

# On the Teaching and Writing of History

*Editor's Note: During 1991 Harvard University Professor Bernard Bailyn was in residence at Dartmouth College as Montgomery Fellow. Dartmouth history professors Jere R. Daniell and Charles T. Wood engaged Prof. Bailyn in two tape-recorded "Conversations" which became the raw material for the 1994 book from which this article is excerpted.*

## ***Why should one study history?***

B. B. That seems to divide into two questions: why history should be studied, and why I--or you or any other individual--should study it in any but the way a normally well-informed person would.

History should be studied because it is an absolutely necessary enlargement of human experience, a way of getting out of the boundaries of one's own life and culture and of seeing more of what human experience has been. And it is the necessary, unique way of orienting the present moment, so that you know where you are and where we have come from and so you don't fantasize about the past and make up myths to justify some immediate purpose--so you can make decisions based to some extent on what has gone before, on knowledge of actual experience.

Accurate historical knowledge is essential for social sanity. Pathological systems--totalitarian regimes of whatever kind, of the left or the right--must systematically distort history in order to survive. Goebbels knew that; Stalin and his lackeys in the Soviet Writers' Guild knew that. So did George Orwell when he assigned the hero of 1984 the task of falsifying the past. Society's need for history, as complete and objective as possible, is obvious.

Why anyone in particular should study history is a different question. My answer to that is that you should study it--beyond what any informed person should know--if it interests you. Somebody's got to study it thoroughly and systematically if our society is to keep its sanity, its sense of reality and self-awareness, but I think the individuals who study history professionally should do so because it attracts them, because it satisfies them intellectually. If it doesn't interest one, there are many other things to devote oneself to.

## ***What about history teaching at the high-school level?***

B. B. Anything I say about this has to be qualified by the fact that I've never taught in a high school. But, for what it is worth, let me say that there seem to me to be two rather contradictory obligations in high-school teaching, both of which are very important. In the first place, because young people can memorize easily, it is a time in which one can give them basic structural lines to large-scale historical narratives--basic information, so they know that there was an English Civil War, that Rome follows the great era of Ancient Greece, that neither Germany nor Italy was a nation until the nineteenth century, that Napoleon follows the French Revolution and that what he did was related to it, et cetera--so that they get the grid lines of large areas of history, within which later details can be fitted. But that can be a very routine, mechanical, and rather boring business that students are not attracted to, unless taught by an exceptionally engaging teacher. One way of handling this...is to convey information in terms of questions that are not contrived--real questions that might appeal to students' natural curiosity.

I recently had a conversation with people at the Harvard Graduate School of Education who were concerned about this problem. They were preparing a section for a school curriculum on the Bill of Rights, and they asked me how I would present this if I were teaching in a high school. I said that one of the interesting things about the federal Bill of Rights is that it is so different from the bills of rights of the individual states. The prescriptive verbs in the states' bills of rights are "ought"s, and they are cast in terms of general philosophical principles. For example, *All men ought to be free*. But the United States Bill of Rights is a mandate on Congress, and the operative verbs are different. It says, *Congress shall not*. . . . The language is mandatory, not optative--and not by accident.

That seems to me to pose a real problem of explanation. Why the difference? I believe if you put it to bright high-school students they will see that it's a question that really requires an answer, and they will want to find an answer. If one can go through major topics in terms of real questions of that kind--interpretative questions--I think you can engage the students. Carl Becker, whom I mentioned before, wrote a high-school textbook framed by paradoxes or provocative topic headings: *How the French people started out to make a small revolution and ended by making a great one; Why the members of the Third Estate took a long time deciding whether they should sit in three rooms or in one; How the Jacobins, after having saved the revolution, destroyed themselves; Was Napoleon a great man?* The worst thing, it seems to me, is simply to dish out descriptive history without offering questions, some

general ideas, a framework to hang it on. You have to have some kind of hook for the information, or it's just brute force and nobody will, in the end, respond positively to that. The second thing that I assume is important to do at this stage is simply to fascinate high-school students with history--get them excited about it, show the fascination of events, personalities, and outcomes; emphasize the drama and personal interest of it all--so they see that this is something that can be vitally, intrinsically interesting to them, and not something dull.

These two things...might seem to run against each other. The ideal of high-school teaching is to do both.... The great obligation...is to see to it that students don't come into college-level study or into their own independent reading of history without any kind of structural lines to the larger story...and they must at the same time take with them from high school some sense that it is enjoyable to study history.

***You have said that, for you, things really come together in "moments of creativity" when you are writing. How is that different from fictional writing?***

B. B. I think it's very different...no working historian, however philosophically sophisticated, can write a sentence of history without thinking that something in fact happened back there; that there was a real world back then, independent of our perception of it, and that, if the sources are available, one's job is to describe and analyze some aspect of that world. You have to assume that, and that assumption exerts--at least in a negative fashion--a control over what you can say. If it's history, it can be disproved. You can't disprove a novel, but you can disprove history; and that seems to me all the difference in the world.

Yes, there are wonderful "moments of creativity" in writing history, but they are not transcendental flights into the unknown. *Creativity in science*, the physicist Richard Feynman said, *is imagination in a straitjacket*. So, too, is creativity in history.

One of the most amusing approaches to this has to do with the now discontinued television series *Hill Street Blues*. I once assigned a graduate seminar to watch that program for a while. At first they didn't get the point; they didn't see why as historians they should be watching it, especially since--and this *was* the point--they had a good deal of difficulty figuring out what was going on.

...*Hill Street Blues* deliberately had four or five interrelated narratives proceeding simultaneously, and they pointed the camera straight into the turmoil of a chaotic police station. People were running this way and that; the stories kept getting interrupted, some never reached a satisfactory conclusion, seemed to remain open-ended; the characters

spoke in code words peculiar to their own world; and sometimes you couldn't tell who was doing what. On top of all this, it was often hard to see who was right and who was wrong. Some of the most attractive characters did nasty things, and in some situations to do right would inevitably have bad consequences.... In *Hill Street Blues* it was left to the viewer, to a surprising extent, to perceive the narrative structures and to form judgments.... Just so in history, it is left for the historian to sort out the narrative line, explain what moved together, what influenced what, what the stakes were in significant decisions, what the origins and consequences were. Historians are viewers, analysts, explicators of the hubbub of an infinitely confused station house, with people running in all directions, in a constant struggle for satisfactory solutions to their problems, their hopes and ambitions. The fact that raw experience is confused, often bewildering, does not mean that clear historical analysis is false, only that historians seek, retrospectively, a clearer understanding than contemporaries could have had.-

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*Bernard Bailyn is Adams University Professor, Emeritus, of Harvard University. His writings have won the Pulitzer and Bancroft prizes and a National Book Award. **On the Teaching and Writing of History** (1994) is available from University Press of New England, Hanover, NH 03755.*