

# What Is History?

How and Why Should I Teach It?

1. the study of past events, particularly in human affairs

2. the whole series of past events connected with someone or something

3. a continuous, typically chronological, record of important or public events or of a particular trend or institution.

1. the study of past events, particularly in human affairs

“ History is above all else an argument. It is an argument between different historians. . . . Arguments are important; they create the possibility of changing things.”

—John H. Arnold

They bought and sold whatever promised to bring them a good profit. They were not troubled by a conscience. If we are to believe all their neighbours they did not know what the words honesty or integrity meant. They regarded a well-filled treasure chest the highest ideal of all good citizens. Indeed they were very unpleasant people and did not have a single friend. Nevertheless they have rendered all coming generations one service of the greatest possible value. They gave us our alphabet.

The Phoenicians had been familiar with the art of writing, invented by the Sumerians. But they regarded these pictographs as a clumsy waste of time. They were practical business men and could not spend hours engraving two or three letters. They set to work and invented a new system of writing which was greatly superior to the old one. They borrowed a few pictures from the Egyptians and they simplified a number of the wedge-shaped figures of the Sumerians. They sacrificed the pretty looks of the older system for the advantages of speed and they reduced the thousands of different images to a short and handy alphabet of twenty-two letters.

--Hendrik Van Loon, *The Story of Mankind*

Many things work against the will toward peace. In spite of all its horrors there are some people who do not hate war, who even think that war may be a good thing. Others think that war is a bad thing, but taking counsel of despair, they say, "There have always been wars, there always will be wars. It is human nature. So what is the use of trying to stop them?"

At first sight it seems as if there was a good deal to be said for this argument. It does seem as if the love of fighting was born in us. It is nothing unusual for a boy at school to fight. No one is surprised if he comes home with a cut lip or a black eye. Indeed it is taken as a matter of course. It is all part of the game of life, and a boy who can use his fists often gets on very well at school.

But when a boy becomes a man he changes. If he wants to get on well in life he no longer uses his fists but his brains. If in his profession or business he wants to get the better of another man he does not throw off his coat and offer to fight him. He sits down and thinks.

And even as children grow so nations grow. In the early days of our Island Story England was filled with many tribes constantly at war with each other. But as years went on these warring tribes were forced in one way or another to the conclusion, that it was better to join together, and all England in time became one nation acknowledging the rule of one king...

All the nations of Europe had to go through a like struggle, but at length within the borders of most states a national peace was established....

Men are only now beginning to see that just as in the old days no baron had the right to break the peace of his country, so now no state has the right to break the peace of the world. And this has led them to the League of Nations.

--H. E. Marshall, *Our Island Story*

# “Biographical” history

## **Origins:**

ancient history’s transformation from royal chronicles  
to the story of men

## **Characteristics:**

history happens when great men  
and women act

## **Drawbacks:**

what about the rest?

# “Progressive” history

## **Origins:**

the Christian reworking of the Hebrew approach

## **Characteristics:**

history is the outworking of a linear, progressive plan  
with a beginning and an end

## **Drawbacks:**

flattens the distinction between previous eras and our own

**OR**

turns earlier eras into “primitive” and “barbarian” times

# Varieties of “progressive” history:

**Providential**

**Whiggish**

**Marxist**

# “Positivist” history

## **Origins:**

the Enlightenment dedication to the scientific method

## **Characteristics:**

history can be explained through the examination of natural factors; reliance on statistics

## **Drawbacks:**

removal of “agency”

# “Social” history

## **Origins:**

the Marxist correction (paying attention to the common man)

## **Characteristics:**

history can be explained through the examination of natural factors; reliance on statistics

## **Drawbacks:**

narrow focus, inability to draw larger conclusions

“History, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in. . . .The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars and pestilences in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all.”

—Catherine, in **NORTHANGER ABBEY**  
by Jane Austen

Elementary (grammar stage):

When? Who? Where?

“There is properly no history; only biography.”

--Ralph Waldo Emerson

Middle grades (the logic stage):

How does it all connect?

“The narrator [of history] must seek to imbue himself with the life and spirit of the time. He must study events in their bearings near and remote; in the character, habits, and manners of those who took part in them. He must himself be, as it were, a sharer or a spectator of the action he describes.”

--Francis Parkman

High school (the rhetoric stage):

What does it mean? Who is determining the meaning?

"Each age tries to form its own conception of the past. Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time."

--Frederick Jackson Turner