region may caution prudence and slow down a final decision to take immediate action. An historian will draw out the complexities of the situation, for example, pointing to the radical religious and ethnic differences in a country like Iraq. That does not suit the impulsive or those without a grounding in history.

Why Study History?

By Steven Kreiss

Let's face it, our first experience with History is that it is a course that we have to take in order to graduate. As a junior and senior high school student we are confronted with American history, state history and perhaps even a general course in western civilization or world history. We didn't have a choice. And the fact that we are forced to take history puts us on the offensive. We begin to build that grandiose brick wall that will prevent us from getting anything important out of history.

The main problem as I see it, is not history itself. The study of history can be fun. But there's only one thing that can make our first experience with history a miserable thing indeed: and that's a poor instructor. I was fortunate. I managed to have a number of excellent history instructors throughout my high school years and this was at a time when I was leaning toward the physical sciences, geology and biology to be exact. I might not have been an excellent history student, but I do remember having excellent history teachers.

Fine. That's my experience. But experience aside, why study history in the first place? What could history offer the business major? the student intending to study web page development? the student taking her first psychology class? or pre-med student? or the lawyer? or the worker on the shop floor? Well, simply stated, everything has a history, whether we like it or not. Even history itself has a history. Try hard as we might, we can't escape the past. We can't let go of the past. And we celebrate the past all the time.

You may have been told that we study history so that we won't repeat the mistakes of the past. This is the wishful thinking school of historical interpretation. It's too clean. If we have learned from the past then over the centuries we ought to have accumulated so much knowledge that things like war, poverty, injustice and immorality ought not to exist. Of course, we've still got a long way to go in this respect.

You may also have heard that everything repeats itself, so if we study the past, we can be sure to know something of the future. I don't hold to this view either. To insist that the study of the past will reveal something of the future is a nice idea, but what I really want to know about is the present. History cannot

"tell" the future. History can, on the other hand, reveal all that is the present. So, faced as we are with the question "why study history?" I can only hope to answer by telling you why I study history.

Well first off, by studying history you can study anything for the simple reason that everything has a history: ideas, wars, numbers, races, windsurfing, coal miners, pencils, motherhood and yes, even toilet-training. I first began to appreciate the study of history as an undergraduate studying political philosophy at Boston University. I was pretty keen on Plato, Aquinas, Dante, Hobbes, Locke, Godwin, Marx, Mill and a host of other "greats." But what I soon discovered was that my lack of understanding of history, i.e. the actual historical context in which these writers conceived and executed their theoretical work, made my understanding of their philosophy one-sided. Sure, I knew what they had to say about liberty, or the proletariat, or monarchy or the franchise. But what was the historical environment that gave rise to their ideas? Ideas are not akin to balloons hanging from the ceiling of Clio's den, waiting to be retrieved by a Marx, a Mill or a Plato. Ideas have a history. They undergo a process of development. They change, are modified, are distributed or are forgotten only to reappear years, decades or perhaps even centuries later.

Once I realized this fact it was quite natural that I turn my attention to history itself. And why not? I could still study Marx or Mill or Plato. Only this time I could do it from the ground up, so to speak. This sort of approach makes me better able to visualize history in a different way. It gives some sense of "pastness" to the past.

But why do I bother? What's the point? Well, for me, it's a Socratic issue. Socrates was a man of knowledge but not that much knowledge. As a freshman in high school you probably knew more than Socrates. But, Socrates was a wise man. He had wisdom because he knew only one thing: that he knew nothing. His "job," so to speak, was to question the Athenian youth. It was not enough to know something. You had to know why you knew it. And this, of course, brought him to the greatest question of all: what is knowledge? What can we know? Well, for Socrates, again, his knowledge consisted in the realization that he knew nothing. This Socratic irony leaves us rather high and dry but I think there is a greater issue at stake here.

For Socrates, perhaps the highest virtue can be summed up in the phrase, "Know thyself." In other words, of all the things in the phenomenal world, there is not one so important as yourself. To know yourself means to be aware of what it is that makes you who you are. And in this respect, the one thing which reveals this knowledge is history. But people do not live alone, they live in society. And it is in society that the individual comes into contact with other individuals, all of whom are on the same quest, in varying degrees. So, for Socrates, knowledge of self does not hinge upon reflection or introspection, but conversation, hence the Socratic dialogue.

The Socratic dialogue implies that instructor and student meet on an equal footing. Dialogue means conversation between two or more people. And what is the point of Socratic dialogue? Improvement. Self-improvement of the instructor and self-improvement of the student.

So why do I study history? or why do I teach history? Well, for me it's a form of selfishness. I wish to improve myself. And by improving myself I also improve others. This classical pedagogical method is called the Socratic method. If your instructor isn't at least familiar with it, then I'm afraid your historical education is going to suffer as a result.

Can you learn history without the Socratic dialogue as your guide? Yes, it can be done. All I am trying to suggest here is that your experience with history will be a much richer one if you keep in mind that history means self-knowledge and as students, that should be one of the most important things to you.

The Danger of Historical Amnesia

A Conversation with Writer David McCullough

In the last issue, NEH Chairman Bruce Cole spoke with historian and writer David McCullough about the importance of history. In this issue, the two talk about how America's schools have failed and why. McCullough is the author of eight books, among them two Pulitzer Prize winners, Truman and John Adams.

Bruce Cole: There was a study done not too long ago that surveyed fifty of the elite colleges and universities. The students were asked questions taken from a high school curriculum, and the lack of historical knowledge was really appalling.

This strikes me as something that the tragedy of 9/11 brings home. That is, our country has been attacked. Not only the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, but really the idea of our country, the ideas generated by the founders. How are we going to defend this if we really don't know much about it? It seems to me that this is alarming.

David McCullough: I thought the results of that survey were alarming, and I said so at the time. I still think so. I can cite what might be called anecdotal evidence at length to support that survey.

I have been talking or lecturing at colleges and universities continuously for twenty-five years or more. From my experience I don't think there's any question whatsoever that the students in our institutions of higher learning have less grasp, less understanding, less knowledge of American history than ever before. I think we are raising a generation of young Americans who are, to a very large degree, historically illiterate. It's not their fault. And there's no problem about enlisting their interest in history. None.

The problem is the teachers so often have no history in their background. They are working at high school and grade school level with lesson plans. Very often they were education majors and graduated knowing no subject. It's the same, I'm told, in biology or English literature or whatever.

If we think back through our own lives, the subjects that you liked best in school almost certainly were taught by the teachers you liked best. And the teacher you liked best was the teacher who was interested in the subject she taught, who cared about that experiment she was going to do in class that morning, and, in fact, loved showing you that experiment.

There was a noted professor of child psychology at the University of Pittsburgh named Margaret McFarland, whose most influential disciple is Fred Rogers, who has taught more children than any human being who ever lived. And Fred Rogers likes to say that all he's done with his programs is based on the teachings of Margaret McFarland.

What she taught in essence is that attitudes aren't taught, they're caught. If the attitude of the teacher toward the material is positive, enthusiastic, committed, and excited, the students get that. If the teacher is bored, students get that and they get bored, quickly, instinctively. Her admonition to teachers was, "Show them what you love." And, in my view, we have to rethink, revise how we're teaching our teachers.

There is very good work in this field being done by the National Council for History Education. The council conducts summer seminars or clinics primarily for grade school teachers from all over the country in this very spirit. People like Ted Rabb, who is at Princeton, and Ken Jackson, who is at Columbia, are real American heroes. They are the ones that got this going. They're making very good progress.

Cole: Ted Rabb has worked closely with the NEH over the years.

McCullough: But it's not just something that we should be sad about, or worried about, that these young people don't know any history. We should be angry. They're being cheated. They are being cheated and they are being handicapped, and our way of life could very well be in jeopardy because of this.

Now since September 11, it seems to me that never in our lifetime, except possibly in the early stages of World War II, has it been clearer that we have as a source of strength, a source of direction, a source of inspiration--our story. Yes, this is a dangerous time. Yes, this is a time full of shadows and fear.

But we have been through worse before and we have faced more difficult days before. We have shown courage and determination, and skillful and inventive and courageous and committed responses to crisis before. We should draw on our story, we should draw on our history as we've never drawn before.

Cole: Our strength comes from our story.

McCullough: Absolutely. If we don't know who we are, if we don't know how we became what we are, we're going to start suffering from all the obvious detrimental effects of amnesia.

Cole: Collective amnesia.

McCullough: Furthermore, we face an enemy who believes in enforced ignorance. And it's all that we stand for . . . is the open mind--

Cole: Right. Tolerance.

McCullough:--the generous spirit, the ideal of tolerance, freedom, education, opportunity. All that is in the paragraph that John Adams included in the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, which is the oldest written constitution still in use in the world today. It predates our national constitution by ten years.

Listen to this. "Wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties"--you have to have wisdom and knowledge as well as virtue to preserve your rights and liberties--"and as these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education in various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people"--in other words, everybody--"it shall be the duty"--the duty--"of legislators and magistrates in all future periods of this commonwealth to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them"--public schools, grammar schools, and so forth.

Then he goes on to say what he means by education. And what Adams means by education clearly is everything. No boundaries. It's all interesting. It's all important. "To encourage . . . for the promotion of agriculture, arts, sciences, commerce, trades, manufactures, and a natural history of the country; to countenance and inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty and punctuality in their dealings, sincerity, good humor"--there will be good humor--"and all social affections"--

Cole: That's wonderful.

McCullough:--"and generous sentiments among the people."

There had never been any such statement in any proclamation or constitution ever in the history of the world. And there it is. This was radical in its day. It's saying not just that it would be a good idea to educate people, it's saying it's the duty of the government. We "cherish" these interests, that the good society, the good life, is the life of the mind, and the life of the mind is the life of the spirit.

The pursuit of happiness. What did they mean by "the pursuit of happiness"? They did not mean material wealth. They did not mean ease, luxury.

Cole: Happiness in our sense.

McCullough: As near as I can tell, they meant the life of the mind and the life of the spirit.

Adams wrote a letter to his boy, John Quincy, concerned that the boy not just be studying Greek and Latin, but that he be reading the great works in his own mother tongue, and particularly the English poets. He was telling him his happiness mattered.

So what does he mean by “happiness”? He says, “Read somewhat in the English poets every day. You will find them elegant, entertaining and constructive companions through your whole life.” In other words, education is the whole life.

Then he says, “In all the disquisitions you have heard concerning the happiness of life, has it ever been recommended to you to read poetry?” That’s when he says this famous, wonderful line, “You will never be alone with a poet in your pocket.”

Cole: That's wonderful.

McCullough: Even more to the point, I guess, is a very well-known paragraph, but still it deserves being repeated, it seems to me, at any chance. I might have put it--it’s where he says, “I must study politics and war, so that my”--

Cole: Oh, that is wonderful. "So the next generation"--

McCullough: --"can study art, music"--

Cole: Right, right. That's one of my favorites.

McCullough: Absolutely right. At the very end of Adams’s life, Adams’s doctor wrote a letter to John Quincy to say, “I’ve just been to see him. But as weak as was his material frame, his mind was still enthroned.”

Cole: That's wonderful.

McCullough: Yes. I did not study Latin. I did not take Latin. It’s one of the regrets of my life. But I’m absolutely convinced, the more I understand these eighteenth-century people, that it was that grounding in Greek and Latin that gave them their sense of the classic virtues: the classic ideals of honor, virtue, the good society, and their historic examples of what they could try to live up to.

Cole: Yes. We have a new initiative at the NEH called “We the People,” which is a response to 9/11. It is aimed at getting people in all walks of life thinking about, through our various projects and through our institutions, what it means to be an American--our liberties, all those things we were attacked for. After 9/11, it seems to me that this is something essential. That’s why it is so alarming that you have this kind of historical amnesia.

McCullough: Well, there are two interesting curves, it seems to me--and I don’t have any data on it. But there is a notable rise in popular interest in history, as measured by the success, for example, of The History Channel on television. Nobody thought that would work. There are other measures: the long run that *The American Experience* has had on PBS, the success of the presidential series that C-SPAN ran, the reading audience for books like mine and Edmund Morris’s Theodore Rex and others. The level of knowledge of those we’re educating seems on the decline while the general interest seems to be on the rise.

Cole: That's the paradox. I think of the The History Channel and *The American Experience* as a kind of public university.

McCullough: Maybe because so many people didn’t learn these things in college, they’re curious to find out. But we need to get them young. Little children can learn anything. I have met with fifth-grade and sixth-grade classes. I’ve worked with them. I know how far they can go, just as they can learn a foreign language. The mind is so absorbent then. There ought to be a real program to educate teachers who want to teach grade school children about history. One of the interesting measures of the rise in interest in

history is the percentage of the people who travel in this country who are going to a specific place because of its historic interest.

Of the people who come to tour Virginia, something like eighty percent of them come because of the history. In my own state of Massachusetts, they come for the history. They bring their children. They come to Washington, D.C., and they come to Williamsburg. The school trip is of the utmost importance. It ought to be encouraged in every possible way, throughout the country.

Another good classroom program has the children act a part. My granddaughter's fifth-grade class, two sections of the class, are doing the American presidents. Each child is a president and/or a first lady. Their job is to learn all about that president. Then, at the end of the month there's a big celebration party for these forty children and their parents. They all come as their president or their first lady, dressed up as that person.

Cole: Are you going to be there?

McCullough: Absolutely. I have met with them. I was astounded by how much they know. The child who plays Dolley Madison or James K. Polk-- they're never going to forget that. I wish that publishers would start producing little plays that could be done with twenty or thirty children somehow involved, or even ten children. If you're going to play the part of an historic figure in a play, in school, you're never going to forget that. That's the time to catch them. I really think if the bug is caught then, it stays with you for life.

I'm absolutely positive it's in our human nature to want to know about the past. The two most popular movies of all time, while not historically accurate, are about core historic events: *Gone With the Wind* and *Titanic*. There is a human longing to go back to other times. We all know how when we were children we asked our parents, "What was it like when you were a kid?" If you have children, you know that they love to hear about that.

I think it probably has something to do with our survival as a species. For nine-tenths of the time that human beings have been on earth, knowledge that was essential to survival was transmitted from one generation to the next by the vehicle of story.

My strong feeling is that we must learn more about how we learn. How do we really learn something so that we don't forget it? I'm convinced that we learn by struggling to find the solution to a problem on our own--with some guidance, but doing, getting in and getting our hands dirty and working it.

Cole: So we really understand it. When we do it that way, we really know it. It's not superimposed.

McCullough: If you had to take that typewriter or that automobile engine apart and spend a year to put it back together, you'd never forget it.

Cole: That's right.

McCullough: I opened a closet in the attic of the old library at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute one beautiful fall afternoon, and there were all the records and the private correspondence and the scrapbooks and the photographs and the drawings and so forth of the Brooklyn Bridge, just stashed in that closet, no catalog, no index--nobody really knew what all was there--bundles of letters tied up with shoestrings the way it had been when the Roebling family turned it over.

I spent three years trying to untangle all that, trying to understand it, and then to make it clear. It's been thirty years, and I'm sure I could sit down now and take a test and do extremely well on that subject because I'll never ever forget it.

Cole: You put that engine together.

McCullough: And we've all crammed for exams, maybe did very well on the exams, and three months later or three weeks later--

Cole: It's gone.

McCullough: --it's gone. So I think we have got to bring the lab technique to the teaching of the humanities to a far greater degree than we have. There are lots of ways that can be done. And they're exciting and they're fun.

I am adamant on the subject that we must not cut back on funding of the teaching of the arts in the schools: music, painting, theater, dance, all of it. The great thing about the arts is that the only way you learn how to do it is by doing it. If a child learns nothing but that as a guide to life, that's invaluable. You can't learn to play the piano without playing the piano, you can't learn to write without writing, and, in many ways, you can't learn to think without thinking. Writing is thinking. To write well is to think clearly. That's why it's so hard.

Cole: That's right. I don't think you know what you know until you write it.

McCullough: Exactly. We all know the old expression, "I'll work my thoughts out on paper." That's exactly right. There's something about the pen that focuses the brain in a way that nothing else does. That is why we must have more writing in the schools, more writing in all subjects, not just in English classes. And the teacher who teaches history should be grading the writing, too.

Lots of schools do this and do it very well, but, generally speaking, we've got to have these programs revised so that there's more stress on writing. That stress on the arts, particularly in public grade schools in the cities, is essential. The talent, including the talent for history--and I do think there are people who just have a talent for it, the way you have a talent for public speaking or music or whatever--it shouldn't be allowed to lie dormant. It should be brought alive.

Cole: Terrific. Thank you very much.

McCullough: I've enjoyed it.

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