

Chapter Title: Joining the through-time community of historians

Book Title: *Becoming a Historian*

Book Subtitle: An Informal Guide

Book Author(s): Penelope J. Corfield and Tim Hitchcock

Published by: University of London Press. (2022)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2kewp3s.7>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



University of London Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Becoming a Historian*

PART I
Starting, assessing, organizing

1. Joining the through-time community of historians

SIGNPOST: Relevant to all researchers



The community of historians through time, formed of countless experts, whose ranks include:

Top left: Classical China's 'Grand Historian' **Sima Qian** 司馬遷 (*c.*145–*c.*86 BC); top middle: Enlightenment Britain's greatest historian **Edward Gibbon** (1737–94); top right: Trinidadian historian and cultural theorist **C. L. R. James** (1901–89); middle left: French pioneer of multidisciplinary history **Marc Bloch** (1886–1944); centre: Austrian-American trailblazer in women's history **Gerda Lerner** (1920–2013); middle right: guru of 'history from below' and peace activist **E. P. Thompson** (1924–93); bottom left: practitioner of anthropological history **Natalie Zemon Davis** (1928–); bottom middle: leading expert in public (outreach) history **David Olusoga** (1970–); bottom right: historian of slavery and cultural memory **Olivette Otele** (1970–). For further information about these historians, see pp. 15–16

1.1 *Defining history*

For the purposes of this *Guide*, ‘history’ refers to the academic and literary discipline of studying the past. The subject has a conscious ‘through-time’ focus, excavating and debating the encrusted layers of meaning which are attached to earlier events. As a result, history is both a research topic and a process of relating to the past. Generations of practitioners continue to develop the subject and what may appear to be its specialist rituals and trade mysteries. Yet researching history is far from an inexplicable undertaking. This *Guide* offers friendly advice on getting to grips with the subject and on navigating the research process – from finding a subject through to completion and onwards to communicating with the wider world.

It’s good to begin with definitions. That is the case especially in the world of historical research, where precision is valued. Naming things accurately is only the ‘beginning of wisdom’ (as the sage Confucius long ago declared).¹ As a subject, history builds on social memory and shared experiences. Humans live with the past every day. Anyone walking along a street subconsciously acknowledges its impact on the present, as it demarcates the route and delimits alternative options. Equally, people cannot explain a decision without recourse to the story of what led to the moment of choice. Collectively, indeed, humans rely upon a distilled knowledge of things that have gone before.

The formal study of the immensely variegated past overlaps with many other disciplines, including classics, literature, politics, sociology, international affairs and anthropology, to name but a few. Yet history as a subject retains and celebrates its core aims and standards. There are many excellent books addressing its research practices.² An associated literature further examines the history of history-writing as a discipline (a specialist field known as historiography).³ And another group of writings explores

¹ R. L. Littlejohn, *Confucianism: an Introduction* (London, 2011).

² See L. Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London, 2000); A. Munslow (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies* (London, 2000); J. Tosh with S. Lang, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London, 2006); S. Gunn, *History and Cultural Theory* (Harlow, 2006); J. Black and D. M. MacRaild, *Studying History* (Basingstoke, 2007); D. Cannadine, *Making History, Now and Then: Discoveries, Controversies and Explorations* (Basingstoke, 2008); and J. H. Elliott, *History in the Making* (London, 2012).

³ A. Grafton, *The Footnote: a Curious History* (London, 1997); M. Bentley, *Modern Historiography: an Introduction* (London, 1999); J. Black, *Clio’s Battles: Historiography in Practice* (Bloomington, Ind., 2015); D. R. Woolf, *A Concise History of History: Global Historiography from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, 2019).

the theories and philosophy of history (in an emergent field, which is sometimes defined as historiology).⁴

People have written about the past since they first put pen to paper – or stylus to clay – and, even before that, constructed a past through oral tradition. By contrast, the academic discipline of history is little more than two centuries old, albeit building upon earlier roots. Since the eighteenth century in the West, and more particularly since the rise of the university system in early nineteenth-century Germany, history has always been a central subject of academic study, exploring the past in its fullest compass.⁵ In so doing, the discipline has evolved a specific relationship to evidence and a known format for producing written arguments, generating a set of conventions which are internationally shared.

This busy world of historical research exists both within and outside formal educational structures. Plenty of historians are ‘freelance’, writing for love of the subject, and not seeking to hold an academic post. Nonetheless, the values and hierarchies of the university world tend to exert a strong influence, as do the values and hierarchies of the world of publishing. The English Marxist historian E. P. Thompson produced his most famous work, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963, and still in print), while working in Halifax (Yorkshire) as an extra-mural lecturer for the Workers’ Educational Association. For most of his energetic life, he remained a freelancer, with only a relatively short spell as Professor at Warwick University (1965–72).⁶ Nonetheless, he acknowledged that, when writing, he became increasingly conscious of the critical gaze of the professionals. The exchange was mutual, as his unorthodox approach and style also influenced Marxist and non-Marxist historians alike.

Influential and sometimes opaque as it can be, however, the academic world should not be viewed as either monolithic or closed. There are multiple

⁴ J. M. de Bernardo Arès, *Historiology, Research and Didactics: Elaboration and Transmission of Historical Knowledge* (London, 1996); M. Day, *The Philosophy of History: an Introduction* (London, 2008); A. Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past: a Philosophy of Historiography* (Cambridge, 2004).

⁵ M. Segre, *Higher Education and the Growth of Knowledge: a Historical Outline of Aims and Tensions* (New York, 2015).

⁶ E. P. Thompson in 1992 interview with P. J. Corfield, University of London Institute of Historical Research, *Interviews with Historians* (London, 1993). For more on this seminal and much-debated historian, see H. J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: an Introductory Analysis* (Cambridge, 1984); S. H. Rigby, *Marxism and History: a Critical Introduction* (Manchester, 1987); B. D. Palmer, *Objections and Oppositions: the Histories and Politics of E. P. Thompson* (London, 1994); and G. McCann, *Theory and History: the Political Thought of E. P. Thompson* (London, 2019).

gradations of status and hierarchy between universities as well as within them. There are also differences between the various national and cultural traditions around the world. And today, all higher educational systems are facing often contradictory challenges, stemming from the pressures of financial uncertainty, the requirements of public auditing and the civic and political demands for widening access.⁷ It is a world at once full of proud certainties from the past and puzzling conundrums in the present.

These factors mean that historians in the making have to negotiate the assumptions, regulations and profound hierarchies of established institutions – but at a time of considerable flux.⁸ The research journey is at once personal and professional. It can seem perplexing but should not be mysterious.

1.2 The broad range of historical research

Nothing has happened that cannot, in principle, be studied. Generically, history (the subject) embraces the entire ambit of the past, which is growing every minute. Not only is the evidence expanding but the debates, viewpoints and participants are also constantly multiplying.

In some cases, scholars track backwards to cover the entire lifespan of the cosmos, or simply the evolution of planet Earth. That branch of the discipline is becoming known as big history.⁹ It marks a refreshment of scholarly interest in the very long term. The approach, which often combines insights from astronomy, geology and biology, is wonderfully stimulating. It can, however, lead to over-simplification. If there are too many ‘big’ generalizations, rolling up entire centuries and millennia together, then the details of human history get lost.

At the other end of the spectrum, meanwhile, some scholars focus instead upon micro-histories. Such studies look at specific communities in great depth over a brief span of time. They seek ‘To see a World in a Grain of Sand’, to borrow William Blake’s scintillating dictum.¹⁰ And this

⁷ See F. Donoghue, *The Last Professors: the Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York, 2008); S. Srinivasam, *Liberal Education and Its Discontents: the Crisis in the Indian University* (New Delhi, 2018); J. Frank, N. Gowar and M. Naef, *English Universities in Crisis: Markets without Competition* (Bristol, 2020).

⁸ J. M. Banner, *Being a Historian: an Introduction to the Professional World of History* (Cambridge, 2012).

⁹ See D. Christian, *Maps of Time: an Introduction to Big History* (London, 2004); updated as D. Christian, *Origin Story: a Big History of Everything* (London, 2018); D. Baker, C. Benjamin and E. Quaedackers (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Big History* (London, 2019); and thematic discussion in P. J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History* (London, 2007).

¹⁰ Opening line of W. Blake, *Auguries of Innocence* (c.1803), in K. Raine, *A Choice of Blake’s Verse* (London, 1970), p. 31.

approach has been highly effective in uncovering the intricate assumptions and power structures which influence attitudes to class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion and political engagement.¹¹ But, again, there may be problems if such studies remain too minutely focused without being set in some framing context.

Meanwhile, most historians in practice choose human-scale timespans. They look at groups of centuries rather than millennia; or at decades rather than a single moment. Often, within that, they encompass a great range of issues, and the subject is continually being sub-divided into new fields and sub-fields.¹² And such groups may, especially at first, make space for practitioners to bypass traditional roles and expectations. New themed newsletters, conferences and websites emerge every year, providing a new professional identity to support the new specialism. And these in turn lead to new academic journals, which help to crystallize the field.

Notable examples, among dozens founded in the last forty years, include: the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* (1981–); the *Animal Studies Journal* (2020–), linking approaches from history and zoology; the interdisciplinary *Journal of Big History* (2017–); and, marking the coming of age of another new field, *Emotions: History, Culture, Society* (2017–).

Stereotypically, the subject was once dismissed as nothing more than telling stories about kings, queens, and battles. Yet such a description was never accurate. The pioneer historians, who formalized the discipline in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, looked at the rise and fall of entire cultures. And when rigorous historical methodologies were developed in the nineteenth century, they were designed to allow both national/imperial histories and broad socio-cultural-economic changes to be described and

¹¹ S. G. Magnússon and I. M. Szijárto, *What Is Micro-History? Theory and Practice* (London, 2013). For an urban case-history, see C. Judde de la Rivière, *The Revolt of the Snowballs: Murano Confronts Venice, 1511* (London, Eng. transl. 2018).

¹² Special fields include the following (listed alphabetically): architectural history; art history; biographical history; business history; classical history; comparative history; constitutional history; costume history; cultural history; diplomatic history; economic history, which may include cliometrics (quantitative economic history); environmental history; ethnohistory (studying comparative cultures historically); family history; feminist history; gender history; history of education; history of medicine; history of science; intellectual history and the history of ideas; labour history; legal history; literary history; local history; macro-history; Marxist history; men's history; micro-history; military history; music history; oral history; parliamentary history; political history; prehistory (the eras before the advent of writing); prosopography (group history); public (outreach) history; quantitative history; religious history; social history; subaltern studies (probing post-colonial and post-imperial societies 'from below'); transport history; urban history; women's history; and world/global history.

mapped. Arguably, the subject grew as much from the quest to understand the role of peasants, feudal lords, merchants, industrialists and workers as the activities of monarchs, generals, religious leaders, politicians and philosophers. After all, one of the classic nineteenth-century 'big' thinkers, the polymath Karl Marx, defined his own analysis of the global political economy from primordial times to industrial society (and onwards into the classless future) as a 'theory of history'.¹³

Within this galaxy of approaches and specialisms, scholars today can potentially exercise free choice when deciding their preferred fields of study. They can also change tack in the course of a career, although that option is difficult to implement. One remarkable switch was instanced by Geoffrey Barraclough. He managed an eleven-year stint at Liverpool University as Professor of Medieval History, before in the 1950s changing tack entirely, making a series of institutional and thematic moves, and ending his career at Oxford University as Professor of Modern History, with special expertise in contemporary global affairs.¹⁴

Today's practitioners, meanwhile, inhabit a rather different world. In some ways, it is intellectually broader. Yet individual scholars often become very specialized, becoming defined in terms of both theme/approach and time/place. As a result, it is easier to become established as an expert on emotion in eighteenth-century Britain than as a historian of emotions through time. Professional historians are, after all, employed by departments or faculties to teach specific subjects; and those subjects in turn have to secure collective approval from colleagues. Many universities (though far from all) make it hard to change the curriculum. Hence, given that academics in post are expected to combine both research and teaching, a structural conservatism acts as a sea-anchor on overly rapid change. So researchers in a tight job market may try to guess at the fields likely to generate demand and adapt accordingly. Yet a degree of flexibility applies as well. New specialisms are constantly emerging, and many individual scholars do manage to evolve their research interests over time. Intellectual rebels and innovators are not always made as welcome on first appearance as they should be. Yet in an ever-developing and broad-based subject, they

¹³ W. H. Shaw, *Marx's Theory of History* (London, 1978); G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a Defence* (Oxford, 1978, 1987); P. Blackledge, *Reflections on the Marxist Theory of History* (Manchester, 2006).

¹⁴ G. Barraclough (1908–84), *Papal Provisions: Aspects of Church History, Constitutional, Legal and Administrative in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1935); G. Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (Harmondsworth, 1967); G. Barraclough, *History in a Changing World* (Oxford, 1955); G. Barraclough, *Main Trends in History* (London, 1978).

often provide fresh impetus; and yesterday's rebels can quickly become the gurus of a new specialism.

1.3 *The broad church of historical researchers*

Defining history broadly means equally that there is a broad church of historical researchers. Their numbers are countless. Plenty are freelance – and all the more welcome for their personal commitment. Mature scholars, in particular, bring welcome expertise and insights from their past experiences in life. All is grist to the historical mills of collective exploration.

But researchers simultaneously inhabit an uneven landscape of authority and engagement. Academic history, while seeking to be welcoming and inclusive, also operates a system of gatekeeping and regulations. Freelance historians working outside the world of academe can, however, choose to adopt the same professional standards – and many do. Meanwhile, current policy in many countries is encouraging universities to look 'outwards'. Established scholars are being encouraged to seek wider audiences in order to demonstrate research 'impact' (see also section 18.4).

It may be noted too that there are additional pressures to expand the amount of interdisciplinary research. Historical research projects already overlap fruitfully with studies in related fields, such as politics, literature, musicology, sociology, art history and so forth. These cross-linkages are a source of renewal for existing research fields, as well as an encouragement to innovation.¹⁵ As a result, interdisciplinary approaches are no longer feared as heresy, but instead applauded as a sign of creativity.

Throughout these changes, there has been a slow – often too slow – evolution in the composition of the professional world of history. For most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was a male preserve. Many historians were men of impeccable social status, albeit being joined over time by middle- and working-class recruits. Meanwhile, the first and second waves of feminist activism were also gaining momentum. Outside the academy, women such as Beatrice Webb, Alice Clark and Barbara Hammond helped to expand the subject's range into social history, striking a resonant chord with the reading public.¹⁶ And from the 1960s onwards, female recruits into the universities changed both the characteristic academic

¹⁵ See, eg. R. Ghosh (ed.), *The Study of Social History: Recent Trends* (Kolkata, 2013) and W. Steinmetz et al. (ed.), *Writing Political History Today* (Frankfurt, 2013).

¹⁶ For Beatrice Webb, see C. Seymour-Jones, *Beatrice Webb: Woman of Conflict* (London, 1992); for Barbara Hammond, see S. A. Weaver, *The Hammonds: a Marriage in History* (Stanford, Calif., 1997); and for Alice Clark, see M. Berg, 'The first women economic historians', *Economic History Review*, xlv (1992), 308–29.

style and the scope of the discipline, bringing the study of gender, sexuality and patriarchy into the mix. (Though it should not be assumed that all women have to specialize in these fields.)

With such changes, the male photographs that stare from department and faculty walls are gaining more variegated company. But, if gender has been a relative success story in opening the profession, the quest to broaden its ethnic composition has only just begun. The need to incorporate more varied voices from different communities remains absolutely imperative.¹⁷ (Again, with the reminder that scholars can choose their specialisms and do not have to speak solely on issues raised by their personal autobiographies.)

Once, professional historians used to be rather snooty about alternative approaches. For instance, some were gently condescending about genealogists who trace family records and explore a form of micro-history through time. And there were sometimes bitter complaints if the diligent genealogists bagged all the seats in the local archive. Happily, such condescension is less tolerated today. The impulse to recover family history is one of the oldest prompts to understanding the past. It's a motivation which historians should welcome and encourage.¹⁸ Understanding family history helps to give people 'roots'. It also disrupts over-simplified notions of 'identity'. The subject, after all, reveals many instances of population migration, intermarriage and free-wheeling sexual relations, blurring the lines between rival groups. Such themes from the complicated human past may provide a solvent against bigotry and exclusion.

So family history has gained intellectual respectability and come into the fold. Today, however, significant new issues loom. The success of online websites like *Ancestry.co.uk* ('Discover Your Family Story Today!') or *FindMyPast.co.uk* ('Your Ancestors were Amazing!') indicates the scale of public interest. Yet serious questions remain. *Ancestry* has grown from a genealogy tracking tool into an organization which offers DNA-tracing for specified medical conditions. Historians of all stamps watch with some alarm the long-term implications of its sale in August 2020 (for US \$4.7 billion) to private equity firm Blackstone Inc.

¹⁷ See A. Meier and E. Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915–80* (Urbana, Ill., 1986); H. L. Smith and M. S. Zook (ed.), *Generations of Women Historians: Within and Beyond the Academy* (Basingstoke, 2018); J. Gallagher and B. Winslow (ed.), *Reshaping Women's History: Voices of Non-Traditional Women Historians* (Urbana, Ill., 2018); H. Chiang et al. (ed.), *Global Encyclopaedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) History* (Farmington Hills, Mich., 2019). For contextual trends, see also P. N. Stearns, *Gender in World History* (London, 2015).

¹⁸ For thoughtful introductions, see D. Hey, *Family History and Local History in England* (London, 1987) and D. Hey, *Family Names and Family History* (London, 2000).

Another parallel group of researchers, known as ‘antiquarians’, used to be treated somewhat disdainfully by professional historians. The noun conjures up an image of a myopic scholar, who collects nuggets of information and then recounts them chronologically. Yet there was often a considerable overlap, especially in the early days. ‘Antiquarians’ were eighteenth-century scholars who travelled round Britain collecting historic manuscripts and investigating ancient monuments like Stonehenge.¹⁹ So both the Society of Antiquaries of London (founded 1751) and its equivalent in Scotland (founded 1780) added notably to the growth of historical studies.²⁰

Over time it was the terminology of ‘historian’ that became most common, and the professionalizing discipline turned increasingly to the archives, rather than to the physical monuments from the past. (Today, happily, all forms of evidence, material as well as documentary, are called into play.) As a result, old demarcation disputes have faded. Historians form part of a broad church of practitioners, both inside and outside the world of higher education. Anyone from the rawest apprentice to the oldest of old hands may discover something extraordinary and/or formulate a radical new interpretation.

1.4 History students are fellow researchers – not ‘customers’ who are ‘always right’

A recent trend among some politicians and university managers, in the era of fee-paying, has been to urge that students be viewed as ‘customers’ who have purchased an educational package. Yet changes to the system of university funding, which remain controversial,²¹ should not be taken too far in terms of eroding or undermining students’ attitudes to learning. After all, they are purchasing an educational programme – *not* a guaranteed degree. Academically, the student-customers are not ‘always right’. They do not always get top marks. They are expected to work hard for their degrees.

¹⁹ R. Sweet, *Antiquaries: the Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London, 2004); S. Piggott, *William Stukeley: an Eighteenth-Century Antiquary* (London, 1985).

²⁰ J. Evans, *A History of the Society of Antiquaries* (Oxford, 1956); D. Gaimster et al. (ed.), *Making History: Antiquaries in Britain, 1707–2007* (London, 2007); A. S. Bell (ed.), *The Scottish Antiquarian Tradition ... 1780–1980* (Edinburgh, 1981).

²¹ For debates, see D. Stager, *Focus on Fees: Alternative Policies for University Tuition Fees* (Toronto, 1989); A. Fazackerley and J. Chant, *More Fees Please? The Future of University Fees for Undergraduate Students* (London, 2010); Spatial Economic Research Centre (SERC – LSE), *Access All Areas? The Impact of Fees and Background on Student Demand for Higher Education in the UK* (London, 2013); S. Riddell et al. (ed.), *Higher Education Funding and Access in International Perspective* (London, 2018).

And, in return, they expect high-quality courses and individually tailored feedback for their efforts.

Tutors of doctoral students for their part offer a mixture of personal encouragement and intellectual criticism. They give credit for the technical presentation and historical content of all works submitted (draft chapters, reports and so forth), whether they (the tutors) personally agree with the arguments or otherwise. It is a professional but also a deeply personal process. At heart, the exchanges between tutors and research students constitute a dialogue between two thinking individuals, which generates camaraderie of mutual effort.

Money can't buy the experience of historical understanding. Instead, researchers gain expertise by well-sustained effort, supported by apt encouragement and criticism from their tutors and often from fellow students as well. (See chapter 12 on troubleshooting.)

There is a further critical dimension to the research students' commitment which also needs frank acknowledgement. They have no guarantee of certainty of outcome. The great expansion of access to academic life since the 1960s has allowed many more people access to advanced research – and to the sheer joy and passion it can generate. Yet there is an attendant risk of raising expectations which cannot be guaranteed, particularly in terms of jobs at the end of the research journey. In 1969, the number of history doctorates awarded in the UK was no more than twenty, although there was probably some under-recording in an era of much more casual record-keeping. Since then, there has been a veritable explosion of activity. In 2015 the comparable number was 545.²² Successful research historians with a doctorate are therefore entering a world of competition and precariousness.

Most will in fact get employment in a range of challenging and exciting fields. The extent of unemployment among research historians is low. However, it is worth stressing from the start that there is no guarantee of any specific type of job. And, in particular, there is absolutely no guarantee of an academic job as a university lecturer. Vacancies appear in a sporadic fashion. Sometimes there are years when many junior posts are advertised; but in other years there may be none. As a result, those hoping to join the ranks of academe may spend years in part-time or temporary appointments, even while they compile an impressive portfolio of publications and outreach experience in hopes of opportunities yet to come. (See more in chapters 18 and 19.)

²² Data for 2015 from British Library Ethos system; compared with earlier evidence in University of London's Institute of Historical Research, *List of Theses Completed* (1969).

Happily, the world of research history is changing, and becoming considerably more inclusive, even when navigating the world of higher education remains difficult. Research students are thus fellow scholars in a joint endeavour. They are not 'customers'. But they are not learners on a guaranteed pathway either. They are highly likely to gain their doctorates, as drop-out and failure rates have been sharply cut in recent years by professional supervision and training. Nevertheless, researchers also live in a wider world that combines both uncertainty and opportunity. The broader result is that, while access to research qualifications is regulated by the universities, the resultant research community stretches well beyond the traditional confines of academe.

1.5 Upholding research standards

All historians rely upon getting critical assessments of their work. Much of the one-to-one interchange between research students and supervisors is a form of peer review. Other responses come in the form of seminar discussions, book reviews, personal exchanges and anonymous assessments, written for publishers and academic journals. At its best, the process of being criticized and edited is productive and enlightening. It's true that the experience can at times be a challenge to the ego. Yet it's absolutely invaluable. As a result, all serious researchers, from the most experienced to the newest apprentice, submit to peer review to weed out inadvertent blunders, omissions, inconsistencies and lack of clarity. Indeed, the verdict may be a thumbs down, as well as the reverse.

After all, historical research is not all of equal value. Some studies are done casually, sloppily, badly, misleadingly and even fraudulently. The 'open house' of research does not mean that there are no standards. One very basic requirement is to document the evidence. Works of fiction do not need factual proof. Valid historical studies do. The level of detail varies with the style of presentation and the intended audience. A popular piece of history-writing often provides suggestions for 'further reading'; a slightly more academic publication or 'trade book', intended for wide distribution, usually manages with brief endnotes, squirreled at the back in order not to break readers' concentration; and a fully academic monograph tends to have footnotes on each page, so that conscientious readers can check the sources as they read. In all cases, the need to document the supporting evidence is a staple of scholarly presentation.

Works of history thus indicate visually on every page that they are serious productions. Footnotes or endnotes invite readers to give their trust. But equally, it is up to authors to decide how they wish to present their work. To take one example, the absorbing study, entitled *Secondhand Time: the*

Last of the Soviets by Svetlana Alexievich, has justly won a Nobel Prize for Literature.²³ She charts the emotional costs of living through turbulent times, citing graphic reflections from oral history interviews with unknown Russians, who recounted their experiences under the rule of the Soviets and their successors. However, no sources are cited. Their authenticity has to be taken on trust. In other words, Alexievich's wonderful literary evocation is not a substantiated historical study.²⁴ (For more on the boundaries between fiction and history, and on the need to cultivate a good, accessible writing style, see chapter 7.)

Interestingly, however, many historians these days do study emotions and feelings, along with everything else (as already noted).²⁵ And Alexievich's evidence, which crucially relates to major themes in recent Russian history, would make a huge contribution to the subject. Historians would therefore welcome a deposit of her interview transcripts in an oral history archive. Such material is now accepted as a great resource (as noted below). Obviously, it's for authors to decide how they want to write. But readers are equally entitled to judge the results. How much or little did the author invent? Literary works (like films) often play a great role in triggering the historical imagination.²⁶ They venture beyond and 'behind' the documented sources. As a result, they can bridge sympathetically between popular culture and specialist studies. However, historical romances have free licence to invent.

Historians, on the other hand, are expected to conform to a rigorous system of validation, citing all their sources and methods, as they attempt the difficult task of differentiating between fact and fiction.

1.6 Summary: joining in

Studying the past is an awkward exercise – a balancing act between controlled imagination, the power of logical argument and the presence of evidence on the page. It generates a fine tension between enthusiasm and scepticism.

Historians simultaneously operate within a global community of practice. Individual researchers are invited to join a long-standing and massive human

²³ S. Alexievich, *Secondhand Time: the Last of the Soviets* (Moscow, 2013; in Engl. transl. by B. Shayevich, New York, 2016).

²⁴ Alexievich, *Secondhand Time*, p. 7.

²⁵ See J. Plamper, *The History of Emotions: an Introduction*, transl. K. Tribe (Oxford, 2015); B. H. Rosenwein and R. Cristiani, *What Is the History of Emotions?* (London, 2018); R. Boddice, *The History of Emotions* (Manchester, 2018); and a fine exemplar in S. Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England: Courtship, Emotions and Material Culture* (Oxford, 2019).

²⁶ K. Mitchell and N. Parsons (ed.), *Reading Historical Fiction: the Revenant and Remembered Past* (Basingstoke, 2013).

endeavour that spans generations. They are part of not just a ‘dialogue’ between a specific period in the past and the present day, but a positive ‘plurilogue’, whereby today’s researchers not only explore the past but also mentally commune with all who have studied the same period across the generations. It’s a subject based upon communal discussions, which is why researchers are also encouraged to teach.²⁷ Anyone ready to enter the debates and critique the sources can join.

Conceptually, history is a universal subject, open to all – even if in practice it can often feel exclusionary and privileged. Understanding its researchers as participating in a shared community, putting their shoulders to a common wheel, makes a fine start.

Further information on historians depicted at head of chapter:

For **Sima Qian** 司馬遷 (c.145–c.86 BC), see B. Watson, *Ssu-Ma Ch’ien: Grand Historian of China* (New York, 1958).

For **Edward Gibbon** (1737–94), see C. Roberts, *Edward Gibbon and the Shape of History* (Oxford, 2014).

For **C. L. R. James** (1901–89), see R. Douglas, *Making the Black Jacobins: C.L.R. James and the Drama of History* (Durham, N.C., 2019).

For **Marc Bloch** (1886–1944), see F. Hulak, *Sociétés et mentalités: la science historique de Marc Bloch* (Paris, 2012) and M. Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, transl. by P. Putnam (Manchester, 1954, 1967).

For **Gerda Lerner** (1920–2013), see her publications *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York, 1986) and *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography* (Philadelphia, Pa., 2003).

For **E. P. Thompson** (1924–93), see C. Efstathiou, *E.P. Thompson: A Twentieth-Century Romantic* (London, 2015) and H. J. Kaye and K. McClelland (ed.), *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Oxford, 1990).

For **Natalie Zemon Davis** (1928–), see G. Murdock and others (ed.), *Ritual and Violence: Natalie Zemon Davis and Early Modern France* (Oxford, 2012).

²⁷ For public presentation, see ch. 13. And for teaching guides, see J. Cannon, *Teaching History at University* (London, 1984); T. M. Kelly, *Teaching History in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2013); R. B. Simon et al. (ed.), *Teaching Big History* (Oakland, Calif., 2015); A. Flint and S. Jack, *Approaches to Learning and Teaching History: a Toolkit for International Teachers* (Cambridge, 2018); W. Caferro, *Teaching History* (London, 2019).

Becoming a Historian

For **David Olusoga** (1970–) on the global meetings of cultures, see his *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London, 2016) and his *First Contact: Cult of Progress* (London, 2018).

For **Olivette Otele** (1970–), see her *African Europeans: An Untold History* (London, 2020), and as editor (with others), *Post-Conflict Memorialisations: Missing Memorials, Absent Bodies* (London, 2021).