

What's the point of history?

Review Number: 2425

Publish date: Friday, 6 November, 2020

Author: Donald Bloxham

ISBN: 9780198858713

Date of Publication: 2020

Price: £35.00

Pages: 336pp.

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Publisher url: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/history-and-morality-9780198858713?cc=gb&lang=en>

Place of Publication: Oxford

Author: Donald Bloxham

ISBN: 9780198858720

Date of Publication: 2020

Price: £35.00

Pages: 416pp.

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Publisher url: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/why-history-9780198858720?lang=en&cc=us>

Place of Publication: Oxford

Reviewer: Daniel Woolf

The sub-branch of history that is known by the ambiguous (and frightening to undergraduates, cats, and many mainstream academics) name “historiography” seems to be undergoing a Renaissance at the moment. In addition to the vast assortment of highly specialized (and, alas, exorbitantly-priced) monographs emerging from trade publishers such as Bloomsbury, Palgrave, Routledge, and Berghahn Books, university presses have become more engaged in the field, and not just with the sorts of anthologies and “how to” method texts that can be calculated to earn (relatively) big money through course assignment. Even the once-moribund sub-sub-branch known as “the history of historical writing” has prospered from this, as newer surveys—of both the traditional western-centred “discipline” and its origins—and more global surveys—either sole-authored or collaborative—have emerged to displace the assorted surveys written in the twentieth century. Whereas we once had to depend upon solid but very dated (and definitely Eurocentric) anthologies such as the late Fritz Stern’s classic *The Varieties of History* (1956), the instructor hunting for assignable gobbits now need look no further than the internet. And there is almost an embarrassment of surveys, companions, and even encyclopedias, quite apart from the hundreds of monographs devoted to particular periods or national traditions.

Donald Bloxham’s *Why History?* might at first glance appear to be simply another trip down the well-worn path whereby history is born in antiquity with the Greeks (and/or the Jews), and gradually makes its way through two and half millennia of development, including not a few wrong turns and dead ends, before happily landing in the modern—or perhaps now, less happily, postmodern—academic history department. One discovers quickly that it is no such thing, though it retains the Eurocentric scope of more traditional surveys. Bloxham eschews any attempt at a global perspective: if you want to find out about Africa, South

Asia, Latin America, or even China (which has a much longer continuous tradition of historical writing than any western nation or empire), this is not the book for you. That's perfectly fine, as there is something to be said for a closer analysis of specific traditions, of which the Euro-American one, whether one likes it or not, achieved disciplinary hegemony in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

We often tell our students that good historical research and historical thinking should begin with a question, and Professor Bloxham chooses to ask a very big one. His simple two-word title, with minimalist subtitle, accurately indicates his purpose, which is to explain the justifications for thinking and writing about the past that have been adduced over the millennia (again, only in the West—the answers in several Asian or in pre-literate traditions would be rather different though not, I think, entirely so). At present, with STEM disciplines seemingly pushing the humanities ever further into the margins, along with an increasingly instrumentalist outlook from the governments that provide the funding for public education, the question “why history” is of interest not simply from a—well—“historical” perspective. So far as the future of academic historical inquiry is concerned, it is virtually an existential challenge. As Bloxham notes, in terms of the declining relevance of professional history, we in the discipline should look no further than the mirror. In the words of the celebrated philosopher Pogo Possum, we have met the enemy, and they is us.

What Bloxham loses in global perspective is more than regained in a shrewd analytic disaggregation of the arguments in favour of history. These Bloxham enumerates in the introduction as follows—History as:

- entertainment;
- memorialization;
- speculative philosophy;
- moral lesson;
- travel;
- method;
- communion; and
- identity.

In the book's later chapters, two newcomers, particularly resonant in our current era of reconciliations, trauma, and political polarization, join the roster: History as “emancipation” and as “therapy”. Of course, the boundaries between many of these are both blurry and fluid; there is a lot of overlap between them, as Bloxham concedes. Moreover, they amount to a kind of collective or “team” of justifications for history. As with any team, they get unequal time on the playing field, some sitting out for entire centuries, or playing only utility roles, and one or two (speculative philosophy of history for instance) having to retire entirely with apparently career-ending injuries, only to stagger back on, hobbled but still game. (See: Toynbee and Spengler's efforts in the first half of the twentieth century after displacement by Rankeans and historicists; premature deaths and resurgences of Marxism; or even such recent efforts at explaining the course of world history, and prophesying its future, as Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*).

In some ways, Bloxham's effort at nomenclature falls, itself, into a grand humanist tradition that goes back at least as far as the Renaissance *artes historicae*, manuals and guides to the reading and (less often before the later seventeenth century) writing of history. For the perplexed reader, faced with what was a relative flood of printed histories, these guides often sought to be the means for judging reliability and for understanding how writing about the past fitted into a world of knowledge principally organized according to rules, inherited from the Greeks, of genre. (1) Thus, Francis Bacon in the early seventeenth century, borrowing heavily (and without attribution) from earlier continental authors, beat the bounds between sacred and profane history (the two grand categories created in late antiquity) and, within the profane, subgenres such as civil history and antiquities. The Enlightenment continued down this road, though with somewhat different purpose and outlook, as, also in a different way, did both Comtean positivism and mainstream German historicism. But arguably the closest recognizable ancestor to Bloxham's taxonomy was none other than the bad boy of late nineteenth-century philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche, whose elegantly simple tripartite division of history into the monumental, antiquarian, and critical—if not his fault-finding with all

three (and what he saw, even then, as a stifling academic culture which had squandered the true value of the past to lived life)—has many features in common with Bloxham's approach.

On the whole, *Why History?* is a marvel of both clarity and erudition. Some of its learnedness, inevitably in a survey, is at second or third-hand (quotations from X who in turn is quoting Y), but actually not a lot for a book of this chronological and topical range. The bibliography is enormous: Bloxham has a deeply impressive grasp of the main features of 25 centuries of western historical writing and has read a vast number of works in several languages. One can't read everything, much less cite it all, but there are one or two surprising bibliographical lacunae: most notably Frederick Beiser's extensive study of historicism from the eighteenth century through Weber, which has been out—from OUP no less—since 2015 (and is obviously known to Professor Bloxham because he uses it in his other book, reviewed below), and the recent Palgrave series on nationalism and history edited by Stefan Berger, which seems underutilized here. But the footnotes and bibliography (which is not fully comprehensive of all the works cited) are treasure troves and I found myself repeatedly stopping to take note of an essay or monograph I'd not run across.

If I have two complaints about this most interesting and learned book, they are relatively minor, and I shall get them out of the way here. The first is trivial: there appears to have been a bit of a rush at the production stage to get this volume into print, and there is a more than usual number of typos and misspellings or mis-citings of names and book titles (Streuver for Nancy Struever, Gunée for Bernard Guenée, and so on—Ernest Labrousse, who lived through both world wars, may be rolling in his grave at the Germanization of his given name into Ernst). I shall not catalogue these at length, and we all make these mistakes, but one is not accustomed to seeing so many in a book from OUP. There is at least one sentence (p. 285, beginning with "Natalie Davis") of which I can make no sense grammatically. And there is the occasional statement or turn of phrase that did cause me to wonder the intent, such as the assertion that Geoffrey of Monmouth's mythical line of British kings was quickly rejected by "specialist scepticism". I'm not sure what would constitute "specialists" in the twelfth century since, as far as I know, William of Newburgh and Gerald of Wales, two of the earliest foes of Galfridian invention, did not occupy endowed chairs in the study of Romano-British history.

The more substantive issue, which may come down to a matter of taste, is that the nomenclature itself, having been well articulated early on, doesn't really fully reappear until the very end of the book. Certainly, the roster of answers to "why history" are individually alluded to throughout, and they underpin the overall argument of the book, but it's easy to lose the unifying thread amid the numerous digressions, expositions, and disquisitions on a wide variety of subjects and past or present authors. The result is that sometimes the middle chapters seem less about the "Why history" of the title and more about the "how history" was perceived and written which is to be found in more traditional accounts of the genre/field/discipline. Now, I do not mean to suggest that one should expect a mechanical set of subsections in each chapter outlining and cataloguing the different authors who variously adopted one type of argument in favour of history over another. That, too, would have been problematic, given the variation in arguments over the centuries. And it would also have been as dull as dishwater to read, so readers will be glad at its absence. Still, a little more signposting, or bringing us back to the central argument, would have been helpful, especially for the non-specialist reader.

Bloxham is no intellectual progressivist. He does not see the current state of historical writing as a kind of extended victory lap (to shift the earlier sports metaphor slightly) built on German, French, and Anglo-American gold-medal performances in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and many of us will be instinctively sympathetic to that anti-Whiggish view. But he goes further, and flattens out many of the changes and period shifts that have become virtually axiomatic in histories of historical writing, including those with a more global reach. Most of these works (full disclosure, my own included) would see significant inflection points in the history of history, occasions or times that turned thinking about the past in a new or different direction, even if we don't fall to the extreme end of the continuity/discontinuity spectrum where dwelt two authors who never wrote histories of history, the early Michel Foucault, with his incommensurable epistemes, and Thomas Kuhn of the successive and mutually exclusive paradigms in

natural science. Bloxham, in contrast, emphasizes continuities between periods and minimizes the implications of transitions such as those from antiquity to the Middle Ages, or the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. The bearers of these continuities (or, sometimes, rediscoveries) are the various above-mentioned reasons for history's existence and practice, even if, as noted, they aren't all equally active at any given time. At times I was reminded of a historian who features very briefly here, Arthur Lovejoy, and his famous "unit-ideas."

I believe Professor Bloxham is correct to call into question some of these shifts. There is no doubt that some of them have been overstated, not least by immediate-successor periods anxious to put distance between themselves and their predecessors. First the Renaissance and later, and even more harshly, the Enlightenment, dumped all over medieval historical thought and writing, and the chapter devoted to "the 'Middle Age'" (sic) demonstrates quite effectively the values and arguments shared between it and both pre-Christian and Christian antiquity at one end and the Renaissance at the other. The originality proclaimed in the 1970s and 80s for French Renaissance historical thinkers such as Henri de la Popelinière and even Jean Bodin looks a little less impressive over the span of several millennia, especially when compared with some of the more astute medieval minds who wrote or thought about history. (2) That said, while agreeing that the notion of a single "medieval mindset" or mentality is a gross oversimplification, must we throw the baby out with the bathwater? Without wholly buying into the late Hayden White's favourable characterization, in one of his most influential essays, (3) of annals and chronicles and his defense of their paratactic capture of the seeming meaningless of events in earthly time, there are aspects of medieval historiography that strike one as more remote than that of subsequent ages. (A book not cited here, which I still find compelling despite its age, is William Brandt's 1966 *The Shape of Medieval History*, which offered a controversial but interesting distinction between what Brandt called "clerical" vs "aristocratic" historiography.) (4)

The revision and deflation of the Renaissance and early modern "improvements" on medieval historical writing, and the stress of continuity, are perhaps the most prominent instances in the book of a larger strategy, which is to follow in the trail of Jacques Le Goff's final book (5) and dispute the utility of periods in the organization of the past. (There is an irony of which I'm not entirely sure the author himself is conscious: the book itself is organized thoroughly conventionally into chapters covering familiar chunks of time—antiquity, medieval, early modern, Enlightenment, Historicist/Nationalist, and Modern.) I'm not so sure we can do without periods, and not simply because without them we would be forced to use even more arbitrary temporal markers (centuries, regular or long; dynasties and reigns) or stick with geographical ones that are just as open to challenge. It's true that periods, especially those with overly sharp-edged boundaries—one recalls the old joke that the Middle Ages ended in 1453 in most of Europe, but it took till 1485 for England to catch up—inevitably obscure continuity and overstate change, but change there certainly is in history. Moreover, how you punctuate those changes, and where, is inescapably determinative of how the complete picture appears. To adapt a metaphor from music, periods are a bit like modes. One can have the same number of notes, but a scale will sound very different depending on which of them you begin and end.

I'm also somewhat less convinced by Bloxham's curve-flattening strategy as applied to the later transition between Enlightenment and nineteenth century history. Of course, there were overlaps, and the curve was notably flatter between the more circumspect (and chronologically later) German Aufklärung and the century of Ranke, Droysen, Dilthey, and Treitschke than in other parts of Europe. Reinhart Koselleck argued that the meaningful shift wasn't simply a stylistic or methodological one between Enlightenment and romanticism/nationalism/historicism, but a more substantive and metahistorical transition, during the *Sattelzeit* between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, wherein the exemplary value of history was finally rejected in favour of a notion of progress, and of a concept of history as not simply writing *about* the past, but the cumulative course of the past-in-itself-leading-to-the-future. This thesis in its broadest outlines seems tough to argue against.

Koselleck is one of a number of great contemporary historical theorists who come in for criticism here, including (not unexpectedly) Hayden White and, rather late in the story, Michel Foucault. Bloxham is quite

fair-minded when it comes to dealing with postmodernism and some of its most prominent icons, White and Frank Ankersmit among them. Certainly, this is no Marwickian/Eltonian jeremiad against all things anti-empirical. While Bloxham regards White (especially the early White of *Metahistory*) as reductively formalist, he is surprisingly positive about Jacques Derrida's contributions, given that, on the whole, Bloxham has little patience with impenetrable jargon. This isn't just a polemical principle: Bloxham appears to revel in his own Derridean deconstruction of cryptic *bons mots*, such as Fredric Jameson's injunction to "always historicize", which our author somewhat mischievously suggests would lead to an infinite regress of historicization of the directive, of the person stating the directive, etc.—essentially historiographic turtles all the way down. Relatedly, it is difficult not to nod affirmatively at a comment the author makes near the end of *Why History?* regarding both indecipherable prose and a different problem: our profession's narrower and narrower specialization, and its successive shifts of fashion or "turns". Of these, the general public who buy books at Blackwell's, Waterstones, and on Amazon know little and care a good deal less. As Bloxham puts it: "The History-reading public has been moved rather less profoundly than the academic profession by the 'turns' of the last four decades. This is partly because of the rise of an alienating jargon, a tendency which at once stems from and reinforces a wider tendency: most historians write primarily for other historians." (p. 316). The division between the academy and popular consumption/production of history is not a new one, but the professionals have been taking increased, nervous, note of it for at least the past 20 years. This lament has become increasingly common in the past decade or so. As David Harlan commented in 2006, reacting to comments by writers as diverse as Sean Wilentz and Michael Oakeshott: "if academic history hopes to avoid what looks more and more like a terminal estrangement from the larger intellectual community...it will have to negotiate some terms of accommodation with the rising influence of popular history." (6) I'm not sure much "negotiation" has happened in the intervening years, but there's certainly a lot more intrusion by historians and historiographers into what Oakeshott termed "the practical past".

While reading the book I was periodically reminded of J.H. Hexter's distinction between historians who were "lumpers" (his prime exhibit was Christopher Hill on puritans, science, and intellectual modernity), always looking for similarities and connections, and those who were "splitters", persistently focusing on tiny differences. Bloxham occupies a middle position. There are plenty of small differences, distinctions and nuances to be drawn from his discussion of multiple representatives of different periods, and semantic discussions of particular terms' distinction (for instance, relativism vs scepticism, and which Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers were one or the other) or similarity. On the latter, Bloxham uses the following (admirably LGBTQ-friendly) example to illustrate the apparent meaninglessness of a practical distinction between contextualization and causation. "Saying that Jill kissed Jane out of love is to say that love belongs to the causal explanation of Jill's kiss, but we might just as well call love a context for the kiss. As soon as a historian offers any causal (part) explanation for anything she is providing a (part) contextualization." (p. 133) Conversely, a good example of splitting, or even of defending the logic of splitting, occurs near the end of the book in one of several passages devoted to Hayden White. "Even in the event that we accept the unsubstantiated claim that there is 'only' a difference in emphasis between 'proper' History and speculative philosophy of History, a large enough degree of emphasis can be rather significant." (pp. 306-7). However, the overall thrust of the book is that if one takes a few steps back and regards the history of historical writing as a whole, these cracks and crevasses tend to disappear over the *longue durée*.

I griped a little bit earlier in this review about the many apparent digressions in the middle of the book wherein the plot, or at least the connective tissue of argument, can easily be lost. In fairness, many of these contain shrewd insights and make illuminating connections between historians or historical thinkers not always grouped together, sometimes across centuries (thereby supporting the argument for continuities). One of my favourite among these comes early on, in the seemingly unlikely, but plausible, yoking of Nietzsche with a pillar of the Victorian academic establishment, Lord Acton, in opposition to *both* Hegelian speculative philosophy of history and its Rankean opposite (both of whose architects had explicitly disavowed the role of the historian as judge). The book is full of little gems of insight such as this, and even if one is less than fully convinced by the overall argument, it should be required reading for anyone planning to teach historiography.

With Professor Bloxham's briefer companion volume, *History and Morality*, we tread much the same ground, but with a sharper focus and, on the whole, a more philosophical bent. The cast of characters is very similar, but some ideas suggested in *Why History?* get a fuller treatment (we get more on Leibniz and his monads, for instance). Specifically, Bloxham addresses a quandary that has arguably arisen only in the past 200 years, namely the duty of the historian to moralize and judge—or, as historicists argued (not always walking their talk), precisely the duty *not* to do so. As Bloxham reminds us, the link between history and morality is an old one, and even Thucydides, who is often credited with even-handed treatment of both sides in the Peloponnesian War, can be seen quite clearly to slip into rendering judgment on certain figures, simply through the artistry of his language (does anyone really think that the respective depictions of Pericles and Cleon, or Alcibiades and Brasidas, are value-neutral?).

From antiquity onward, history was valued not merely for its offer of entertainment or its capacity to commemorate great deeds, but for its ability to inculcate virtue through example. The most famous ancient expressions of this are of course Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Cicero, but there are certainly others, and a moral, specifically normative function was maintained right through the Middle Ages and the early modern era, though the nature of the morals taught of course changed with the advent of Christianity, then again with the Renaissance (Machiavelli's famous divorce of "ought" from "is") and Reformation (Luther's turn from deeds and ritual to salvation by faith). But it was the nineteenth century and the Rankean impact on the Euro-American tradition of historical writing that, partly in reaction to the judgmental nature of much Enlightenment historiography (think Voltaire for an extreme case), decided to turn its back on the moral role of the historian. In its place was created a counter-cult of objectivity and impartiality that has held sway for nearly 200 years.

Bloxham handles these shifts deftly, and once again the digressions and byways are often as rich as the main thread of the argument. As with *Why History?* the geographical scope rarely peers beyond Europe. I think a bit more could have been done here by way of comparison, though China puts in an appearance or two. Bloxham himself parries this as a potential criticism by pointing out that, rightly or wrongly, the Euro-American tradition and the disciplinary institutions (academic journals; history departments) underpinning it more or less swept away its alternatives. (7) There were of course outliers in the nineteenth century, from romantic era historians such as Carlyle and Michelet, all the way up to Acton, who was fighting against the stream in his many arguments defending the historian's duty to call out evil (though he did so less in practice than one might expect).

Various axioms of mainstream historiography (and some of their proponents) are shredded here, often by showing their inherent illogic or self-contradiction and, while the argument is subtly nuanced, Bloxham's own position is, once again, refreshingly unambiguous. In fact, it can be boiled down to the book's final, punchline sentence. "One cannot disengage the moral faculties in the study of history, and one should not aspire to." I suspect our friends in philosophy departments might argue that these are two different propositions—another is/ought distinction. It is one thing to assert that historians cannot escape, simply by being human beings and not bots, applying a moral sensitivity to acts. Any time we choose to use a particular verb, noun or adjective we are essentially making a judgment, albeit perhaps one more subtle than

shouting “arrant villains!” at history’s basket of deplorables. But should we even try to suppress this instinct?

What is still likely the mainstream of historians will surely claim that we ought not moralize and judge the past *by present standards*. However, there is a growing school of thought that will agree with the second clause of Bloxham’s closing sentence, and argue that our addiction to an ultimately unachievable moral neutrality has led the discipline down a cul-de-sac at the bottom of which lies social irrelevance, and abdication of responsibility, and declining enrolments among a “woke” generation of students deeply concerned with issues that are inescapably moral, such as diversity, equity, and climate change, all of which have historical roots. This is somewhat similar to the point made by Jo Guldi and David Armitage in *The History Manifesto*, though the primary goal of that book was to make a case for more ambitious topics, longer chronological spans, and more generally for an *histoire engagée*. (8) A great many other books and articles broadly sympathetic to this view, and many directly concerned with the historian’s ethical responsibilities, have appeared over the past two decades alone.

It is important to note that Bloxham himself does not endorse the more radical versions of normative judgment. Identity-oriented history comes in for sharper criticism here than it did in *Why History?*, Here Bloxham is unsympathetic to the argument that to write about a subject (say black history or women’s history) one must be a member of the subject group, or that one can’t judge the past because one wasn’t in it—the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski was “simply wrong that ‘to judge something, you have to be there.’” (p. 105). Late in the book, Bloxham asserts even more forcefully that “there should not be a rule about what or who any given historian chooses to study” (p. 254). It should be added that he is careful to distinguish between the possibility of evaluation (good) and the Whig-like acceptance of current western modernity’s “full spectrum, society-to-society level superiority over the past”, including the defense through infantilization of past cultures (p. 235).

As with *Why History?* there are some curious slips (such as renaming Australia’s former prime minister John Howard “Michael Howard” in two places—a subconscious critique of military history?). But they are rarer than in the companion book and of no consequence to the argument. Like *Why History?*—perhaps even more so—*History and Morality* ought to achieve wide readership. It’s not a book that is going to gladden the hearts of every member of the profession. And that, to be normative for a moment, is in itself a very good thing.

Notes

1. See on the *artes historicae* the following: A. Seifert, *Cognitio Historica: Die Geschichte als Namengeberin der frühneuzeitlichen Empirie* (Berlin, Duncker and Humblot, 1976); A. Grafton, *What was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See especially D.R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship: Language, Law and History in the French Renaissance* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1970); G. Huppert, *The Idea of Perfect History: Historical Erudition and Historical Philosophy in Renaissance France* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1970); and Z.S. Schiffman, *On the Threshold of Modernity: Relativism in the French Renaissance* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality”, in his *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. Brandt, *The Shape of Medieval History* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1966).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Le Goff, *Must we Divide History into Periods?* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2015).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. David Harlan, reflecting on the earliest of White’s theoretical essays, in “‘The Burden of History’ Forty Years Later”, in F.R. Ankersmit, H. Kellner and E. Domańska (eds), *Re-figuring Hayden White* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009), p 179.[Back to \(6\)](#)

7. Full disclosure: this is the position taken by the present reviewer in his *A Global History of History* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011) and, with some revision, in *A Concise History of History* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Guldi and D. Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014).[Back to \(8\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2425>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/326965>

[2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/326966>