Introduction

The Problem with History

It is said that Clio cannot be taken by storm, but requires much patient and skillful Wooing. Moreover, Clio likes a certain degree of self-effacement in her suitors.

Charles Downer Hazen,
“This Country as Mr. Chesterton Sees It,”
New York Times Book Review, June 8, 1919

Clio, paramount among the nine ancient Greek muses, was gifted by her mother with memory and shared lyric skills with her eight sisters. She inspired those who assayed to sing, tell, and write stories of the past. Ancient audiences held the followers of Clio in high regard, for they captured the imagination of the listener and reader. For Hellenes gathered around the fire pit to hear Homer sing about Troy, or Hellenized Romans who delighted in reading their copy of Plutarch’s Parallel Lives, or the monks in the English abbeys who squinted in the candlelight as they re-read older chronicles of the lives of Saxon saints and kings, or the thousands of nineteenth-century middle-class families that gathered in gaslit parlors to devour the tales of heroism in Francis Parkman’s volumes, history enchanted and instructed, just as Clio wished. The Greeks defeated the Trojans; Caesar failed where Alexander the Great succeeded; Alfred the Great unified Anglo-Saxon England; and the British chased the French and their Indian allies from North America for reasons that
historians’ listeners and readers thought worth knowing. In the nineteenth century, no educated person in the West doubted that history was “assigned the office of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages.”

The university-trained historians of the late nineteenth century echoed this creed as they lobbied for required history courses in the schools alongside the sciences.

If it is desirable that the high-school pupil should know the physical world, that he should know the habits of ants and bees, the laws of floral growth, the simple reactions in the chemical retort, it is certainly even more desirable that he should be led to see the steps in the development of the human race, and should have some dim perception of his own place, and of his country’s place, in the great movements of men. . . . All our institutions, our habits of thought and modes of action, are inheritances from preceding ages: no conscious advance, no worthy reform, can be secured without both a knowledge of the present and an appreciation of how forces have worked in the social and political organization of former times.

Historians and teachers of history wanted everyone to be able to judge history and assumed the value of such judgment. In a “best practices” piece for the American Historical Association (AHA), Peter Stearns warned, “In the past[,] history has been justified for reasons we would no longer accept,” but taught well, history still had the power to delight, instruct, and empower.²

Sadly, Clio’s enticements faded as war and genocide in the twentieth century turned history into a horror story. The ease with which cynical and maniacal political leaders and their ideological abettors used history to justify their policies of conquest and annihilation drove Clio from her pedestal. In “the bloodbath of European fighting in the First World War and the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the present threat to environmental resources,” who could trust the old ideas of beauty, progress, reason, and education the histories once proclaimed? There was too
much history for us to bear. “For as long as we can discern, the past has
loomed ominously above the lives of men, threatening, demanding, and
hinting at cataclysm. . . . Its dark firmament has glittered with examples,
a few benevolent, most doom laden. Embedded in this mass of belief,
which fulfilled, as we shall see, diverse and necessary social purposes,
were bits and pieces of truth.” Historians were shaken; their faith “that
they could understand by a simple process of induction the forces that
shaped the past now seemed dangerously naïve.”

Weary and wary academics now warn that the student of history will
suffer “bitter disappointment” if he or she seeks guidance from history. A
bestselling textbook in philosophy of history issued the following warning:
“Historians are not the guardians of universal values, nor can they deliver
‘the verdict of history.’” A popular history of historical writing summed up
this judgment: “[A]ways handle history with care.” Even defenses of the his-
torical profession today begin with a mea culpa: “We professors,” as Ameri-
can Historical Association President Anthony Grafton ruefully recounted
the “barrage” of charges against history, “are imprisoned within sclerotic
disciplines, obsessed with highly specialized research. We can’t write except
in meaningless jargon, and we address only esoteric students, thus insur-
ing that we have no audience.” Not surprising, then, that Keith Jenkins, the
enfant terrible of philosophy of history, found the search for the truth in
history an “unachievable” goal, misleading at best, for “the truths of the past
elude us. . . . [H]istory is intersubjective and ideologically positioned, objec-
tivity and being unbiased are chimeras.” This much is certain—truths that
once seemed within our reach are now beyond our grasp.

The pervasive disenchantment of the academics echoed popular per-
ceptions of the futility of historical study. Entertaining though it might be,
it was still “the bunk,” “lie,” and “one damn thing after another.” What the
popular mind especially rejected was the uniqueness and authority of his-
torical study. A popular essay on the meaning of the past at the end of the
twentieth century by a nonhistorian, Francis Fukuyama, reduced history
to a Swiss Army knife whose many attachments one can manipulate to fit
any need, useful because they are so conveniently manipulated. Forget the
claims of the professional historian to objectivity. “Just as a modern economist does not try to define a product’s ‘utility’ or ‘value’ in itself, but rather accepts the marketplace’s valuation of it as expressed in a price, so one would accept the judgment of the marketplace of world history.” In that process, “we can think of human history as a dialogue or competition between different regimes or forms of social organization.” In other words, we could buy and sell histories—the perfect fit for a consumer-driven intellectual marketplace—with the result that some academic historians have morphed into consulting editors and staff writers for mass-market magazines.5

The distrust of the academic historians and their work product exploded in the last years of the twentieth century, when the National Endowment for the Humanities underwrote a study of history lesson plans for secondary schools. At the head of the project was a professor of history at UCLA, and other academics sat on various drafting committees. Finished and published in 1994, the National History Standards draft curriculum for K–12 seemed to be a little short on heroes and far too long on slavery, violence, and other blemishes in American history. Conservative critics of the suggested “student achievement examples” were appalled. Lynne Cheney, who as chairperson of the National Endowment for the Humanities during President George H.W. Bush’s administration had sponsored the project, later recalled that the National History Standards “reflected the gloomy, politically driven revisionism” that had become “all too familiar on college campuses.” George Washington, U. S. Grant, and Robert E. Lee were gone, replaced by women of color, labor radicals, and other minor figures. Enduring values were gone too; only oppression remained. On October 20, 1994, Cheney’s op-ed piece “The End of History” graced the back pages of the Wall Street Journal. In it, she ridiculed the project for elevating the National Organization for Women, the Sierra Club, and Harriet Tubman in importance above the Constitution, the U.S. Congress, and the Civil War. The result was a “grim and gloomy” account of America that could give comfort to only the “politically correct” (as if the Revolution and the Civil War did not have some grim and gloomy moments).6
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Repeating Henry Ford’s infamous dismissal of all history, then-Congressman Newt Gingrich aimed his fire at the professional historians: “[T]he fiasco over the American and Western history standards is a reflection of what has happened to the world of academic history. The profession and the American Historical Association are now dominated by younger historians with a familiar agenda: Take the west down a peg, romanticize ‘the Other’ (non-whites), treat all cultures as equal, refrain from criticizing non-white cultures.” The National History Standards was condemned in a 99–1 U.S. Senate vote.⁷

The chair of the drafting committee, UCLA history professor Gary Nash, defended the document and the process by which it had been created. He later recalled, “Those who were at first reluctant about the wisdom of this enterprise soon decided that they might compromise their own best interests if they failed to join in. If the cards were being dealt, why would historians or social studies educators not want seats around the big table?” The process was long and arduous but uplifting. “Never in the long history of public education, reaching back more than three hundred years, had such an attempt been made to raise the level of history education. Never before had such a broad-based group of history educators from all parts of the country gathered to work collaboratively on such an enterprise. The History Standards Project represented the building of bridges between two groups of largely separated educators. These bridges may even outlast the standards themselves.” But the controversy was not really about the standards. It was about the uses of history. “The history standards controversy laid bare competing meanings of patriotism and the question of how to inculcate the ideal of citizenship in young students. For the Cheney-led cohort, children who learn about the Ku Klux Klan and McCarthyism will not learn to love their country. It will embarrass and make cynics of them. For historians, the approach favored by critics is sugar-coated history that will make cynics of children because they will grow up to find that the bland or celebratory history books have excluded or misrepresented the realities of past life.”⁸
Nash was waging an uphill battle, not only against those who disputed his expertise and the cachet that expertise supposedly brought but also against those who saw in history proof of our inability to know the past with certainty. We yearn for the comforting past, for as the celebrated literary critic Frank Kermode wrote shortly before he passed away, “[W]e project our existential anxieties on to history.” It was for this very reason that during the bitter partisan contests of the 1820s, the surviving founding fathers feared that Americans would forget the sacrifices of previous generations. Shortly before he died, Thomas Jefferson wrote to his longtime friend James Madison, “It has also been a great solace to me to believe that you are engaged in vindicating to posterity the course we have pursued. . . . [T]ake care of me when [I am] dead.” Our political leaders still want to get right with history, particularly when the verdict of history is uncertain. At his farewell press conference on January 11, 2009, outgoing President George W. Bush expressed the hope that “History will be the judge. . . . History will look back and determine” whether he had failed in his trust or left the world a better, safer place than he had found it. President Bush compared himself to Lincoln, two wartime presidents burdened with history. So the problem facing the student of history is how to woo Clio, how to sustain an arguable case that the historians’ methods for knowing about the past are as valid as any other way of knowing about the past. As my first history teacher, Hayden White, wrote in 1966, “[T]he burden of the historian in our time is to reestablish the dignity of historical studies.”

As this very brief tour of “the problem” with history reveals, history has a history, a changing cast of chroniclers working in a varied collection of institutions, sharing a vital concern about the meaning of the past. Along the way, the doing of history has evolved in a convoluted fashion from storytelling and soothsaying to its recognizable modern form. Although popular historians and academic historians may not always use the same methods, they share a place in the history of history with religious writers, philosophers, social scientists, men and women of letters, biographers,
policy makers, and lawgivers who use history. It is this story—the story of history and its related disciplines—that I want to tell here.

It may seem, as one reads the following pages, that my project resembles Stephen Leacock’s impetuous nobleman who flings “himself upon his horse and rides madly off in all directions,” but there is a method to the organization of this book. While the outer frame—the seven chapters—is topical, the order of the topics reflects the chronological order of history’s encounter with each chapter’s subject matter. History and religion were born together. Philosophy made its claim on history in the classical period of Western civilization. In the seventeenth century, the introduction of the social sciences added another member to Clio’s modern family. The eighteenth century imposed literary canons on the historian. The next century’s celebration of the great man drew biography and history together. The twentieth century’s near-fatal fascination with war gave rise to historically infused policy studies. In the closing decades of the twentieth century and the opening years of the twenty-first century, the explosion of historical consulting and expert witnessing in law cases made history and law close collaborators.¹⁰

Not only are the chapters arrayed in chronological order, within each chapter my account is roughly chronological. Each chapter thus stands on its own, a story of collaboration and rivalry, of cross-fertilization and competition, like the story of any family. Though they sometimes squabble, Clio and her companions are inseparable. On the foundation of this comparative approach, we can see the particular strengths of the historical way of knowing and determine if, in the final analysis, the entire enterprise of historical scholarship is worth our investment in it. If history is “a pool, sometimes benign, sometimes sulfurous, that lies under the present, silently shaping our institutions, our ways of thought, our likes and our dislikes” that “we call on for validation, and for lessons and advice,” an inquiry into the validity of historical judgment is a vital intellectual task not just for the historian, but for anyone who reads history and takes it seriously.¹¹
A final, more personal confession: Like so many other academics, I was guilty of the Baconian fallacy of wanting to know everything about this subject before I wrote anything. For years, I amassed file boxes of note cards, certain that just a few more forays into the library would sate the muse. But self-indulgence was a trap, and the longer I held off writing the closer I came to “giv[ing] up [my] soul to weariness and resignation.” My escape from this snare was to adopt what I have come to call the synecdochal method—not exactly sampling, but using selected parts to represent the whole. I focused on the critical moments when history and its companions were in genuine conversation. Some examples: I elected to devote most of the first chapter on history and religion to the encounter between Judeo-Christian chronology and Western science because Judaism and Christianity are particularly concerned with history, and modern science questions traditional Judeo-Christian views of history. In the third chapter, on history and the social sciences, I focus much of my attention on the half-century between 1875 and 1925 because that was the period when social science and history most closely paralleled each other. In chapter 6, on history and policy studies, I focused on warfare because my concern was to show the crucial interaction of the two disciplines rather than explore every place where they might interact. By selecting portions of the long dialogue between history and its companions rather than tracking the entirety of the conversation, I found I could illuminate my thesis without blinding the reader. A more universally knowledgeable scholar would have included more examples, but a truly encyclopedic work, like the Moiré pattern that appears when an electronic image is overly enlarged, would have resulted in a pattern of black dots rather than a recognizable picture.