

Historians and Mirrors: A Review Essay

By MAYNARD BRICHFORD

It is superfluous to observe that archivists should read what historians write about the practice of history. Not only is it instructive to study current thinking on the research use of original sources, it often provides interesting and entertaining reading. In recent years, historians have drifted from writing occasional essays categorizing their colleagues and begun to discuss the nature of their collective work. They have not completely forsaken sterile historiography, nor have they come to the appraisal of themselves as a group. Nevertheless, the onslaughts of social scientists, philosophers, and natural scientists have prompted the devotees of *Clio* to take up the pen to explain their work. The results provide a rich literary fare. The half dozen volumes by Elton, Winks, Berkhofer, Fischer, Higham, and Hexter are evidence that this period of self-examination has begun to yield results. Elton explains his "faith and practice" in the study of history as a "rewarding experience." Winks's collection of essays focuses on the historian as a searcher for sources. Berkhofer advocates behavioral science methods. Fischer states the case for a problem-solving logic of historical thought. Five of the nine collected essays by Higham relate to problems of contemporary intellectual historians. Hexter's book is a strong defense of "professional history" as it is practiced. Elton found that the French *Annales* school "lost itself in rhetoric and self-adulation." These six volumes indicate that this statement may be only half true of the profession at large.

A Tudor historian at Cambridge, Elton makes a vigorous and colorful defense of "professional history" while discussing the "purpose of history," research, writing, and teaching. He observes that colleagues who borrow new methodologies from anthropology and sociology produce "jejeune"

The author is university archivist at the University of Illinois at Urbana. The books he examines here are Geoffrey R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (London: Sydney University Press, 1967); Robin W. Winks, editor, *The Historian as Detective: Essays on Evidence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); Robert F. Berkhofer, *A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis* (New York: Free Press, 1969); David H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); John Higham, *Writing American History: Essays on Modern Scholarship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970); and Jack H. Hexter, *Doing History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971).

history cluttered with bad analogies. Others who write about "the meaning of history" subordinate history to prophecy. He finds the study of history legitimate in itself. His defense of history as a "search for the truth" brings him to an appraisal of methods. Elton regards the "objective reality" of the past as guaranteed. To him, "verifiability is the enemy of objective truth because it consists of the operation of the observer and experimenter upon the subject matter studied." He warns against the "overconfidence of the men who see the world as categories and statistics, and who think in jargon."

Elton views the graduate student as an apprentice learning the craft of historical scholarship. While this craftsmanship can be taught and tested, "no one has yet succeeded in training academic historians as teachers." He notes that the historian's trade is learned better in a manageable area and observes "that it would be nice if historians of recent times could bear to be trained as medievalists, acquiring the competence to handle tools where the techniques are better developed and the paths more clearly blazed." This argument is a central issue in the training of European archivists. In dealing with evidence, Elton discusses the historian's need to be acquainted with the available evidence, to make a scholarly assessment of it, and to offer an imaginative reconstruction and interpretation. He holds that "proper research training must . . . include the recognition of the right questions"—counsel which is of special relevance to archivists. He contends that we attempt to teach too much historiography to undergraduates and that methods training should be presented in a brief period of intensive instruction at the beginning of graduate work.

Elton enjoys taking pot shots at "tired jargon" and colleagues who violate his standards. Local historians and the "tepid approval which pervades . . . most professional reviewing of historical books in America" each receive a critical shot. He also deplores the American habit of "studying problems through the contrasting opinions of selected writers rather than from the evidence" and alleges that such collections "give off a clear light only when a match is put to them." While Elton's discussion of sources acknowledges the work of historians in the preparation of finding aids and the importance of maintaining the original arrangement, archives are only mentioned as places where a few historians are employed. The *École des Chartes* is identified as one of "the best-known training schools for historians." His lack of awareness of archivists is emphasized by the statement that evidence "which is deliberately preserved by observers is a drop in the bucket compared with that which is left behind by action and without thought of selection for preservation purposes."

Many historians cherish a view of research as a hunt for manuscripts or archives. Inspired by books like Richard Altick's *The Scholar Adventurers*, they regard the adventurous pursuit of sources as a fascinating aspect of the historian's craft. Manuscript hunts are the basis for exciting stories of personalities, psychological ploys, and sleuthing. Yale

historian Robin Winks has edited a collection of twenty-six essays on historical method. Subtitled "essays on evidence," *The Historian as Detective* is primarily concerned with hunting for evidence. Each "case" is drawn from a search for evidence or its meaning. In William Willcox's contribution, the author states that research is "inherently exciting" and that "it is research as art that redeems the drudgery of data-gathering." While conceding that "historians have not cared to look closely at themselves," Winks builds an interesting case for a historical methodology based on the solution of mysteries.

Commenting on the historian's struggle with "consciously articulated ideation," Berkhofer lectures his readers in an intriguing attempt to engraft behavioral science methods onto historical method. He emphasizes culture and man's concept of culture as the basic point of reference in historical research. With heavy reliance on anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn and sociologist Talcott Parsons, the author carries a heavy set of footnotes into a dubious battle. Berkhofer contends that historians, as scientists, formulate questions to test their interpretations against the surviving evidence. He advocates a behavioral approach to historical analysis. Where Elton would eschew empirical verification, Berkhofer seeks to fit historians into the role of "objective observers." He contends that behavioral scientists and philosophers have paid "far greater attention to the complexities of human activity" than have historians. His remedy for modern historians is "a sophisticated set of categories derived from the current orientation to human behavior." Because only an empirical study can define a culture or a society, he proposes the analytical study of social practices and cultural ideation. In urging historians to seek ways to use "conceptions defined problematically and researched empirically," Berkhofer defines culture as "empirically established shared ideation." He believes that the diligent application of this concept will give historians new understanding and objectivity. He calls for attention to the analysis of systems and suggests that historians engage in the holistic study of time. Here they differ from social scientists who seek events which can be "ordered into repetitive series." Proclaiming the death of "traditional narrative history" or chronicle, Berkhofer emphasizes a concern for the questions asked.

Fischer begins his book on logic in historical thought with a critical judgment on "books on the nature of history" which "degenerate into mere exhortations or manuals." He quotes philosopher Walter B. Gallie's comment that "historians . . . show an almost pathological disinclination to commit themselves to any general statements about their work, its aims, subject-matter and methods." Drawing upon Jeremy Bentham's *Handbook of Political Fallacies*, the Brandeis University historian presents an interesting salad of 116 fallacies in eleven categories. Fischer's reference to "dusty archives" could qualify as the 117th fallacy—that of the amathophobic historian. Transgressor's writings are labelled "dysfunctional." American radicals and other groups receive well-earned criticism. Even the fallacists have their fallacies. Fischer con-

cludes with an eloquent call for fellow historians to clarify problems, suggest the future, refine theories, help people think about themselves and teach people how to think historically. For archivists, whose basic function involves the hypothetical questioning of documentary sources, a work advocating questions, hypotheses and models has merit. An awareness of the numerous pitfalls that await the scholar should prompt archivists to consider their holdings in terms of their effective use in answering important questions.

In his essays on writing American history, John Higham of the University of Michigan explores the schism in American history between the humanists and the social scientists. He contends that "two culture" thinking resulted in the early identification of quantification with the sciences and quality judgments with the humanities. With a heavy emphasis on empiricism and a separate organization in the Social Science Research Council, American social scientists have created a third area of scholarly research. Higham notes that many historians have adopted social science techniques, but that they have not flocked to assume responsibility for the informed, humanistic, moral judgments to reconcile theories of conflict and consensus. Though his principal concern is the development of intellectual history, his call for a synthesizing perspective on the past suggests basic questions about American attitudes toward the documentation of the past.

Professor Jack H. Hexter of Yale brings the discussion back to Elton's position with respect to professional history as "history written by men who have been subjected to fairly rigorous training in historical research and . . . writing." He observes that historians tend to write about theory, research methodology, and the writings of colleagues rather than "the craft of writing history." The lack of "a pedagogic equivalent of *The Joy of Cooking*" has made "our present methods of transmitting the skills" of the craft "inordinately hit-or-miss and wasteful."

The first two essays state a basic argument for a society of "professional historians" and their use of "fictive rhetoric" and "evocative language." In a tough-minded refutation of "the 'dedicated teacher' canard," Hexter states that the unique purpose of the society of professional historians is "to get history written" and "not to get it taught." Teaching is undertaken because it is "a condition of employment" and "there are few other paying posts available." The central institution of the society of historians is "judgment by peers" through book reviews, footnotes, correspondence, and oral communication. For the professional historian, his peers are his "society" and they shape his work by providing both sources and evaluation. While he must publish, he may still perish. He is rated by the price he "fetches in the current job market."

In his article on the "rhetoric of history," Hexter equates historiography with the writing of history and compares the historian's work with "the mathematizing natural sciences." Historians do not employ the "wholly denotative rhetoric of verbal signs" that scientists use to facilitate generalization, replicability, and logical entailment. They do not share the

social scientists' regard for scientific rhetoric and methodology as "their goal and ideal." Historians sacrifice exactness for the "evocative force" of "fictive rhetoric." Within the framework of their "overriding commitment . . . to fidelity to the surviving records of the past," they employ narrative explanation and the devices of historical rhetoric, i.e., footnotes, quotations in text, and word lists. In suggesting a codification of the principles of historical writing, Hexter notes that they are now taught almost wholly by experience rather than by a combination of experience and systematic knowledge.

While Hexter is by no means gentle toward his colleagues, who often bury "tiny kernels of insight, perception and discovery" in "thick, heavy shells of incompetence, dullness and confusion," he uses his main batteries against philosophers and social scientists. Analytical philosophers are cut down for their "assimilationist answers" in attempting to explain anomalies in the rhetoric of history in terms of their "paradigmatic rhetoric." Hexter sees the failure of the philosophers' attempts to explain the "nature of knowing, understanding, meaning, and truth" in the language of the natural sciences as opening the way for a possible "paradigm shift," which would accept the rhetoric of history as a means of pursuing the truth. He warns that the social sciences and quantification are "tactical or logistic aids" rather than saving methodological truths. He concludes with a caution against surrendering "history's proper claim to being a practical, humane, and moral science in order to have the foolish, fond hope of transforming it into a theoretical one."

The evocative force of Hexter's essays is impressive. Unfortunately, his description of the society of "professional historians" flies in the face of reality. While a dedicated group would accept his contentions, most college and university teachers of history, by profession and by practice, do not support his arguments. They represent that broader society whose first allegiance is to their "paying posts" as teachers and whose disinterest in research methodology and "the craft of writing history" is well known to archivists.

Archivists may join in the reaction against contemporary excesses of enthusiasm for theoretical model-building and searches for quantifiable data, but they can ill afford to overlook the profound impact of the social sciences on the modern world. The transformation of society wrought during the technological revolution of the last three generations should free the archivist from an inherited reliance on the scholarly theories and methodologies of the late nineteenth century. Since graduate training in history is still the basis for entry into archival practice, archivists will benefit from these examples of current historical thought. Reading historians should not affect the increasing awareness of the fundamental differences in archival and historical careers. Where historians devote themselves to teaching and research on what Hexter calls "some limited constellation of past happenings," archivists find themselves engaged in the administrative problems involved in the identification, selection, description, and preservation of documentation for all types of research

uses. Historians tend to regard records as survivors. Contemporary writers affirm that only a portion of historical evidence survives, but they show little interest in the factors which brought about this condition. Why do men record? What elements of chance affect the preservation and destruction of documentation? How does archival evaluation affect our evidential and informational heritage? The questions of major importance to archivists do not interest our historical brethren.

Historians have examined their mirrors. Archivists face a similar challenge with respect to archival practice. We know what the archivist does and how he does it but are only dimly aware of the rationale behind many of his activities. In a period of declining opportunities in teaching and declining employment in the federal government, archivists need to consider why their social function is important and worthy of greatly increased public and private support. To associate themselves with societal needs and goals, they must demonstrate the importance of a sound, objective understanding of the past in all areas of human investigation. Archivists committed to meaningful change will find these works by our colleagues in history a source of inspiration to develop a comparable literature about archival practice. We cannot keep the "keys to the documentary kingdom" without a belief in the importance of our work and a recognition of our professional obligation to write about the archivist and what he does.