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Past Futures. The Impossible Necessity of History (based on the Joanne Goodman Lectures)

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'It is not necessary to be dull to write about history', Ged Martin remarks (p. 8). One suspects that many historians would add, 'but it helps'. This book is a wonderful antidote to that excessive seriousness. The style is crisp, paradox and aphorism abound – 'historians love paradoxes', Martin says (p. 3), and he is no exception – wide learning is lightly carried, and there is wit: how often have you laughed out loud while reading a work of history? Quite apart from being a pleasure to read, *Past Futures* is full of intellectual interest.

Martin's central argument is that historical explanation is ultimately impossible and that scholars should confine themselves instead to a variety of questions they can answer effectively: what is the event being studied, who was involved, why did they take decisions when they did, what choices did they have, and what flowed from those decisions? The historian's task, he says, is not to pontificate with spurious authority on why events happened, still less to develop great over-arching theories about the past, but, far humbler, to 'locate events in time'. In the process of arguing this case, Martin directs attention usefully to a number of areas, including the importance of decisions and decision-making, the attitude of figures of the past to the future, the links between the present and the past (what is 'a long time' in history?), and the notion of significance.

The problem for historical explanation, Martin contends, lies partly in the incomplete and misleading nature of the surviving evidence and, more importantly, in the complexity of human events. For most historical episodes we can know far less than contemporaries knew, and what we do know comes to us often as the result of accident. That surviving evidence cannot be taken at face value, indeed it may have been deliberately designed to mislead, and it must always be interpreted in its context. Moreover, the concerns of the past were not always the same as the concerns of the present, so that there is frequently a mismatch between the questions the historian asks and the answers the documents provide, as, for example, in the case of homosexuality. Official documents, Martin suggests, were often concerned with *how* rather than the *why* that historians ask, and he cites tellingly Lord Sydney's letter of 1786 ordering the Treasury to equip the expedition to New South Wales, instructions that have been at the centre of the debate over the purposes behind the founding of Botany Bay. 'People who give orders do not need to explain the reasoning behind them', he remarks (p. 23). The present may permit perspective on events of the past, but it may also intrude

its own distorting values.

Even if we had all the evidence we could wish, Martin argues, we lack a methodology that would allow us to prove that A caused B – or, rather, to prove that A caused B with scientific certainty. We cannot replicate events as scientists replicate experiments. Furthermore, there is often more than one possible explanation of an event. Evidence may make one hypothesis more or less plausible than another, but that explanation will still rest on a collection of contestable causal inferences. Does bad government necessarily lead to revolution? Does indebtedness lead to rebellion, as has been suggested for Upper Canada in 1837, where some of the most heavily indebted were active on the government side? There is usually a multiplicity of possible or actual causes, any particular combination of which will still produce different responses in different individuals. A thorough account of the antecedent events, as suggested by Michael Oakeshott, may seem to offer a way out of the conundrum of historical explanation, but, as Martin pointedly asks, which events were antecedent? We can only answer by assuming the explanation we wish to prove. Even if we avoid the pitfalls of Cleopatra's nose, the Coldingham Fallacy, the Viking Syndrome, the Lobster of Kirriemuir and reification, all of which are pungently analysed, we are left with explanation that is 'partial and incomplete' (p. 74). Yet the process of historical explanation is the same as that by which we feel compelled to make sense of our daily lives and our place in time. This is why history is an 'impossible necessity'.

If human history is the product of decisions made by people, as Martin believes it is, the problem for historical explanation increases. Most decisions, he asserts, are made so instantaneously and intuitively that the decision-makers themselves may not understand why they acted or even when their decision was made. What hope is there for historians? Rather they should concentrate on defining the event to be studied, identifying the personnel involved, and specifying, as far as possible, when the decisions were taken. To understand those decisions it is necessary to portray the options that were seen to be available and importantly to account for those that might now seem obvious or logical but were not considered at the time. Historical figures might advance reasons for their decisions in speeches, letters, journals and other documents, but, even when the individual knows or thinks he knows why he chose one option over the others, these statements bear too much of the character of rationalisation or persuasion to be relied upon as evidence of causality.

Martin's discussion of decisions – individual, collective (e.g. a cabinet), and mass (e.g. a general election) – is fruitful and particularly relevant to any intending biographer. How did the biographer's subject typically make decisions? Was he or she decisive, even rash, or procrastinating or indecisive? Rational or irrational? To what degree? Do the answers change in the course of the subject's life? Similarly, when Martin writes of the importance of the futures faced by past individuals, the aspiring biographer should take note – not only of what the subject expected to ensue from the various options that presented themselves at any particular moment of decision but also of his or her general attitudes to the future. Did he or she seek to mould the future? Did they take pleasure in assisting the great ineluctable movements of history as they saw them? Were they content, like John Henry Newman, to drift on the tide of events? Did they look to the long or the short-term or not at all? Were they optimistic or pessimistic? What did they think about that perhaps most compelling future of all, the after-life? As Martin points out, these areas bear further thought by historians of all kinds. It is an observation that, as he suggests, seems particularly relevant to Canadian history.

One of Martin's objectives is to return history to 'its rightful position at the centre of all studies of the world around us' (p. 9). This requires a consideration of the relationship between the present and the past. All disciplines involve time, history most of all, but, Martin tells us, time is an area strangely little studied by historians. Has the past become irrelevant in this period of exceedingly rapid change – have we seen the end of history, as Francis Fukuyama proclaimed in 1992 – or is it more relevant than ever? Is the past remote or near? What is a long time in history? Martin's discussion of these questions is inconclusive, inevitably so, but on the way he makes good points about, among other things, the fleeting nature of the present, and, a thought too little considered by George W. Bush, liberal democracy as the creation of a particular phase, indeed moment, of history and a relatively recent one at that. We are too ready to assume either that history

has stopped with us, that we have arrived at the point to which all previous progress was tending, or that we are in some often unspoken way superior to the past. Nowadays most practising historians would agree with L. P. Hartley's famous dictum, that 'the past is a foreign country', that it had its own values different to ours, and that the historian should abstain from imposing his or her own ethical stance on it, but Martin perceptively shows that even when we think we are maintaining our ethical neutrality towards the past, our interpretations may in fact be subtly influenced by our present-day value systems. We ought to be more open, he urges, about our attitude towards the values of the past, just as we ought to make more strenuous and circumspect attempts to get inside its ethical world.

Finally, Martin addresses the question of significance in history. In order to locate events in time and to define the relationship of the present to the past, it is necessary to have some signposts, to identify events that were more important than others. He rejects counter-factualism but suggests that an event becomes significant if it can reasonably be shown that 'a markedly different outcome was plausible' (p. 212). Arguably, this is less counter-factualism than comparison; at worst it is counter-factualism limited to obviously realistic possibilities. He also appeals to a general system of values: 'events do not all punch the same weight', he says (p. 196), declaring that Hitler's bombing of a particular church in a London suburb cannot be ranked equal in significance – a dangerous word, as he and other historians have recognised – with his declaration of war on the United States, though both occurred in 1941. Events do not have to be dramatic to be significant, as Martin's discussion of population and mortality shows.

Some, perhaps much, of the above will be familiar to historians. Even so, the reminders are valuable, creatively explicated and enhanced by the richness of illustration. The argument as a whole is powerful and, if accepted, important for future historical practice. But, as with most things historical, another view is possible. While accepting that history cannot explain the past with scientific certainty, it may be deemed an over-reaction to reject 'partial and incomplete' explanation as a reasonable objective of historical study. In doing so, Martin keeps the company of very respectable historians and philosophers of history. Yet this is just the sort of explanation that we base our daily lives on, as he says, and most of us expect no more of historians. If history is to regain its influence in society as well as academe, it must continue to provide such explanations, albeit more carefully and provisionally than has generally been the case in the past. Perhaps decisions are not quite so frequently intuitive, irrational and unknowable as Martin suggests nor the decision-makers' statements about them quite so self-serving. Surely, also, discussion of the relationship of events in time will be enriched if causation is included. Perhaps which view one opts for will come down in the end to temperament.

With his emphasis on decision-making, on the individual and the particular, with his suspicion of large concepts, especially those borrowed from the social sciences, and with his criticism of narrow specialisation and his plea for general history, Martin comes across refreshingly as starting from a very traditional or classical historical position. Other sorts of historian – social or ethnographic or economic, for example – might have reached broadly similar conclusions but they would undoubtedly have travelled by a different route to the end point. Few are likely to have offered so much food for thought and so much entertainment along the way.

This is a fine book, a worthy addition to the distinguished list of published Joanne Goodman lectures.

Ged Martin writes: I very much appreciate the generous spirit in which Don Beer has engaged with the themes I have attempted to discuss in *Past Futures: the Impossible Necessity of History*.

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