

## **“History- A Worthwhile Academic Discipline”**

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### **Introduction**

The study of history has been condemned as a low level intellectual activity that encourages mere regurgitation of names, dates, places and events. Some view history as dead, dusty and buried. This is a misrepresentation of Elton (1967: 11). Elton states, “The future is dark, the present burdensome. Only the past, dead and buried, bears contemplation.” Others have dismissed history as all relativist. In one of Jane Austen’s novels, a character called Catherine Morland said of the discipline, “I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention” (Austen 1969: chapter xiv). Henry Ford uttered one of the most demeaning remarks about the discipline when he said, “I don’t know much about history, and I wouldn’t give a nickel for all the history in the world. History is more or less bunk. It is tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker’s damn is the history we make today” (*Chicago Tribune* 1916).

As careless and unreasonable as such statements appear, they have had a profound impact in bringing into disregard the study of history in comparison to other disciplines. The intention of this paper is to demonstrate that some criticisms leveled against history arise mainly from a misunderstanding of the dynamics involved in the discipline. The paper makes no claim for the production of new historical knowledge. What it seeks, nevertheless, is to clearly delineate and re-emphasise the manifold value of history as an area worthy of academic pursuit.

### **Rigorous Intellectual Activities**

The rigorous intellectual applications that the study of history develops in, and demands from its practitioners, dismiss the notion that it constitutes a low level academic activity. History trains the intellect in very useful and profound ways. These include, but are not limited to, reading and research, thesis formulation, data analysis and the writing up of findings.

Studying history makes avid, meticulous and critical readers out of its students. The historian must read and research widely, not only to grasp the content of historical writing but also to ascertain the lines of argument, the kinds and ranges of sources, the style of writers as well as to carve out original spaces within the historical discourse. Criticism of sources, a vital dimension of historical enquiry, can involve the application of complicated and sophisticated methodologies. For example, in recent years, paleography, literary and word frequency comparisons have been used to establish authorship. Carbon 14 and thermo luminescence dating tests have also shed light on the date of historical sources (Watson 2004:17).

The need to analyse historical data is one of the major and intellectually challenging objectives of the discipline. While it is taken for granted that the historian will be careful enough to be accurate about the discrete and particular issues with which his or her investigation deals,

the primary responsibility is to derive meaning through exhaustive and exhausting interrogation of the remnants of the past (Watson 2004:16). Meticulous care and attention are also required for the accurate inclusion of references, such as footnotes and bibliographies, in historical writing. That referencing is vital is reflected in the historians' golden rule: „no sources, no history“. Citing references is also crucial to avoid plagiarism.

### **Synthesizing Multiple Writings**

The skilled historian is normally involved in a highly complex balancing act in terms of the kinds of writings employed in presenting historical findings. Basically, three kinds of writing are simultaneously at work. First, there is historical narration, (not be confused with literary narration), which furnishes the necessary details of an experience of the past, thereby providing context for the work under investigation. Second, historical description, having nothing at all to do with metaphors and similes, organises the discussions into appropriate dividers and sign posts such as themes, periods and geographical and other spaces. Third, historical analysis applies interpretation to the data being researched. The historian must continuously be conscious of the need to balance these three kinds of writing. Without sufficient narrative, a vacuum will be created. Without sufficient description, the reader, lacking sign posts, can become lost, as developments and phenomena lose distinctive location, form and context. Without interpretation, the work will become a mass of meaningless chronicles. Writing history necessitates the synthesis of multiple kinds of writing in the right proportions.

### **Interpretation Controlled by Procedure**

The interpretative dimension of history reading and writing is a major feature esteemed by historians. For history's critics, however, it is this very quality that has been scorned as interpretative flux. Well known British historiographer, Keith Jenkins, identifies interpretation in history as its prime epistemological fragility (Jenkins 1991:11). Yet he insists that history ought not to be dismissed as being all relativist. Jenkins admits that several historians, using the same sources, may reach different and even contradictory conclusions. The fact remains, however, that the past (i.e. what had happened) is fixed. It is not invented nor can it be altered by its researchers. There may be many histories, (i.e. multiple interpretations of the past), but there is only one past. The fixity and finiteness of the historians' materials mark the extreme possible limits of the subject (Jenkins 1991:9; Bindoff 1962:12). And, even in the deconstruction and construction of many histories, properly referred to as historiography, the demand for wide reading, empiricism, rigorous questioning, close referencing, logical, well articulated and supported arguments, and the sometimes hostile peer reviews (Marwick 2001a:19; Elton 1969:70, 112 - 113; Marwick 1970: 187, 190), act as a brake on careless and hasty historical analysis. Sound historical interpretations do not emanate from fanciful whims. To find acceptance, the plausibility of historical writing has to be justified by the independent, objective past, through fairly standardized methodologies and procedures.

## **The Interconnectivity of Past, Present and Future**

The study of history will always be relevant because it is an important trajectory connecting the past to the present and the future. This does not mean, of course, that the past explains the present in its exact form or anticipates the future exactly as it will occur. History's emphasis is on the uniqueness of events, and the acknowledgement that no two activities of the past are exactly alike. Thus, the clichés that the past repeats itself, and that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it, must always be placed in proper context (Watson 2004:10; Bindoff 1962:4; Marwick 1970:17). The past furnishes insightful explanations about the present. While over time all things change, remnants of the past always "walk into" the present because of the abiding principle of continuity. Things are therefore the way they are partly because of the way they used to be. And if the past exerts influence on the present which is tomorrow's past, then it will most assuredly affect the future which is tomorrow's present.

Several writers have presented poignant defenses for studying history by underscoring its role in linking past, present and future. Noted historian, Edward Hallett Carr, asserts that "History is an unending dialogue between past and present" (Carr 1961:30). H. P. R. Finberg posits that "... the present is only an indivisible dividing line between the future and the past" (Finberg 1962: viii). The novelist William Faulkner wisely observed that "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (Faulkner 1951: Act 1, Scene 3). George Orwell, in his well-known novel, *Nineteen Eighty Four*, warned, "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" (Orwell 1949: 35). Marwick suggests, and this might be the most significant implication, that "Without history we shall not begin to understand the problems of the present, and will be without the basic knowledge essential for grappling intelligently with the future" (Marwick 1970:17). These statements capture the critical relevance of historical understanding with regards to its interconnectivity with time.

### **A People's Memory Bank**

A continuum of the past's influence on the present and the future is the crucial role that the discipline of history plays in crafting for a people their sense of self. History is our memory bank. If we have no history, we have no memory and, consequently, no identity. Keith Jenkins explains that "People in the present need antecedents to locate themselves now, and legitimate their ongoing and future ways of living ... Thus people literally feel the need to root themselves today and tomorrow in their yesterdays" (Jenkins 1991:18). Consequently, in the absence of historical understanding, people experience virtual amnesia, and find no anchorage in time; a dangerous, psychologically traumatic situation (Watson 2004:6; Jenkins 1991: 18 – 19). Through the study of history, however, a sense of belonging, national pride, patriotism, understanding and appreciation of present circumstances, especially relations with others, can take root and flourish, and can be used by leaders to motivate people to move in one direction or the other. These are the reasons, as Marwick points out, why nations take special care and pride in maintaining museums, archives and libraries, devoted to the preservation of sources and relics of the past

(Marwick 1970:15). History is the only proof that a group of people did exist in the past. This function alone furnishes the discipline with the esteem it deserves. History is a prerequisite for giving and shaping the identity of all peoples of the world.

### **Careers for Historians**

The utilitarian functions of history have, at least, always been appreciated by historians themselves. In ancient times, between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries when Herodotus, the father of history, and his colleagues such as, Thucydides, Polybius, Livy, Tacitus and Plutarch, wrote history, their intentions was not merely to teach the discipline but also to provide a leadership manual for those earmarked for power (Rawlinson 1858). To meet this objective, they sometimes embellished their records. While their methodology may not have been altogether sound, they did succeed in making history required reading for those selected for political and military leadership. In the modern world, the career opportunities opened to history students is comparatively much wider. With relative ease, history graduates gain entry into the professions of teaching and lecturing. Some pursue careers in law, politics, journalism, the diplomatic and foreign service. In this regard, G. N. Brooke makes the useful observation that, since history touches on other academic disciplines such as art, literature, philosophy etc. , it is not surprising that a history graduate is both well rounded and marketable (Brooke 1957:3).

### **Intellectually Entertaining**

History's entertainment value makes it both endearing and irresistible. The intellectually alert and curious are fascinated by the varied and extensive data base history stores and generates; which, over the years, has led to the emergence of multiple variants of the discipline such as social, economic, gender and family history. The multiplicity of branches of the discipline makes it possible to ask both big and small questions of the world, and produce answers that other fields of academic enquiry cannot possibly ask or answer. History also makes it possible to enter vicariously into the lives of the rich, powerful, famous, as well as the lives of the poor and downtrodden. Biographies and autobiographies, and myriad categories of historiography, continue to satisfy the curious gaze with which both historians and non-historians peer into the lives of those who lived in the past.

### **Conclusion**

Reading and writing history is an exacting and meticulous craft. It is a discipline that both taxes and trains the mind. It narrows the gap between the past, present and future and amasses and distills people's collective memories. It satiates the hunger of the intellectually curious and is also a gateway to a multiplicity of professions. Both the student and professional are likely to find the discipline both highly functional and entertaining. History has conferred, and will continue to confer, multiple and important meanings to a wide-cross section of people.

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