Introduction

*Why History Is Impossible, Yet Necessary All the Same*

Now that I am old, the most intriguing aspect of history turns out to be neither the study of history nor history itself . . . but rather the study of the history of historical study.

—Carl Becker (1938)

Early in my career of teaching history at the college level, nearly forty years ago, I found myself writing and lecturing confidently, positive about something I could never really know, trying to take my students and readers back to a time and place where I had never been, asking them to believe what I said and wrote about it. I supported my writing and teaching with voluminous citations to authorities who in retrospect had engaged in the same impossible task. We call this exercising the historical imagination, as if by some magic of naming an impossible act we can perform it. At the same time, I knew that if my travel back through time and space was impossible it was nonetheless necessary, for what is a people without a history? They do not exist. Historians bring to life what is dead—surely the most impossible of all quests, yet the most humane. Without history, a people have no identity, no present as well as no past.

Perhaps I should have known better. Who can even claim to master a subject that is forever receding from our sight? In a wrenchingly honest appraisal of a life doing history, Oscar Handlin wrote of knowing about the past as one knew the way to a mountain’s top. “We know now that no simple journey will bring us to the summit. Indeed, we cannot be sure where the summit lies, or in fact whether it exists at all, for our valley is high enough to reveal the complexity of the surrounding ranges.”
The increasing elaboration of theories of history and methods of historical research in the 1960s and after was no help. Borrowing social science theories, quantitative methods, and literary devices could not provide the certainty, or even the promise of certainty, of historical knowledge that Handlin sought. As Allan Megill has prefaced his learned essay *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error* (2007): “It is not my intention to offer a theory of historical writing, because I do not think that a single theory, either of historical writing in general or of historical epistemology [knowing], can be offered. At any rate, no acceptable theory can be offered [italics in original].” What then?

A century ago, historians—and their audiences—had little trouble with the notion that history was possible. It was a science. The French historian Fustel de Coulanges lectured his colleagues in 1862, “History is something more than a pastime. . . . It is not pursued merely to entertain our curiosity or to fill the pigeonholes of our memory. History is and should be a science.” His German contemporary Leopold von Ranke put it even more simply when he ordered his students to report on the past “as it actually happened.” J. B. Bury, a professor of history at Cambridge University, taught his students forty years later, “It has not yet become superfluous to insist that history is a science, no less and no more.” The library and the archive were laboratories, and historical evidence rigorously tested and objectively presented could be used to prove, or disprove, hypotheses about the past. In fact, the first seminar room in the first graduate program in American history at the Johns Hopkins University in 1880 was designed to look like a laboratory.

The yearning for truth in history persists. As British historical giant G. R. Elton wrote in *The Practice of History* (1967), the historian’s “instinctive familiarity with evidence results in a useful and necessary sense which extends his range beyond the strict confines of the evidence, even his guesses bear the stamp of truth because they fit the reality of the situation.” The well-attuned professional historian’s “hunch is based on an expert understanding of what can, what must have happened.” We can be confident, for Elton assures us that the “principles and practice of historical research” yield truth.

But such claims of totally logical and objective historical inquiry, whether based on the analogy to science or a simple faith in expertise, cannot be credited without some suspicion that they are self-serving. After all, they found the historian’s authority on what amounts to nothing more than the authority of the historian. But the historian is a person living in
a time and place, not an objective observer. One can even retranslate von Ranke’s famous aphorism to mean that historians “wanted” to show the past as it happened, not that they could. What stopped them? The fact that the historian was a historical actor. As Carl Becker told the American Historical Association (AHA) in 1931, “It must then be obvious that living history, the ideal series of events that we affirm and hold in memory, since it is so intimately associated with what we are doing and with what we hope to do, cannot be precisely the same for all at any given time, or the same for one generation as for another. . . . Each of us is subject to the limitations of time and place.” In short, the “reality of the situation” may be ours more than the evidence’s.

Becker was one of the first of the relativists. He tells us that we are part of the history that we write and teach. Our choices of subject, our selection and arrangement of evidence, our emphasis and nuance, are not reducible to a science. Relative to our own training and the world around us, our history tells our own story as well as the stories of times gone by. Everyman is a historian every time he reads his heating bills. As the basis for a philosophy of history, however, Becker’s formula is as suspect as Elton’s faith in expertise. Too often, everyman is not a reliable factfinder or weigher of fact. Everyman’s hopes and fears, his biases and blindness, his expectations all shape how he reads that heating bill. The Monty Python “Dead Parrot” sketch, in which the owner of a pet store confronts an irate customer, demonstrates how everyman regards facts as conveniences.

Customer: ’Ello, I wish to register a complaint. . . . I wish to complain about this parrot what I purchased not half an hour ago from this very boutique.
Owner: Oh yes, the, uh, the Norwegian Blue. . . . What’s, uh . . . What’s wrong with it?
Customer: I’ll tell you what’s wrong with it, my lad. 'E’s dead, that’s what’s wrong with it!
Owner: No, no, ’e’s uh, . . . he’s resting.
Customer: Look, matey, I know a dead parrot when I see one, and I’m looking at one right now. . . . ’ELLO POLLY! Testing! Testing! Testing! Testing! This is your nine o'clock alarm call! . . . Now that’s what I call a dead parrot.
Owner: No, ’e’s stunned!
Customer: Stunned?
Owner: Yeah! You stunned him, just as he was wakin’ up! Norwegian Blues stun easily.
If history is everyman’s memory, then there is no way to measure its reliability. As memory is fallible and given to invention, should history be as well? Becker dodged the question: “The history written by historians, like the history informally fashioned by Mr. Everyman, is thus a convenient blend of truth and fancy, of what we commonly distinguish as ‘fact’ and ‘interpretation.’” Cultural historian Hayden White put the matter even more bluntly. For White, the entire enterprise of doing history is akin to the tricks that men of letters play on their audiences all the time. History is always propaganda or flight of fancy. All history was “figurative.” How could it be anything else when knowing the past was itself a figure of speech?

We cannot conclude that doing history is the kind of folly that Erasmus warned against In Praise of Folly, a mischievous self-delusion that has always proven unreliable, because we need history—a valid, usable history—too much. This is the historians’ paradox. I propose that we can fashion a philosophy of history that is both relevant and workable. In this book I’ll combine historical anecdotes, examples of historians at work, a little popular philosophy, and some basic logical principles to lay out the plan for such a philosophy of history. Here are my specifications for that plan: a philosophy of history for our time must accommodate the imagination of ordinary people, while not abandoning the just requirements of analytical penetration and narrative depth. It must exhibit a willingness to entertain mystery, courage, and love. It must incorporate a due sense of humility, recognizing the legitimate place of paradox, irony, and uncertainty, and have a place for faith (though not necessarily in organized religion). A tall order—but see what you think when we are done.

If we are successful, our philosophy of history will enable us to do, read, and teach history with confidence, but that confidence will not rest upon any claim here to philosophical certitude. As one leading philosopher opened his recent essay on the subject: “Given the plurality of voices within the ‘philosophy of history,’ it is impossible to give one definition of the field that suits all these approaches. In fact, it is misleading to imagine that we refer to a single philosophical tradition when we invoke the phrase, ‘philosophy of history,’ because the strands of research characterized here rarely engage in dialogue with each other.” Amen to that.

But if the philosophers cannot pinpoint the meaning of their own term, why should historians give philosophy of history—any philosophy of history (including the arguments in this present volume)—a second thought? Working historians are singularly indifferent to what philosophers have to
say about history. As historian Richard J. Evans has lamented, “The subject [of philosophy of history] . . . is so theoretical, so far removed from actual problems experienced by working historians,” that “we have what has often seemed to be a dialogue of the deaf” between the historians and the philosophers.

My answer is that philosophy of history is too important to working historians to be left to philosophers. Think about the term itself—philosophy means love of knowledge. Philosophy of history then must mean the love of historical knowledge. Who loves it more than historians? Indeed, as historian Charles Beard told his audience at the 1933 meeting of the American Historical Association, “The philosopher, possessing little or no acquaintance with history, sometimes pretends to expound the inner secret of history, but the historian turns upon him and expounds the secret of the philosopher, as far as it may be expounded at all, by placing him in relation to the movement of ideas and interests in which he stands or floats, by giving to his scheme of thought its appropriate relativity.” And if philosophy belongs to the province of intellectual history, the philosophy of history cannot belong to philosophers.

Because we cannot know for certain about historical knowledge from philosophy and we cannot return to the self-satisfied era of scientific history, we have all the more need of a robust and realistic philosophy of history for our time. It must speak to everyone who joins in our enterprise—all of us who write and teach history. A definition of that philosophy here would be premature; this entire book is the definition. But a good starting place is the very last effort that Marc Bloch, a twentieth-century French historian, made to explain what he was doing and why.

No one was more skeptical of the old philosophies of scientific history than Bloch. Born in 1886 in the “Dreyfus generation,” which warned educated Jews that they were only barely tolerated in France, Bloch nevertheless loved his country with the sincerest passion. A medievalist and a co-founder of the “Annales” school of social history, he was a consummate professional. But Bloch was no mere ink-stained scribbler. A much decorated veteran of the First World War and a resistance fighter in the second, he was captured by the Nazis in 1944 and executed. Even as he dodged the death squads he never laid down his pen, and in his briefcase when he was arrested by the Nazis was a fragment of a book later published as *The Historian’s Craft* (1953).

Bloch conceded the inherent impossibility of history in *The Historian’s Craft*. Time was “a continuum” that exhibited “perpetual change.” The
essence of the historian’s craft was to leap over the changes, to reenter the past world. He needed no philosophy of history to do this. Bloch objected to the very idea of a science of history. “To me, the very idea that the past as such can be the object of science is ridiculous.” The Historian’s Craft offered instead a command to the working historian. History “requires us to join the study of the dead and of the living . . . [that is] the most comprehensive, the least exclusive, the most electric with stirring reminders of a more than age-old endeavor.” History was the bridge we must build from the present to the past. Or as Edward Hallett Carr wrote in What Is History? (1962), history is “an unending dialogue between the present and the past.”

Once more, why do we need a new philosophy of history? Or to be precise, why now? In 1974, when there was much turmoil within the historical profession, old-liners objecting to the borrowing of social science models and quantitative methods, and conservatives afraid that the “New Left” historians were about to tear down the house, mused aloud on what was wrong with history. Among these, and typical of them, Jacques Barzun worried that “empirical observation also suggests that History is sick, dying, dead. Whether one looks at the numbers enrolled in history courses or the tendency of history departments to make sheep’s eyes at bold quantifiers, or the declining popularity of history among general readers . . . it is clear that the nineteenth-century pre-eminence of history in the sphere of intellect no longer obtains. The historical sense in modern populations is feeble or non-existent.” A poor prognostication, as events proved. History today is a booming enterprise, with more and more students, more and more books, and greater popularity than ever.

But boom times have brought unique problems. It is no longer clear what history is and how we who write it and teach it fit into its exploitation. Is history to be a celebration of great men and their deeds, a patriotic inspiration to new generations? Is history to remind us of the promises we have made and broken, or never meant to keep, to the weakest among us? Is history to become the highly technical subject matter of a handful of experts, written in a language that only they can understand? Is history to be surrendered to popularizers who do not bother to consult the most recent scholarship and tell the same old stories in books with brand-new covers?

How then can we build a bridge to the past (conceding at the outset that the “bridge” is a metaphor for method) that combines sound methods and modern tastes in history? We begin the philosophy of history
for our time with the thesis that history is always argument. Whatever our philosophy of knowing, whether we prefer narrative or analytical approaches, persuasive historical writing is always an argument. Any philosophy of history beginning with this premise must concern itself, at least in part, with logical matters—the requirement that historical argument be reasonable, free of fallacy, and supported by appropriate evidence that is itself tenable. It is thus with logic and its rhetorical kinsmen that we begin this book. We then explore how a philosophy of history-as-argument can reach out to include the loaded question, the imaginative fabrication, and the invisible linkages we call causation. We then test the philosophy in political discourse, in the marketplace, and in the realms of the literary and linguistic critics. Finally, perhaps most important, we weigh our philosophy of history against the claim that the highest purpose of any history is moral judgment.

Each of the following chapters is a self-contained essay on one topic, but all are way stations on a journey to recognizing how a philosophy of history for working historians can help us understand the most basic questions of human life. Each of the lessons is a little harder, as each builds on the previous ones. Each brings us a little closer to that far, mist-shrouded shore we call the past. Along the way, to pass the time, we will share stories and see what lessons we can draw from them. Erasmus taught us that humor is a great teacher. We will pause in our journey to learn from pun masters and pranksters.