

Light on creative approaches to history

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History in practice

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The repositioning or realignment of history as a discipline in the field of the humanities (or social sciences) in the tertiary educational arena has been common in many of the most advanced liberal democracies of the world. In fact, in more than one university faculty, Fukuyama's prophetic prediction in respect of the *end of history* has reverberated with astounding effects. The ending of the Cold War and the rapid development of information technology, as well as the rethink on government funding for certain fields of scientific endeavour have been instrumental in bringing about substantial changes.

Somehow many of the elaborate theoretical textbooks used for teaching historians appear to have become antiquated. It is thus with more than the usual interest that the reader should take note of a methodological text on the practice of history.

In *The practice of history*, Prof. Ludmilla Jordanova, a specialist in the field of the history of medicine, gender and the sciences at the University of East Anglia offers the reader an understandable text on issues relevant to those people who wish to pursue history as an occupation in the new millennium.

In many respects it is a hands on practical guide to doing history. The book addresses some of the crucial questions in such a way that the layperson can form an opinion on the main crosscurrents in the discipline at present.

At the outset the reader is informed of the three primary goals of the work. They are to provide information on the current issues in the discipline, the position of history in a wider context, and basically what and how historians operate (p. xv). For educationists interested in furthering the outcomes based approach, each of the seven chapters features an outline of objectives and a summary or "bridge" of the dominant issues that were discussed.

Instead of merely offering an answer as to what history precisely is, Jordanova places the discipline within the broader field of scientific endeavour and points out

that it has a complex array of practices, which in some areas overlap, but in others tend to be of a unique nature. Without much ado the reader is told of the way in which the educational system functions. It is then important to take note of the different organisations that serve the interests of historians. There are observations on publishing and the way in which research is done.

In all these fields there have been substantial changes in recent years. She explains that the organisational arrangement of history at universities has changed both in the United States and in Europe. Whilst the Europeans still tend to opt for the strong focus on the discipline as a pursuit of specialisation, the Americans tend to resort to the modular approach in which history is fitted comfortably into a number of compartments of other disciplines (p. 12). The significance of organisations such as the Royal Historical Society or the American Historical Association must be seen in the context of the assistance offered to practitioners in promoting a sense of ownership of their discipline (p. 15). Other valuable information that is disclosed is the fact that there is a distinct difference between what constitutes a “best seller” in the publishing industry, and the perceptions of historians on the matter.

In the second chapter the more conventional topics are up for discussion, such as what precisely history is and the type of materials the historian encounters. Instead of giving a detailed description of sources the reader is made aware of the fact that the creative and self-aware use of evidence is important in historical research. After discussing a variety of different types of history, the reader is introduced to an holistic approach to the discipline. Then follows a description of more recent trends in the discipline. Along with a brief description of certain methods, the thematic history and theoretical history is considered.

For the postgraduate student in history it is important to determine how history interfaces with disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy and literature. In particular there is an accent on the need for the greater cognitive awareness of culture and its manifestation in the past and present.

In the chapter dealing with the status of historical knowledge the discourse tends to deepen considerably when the author explains how it has come about that the status of the discipline has been subject to challenge over the past two decades. We are told that the *critique* of history is significant because it makes us aware that at the roots history promotes the idea of identity of a nation or a people. History is also used in making decisions, or it is subject to abuse in order to prop up individuals or groups. Up for discussion is also the crucial element of historical truth, which has undergone a number of transformations since the advent of the postmodernist discourse. The author circumvents some of the issues by resorting to an explanation of what does it mean to know something of the past, and when does it become “knowledge”. It is here where the issue of the “authentic” document features prominently. Even historians of high standing are subject to the particularistic interpretation of the document and it is essential for the reader of history to be aware that there are several correct ways of interpreting the document. Therefore the evaluation of the different sources with a sound sense of critical intonation is of

importance. Source criticism as practise is offered from different perspectives as an essential ingredient for the understanding and evaluating the comments and observations on the past.

Periodisation, which has of late been comprehensively considered, in view of the chronological transition to a new millennium, offers a number of solutions to the problems historians encounter when the past is reported. The author looks at the event, when it becomes significant in the context of time. We are also made aware of the fact that historical metaphors usually have their origins when the past is conceptualised in the specific context of particular historiographical traditions and conventions. At the centre is the issue of change, which makes it possible for the historian to perceive differences. She explains: "Judgments about how fast or how slowly things change depends upon accounts of how they change at all, upon historians' understanding of the detailed mechanisms through which human beings and their environment are transformed." (p. 137.) Intelligent observations of this kind abound in the work. Without being obtuse the author tends to address some of the haunting issues in the discipline as it is practised today.

In line with the trend of many British historians here is substantial attention given to the concept of public history - a concept that had its origins in the Marxist theories of Habermas. This awareness of the past has been refined, especially in the field of cultural history. Ever since the 1970's history from the bottom up has been the objective of many a workshop. The promotion of the idea of ordinary people participating in the drama of the historical event occurring, was striking. It led to numerous fresh and creative insights into the discipline. Central to the concept was the issue of the ownership of the past. Claiming up the right particular right is a responsibility which is seldom realised by individuals and communities or interest groups. Arguing from the perspective the author offers the example of womens history (pp. 163-54.) and how it has changed attitudes. But, we are told, it is important to bear in mind that the historian as an ethical obligation. It is necessary to be humane, accurate, self-aware and judicious. (p. 165.)

In more than one respect this is essential in the public domain, because it is there where the historian works with what can be constituted as being the property of the public. We are also told that "Ownership is not only an exceptionally powerful metaphor, it is totally bound up with identity..." an awareness which is currently very much alive. (p. 163.)

In the final chapter the author offers a comprehensive discussion on skills. From the perspective of promoting a skills-based approach in teaching history the concept is defined, there are a number of types of skills explained. More important is the subject specific skills of being able to interpret, do research in the archive (which is not always according to the author the most important part of doing history) and of course the issue of skills in the process of teaching history.

If there is one appeal that comes through strongly in *The practice of history* it is that historians should take history out into the open by offering it to the public and

making it part of what is being spoken and written about the past in the public sphere by the media and in museums. Jordanova explains the role historians have to play is to work towards the recognition of the emotional and social value of memory and commemoration. (p. 204.) Not all is simply fiction. There are many forms of trust (not necessarily truth) which need to be established in order for a sound relationship of mutual acceptance to take place between historians and the public. “The future of history lies in practitioners and their public possessing *both* an awareness of its limitations *and* a confidence in its intellectual strengths and achievements. (p. 205.)

History in practice is a good methodological source for senior under- and junior postgraduate students in history. Jordanova sheds interesting light on the creative ways in which the discipline can be used in a variety of fields. She must be commended for making use of visual illustrations. Discussions on works of art and historical photographs abound in the text. The reader is given a broader perspective of how comprehensive and vast history can be, should we wish to explore its potential from different perspectives.

On a negative level, it could be said that some of the statements of the author tends to be naive and coloured by the (acceptable) bias of being a female historian who confesses that she is inclined to support a more radical line of thought. Also some of the approaches of conforming meticulously to a fixed format of writing in terms of the principles of outcomes based education, makes the work less readable for the general reader. Overall however the work is of a good quality and can be recommended as a valuable textbook for students in history.

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