

京大過去問 2011年 第1問

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The word 'history' has two senses: what happened in the past, and what we say in the present about what happened in the past. In the first sense, history as past events is imagined as a country stretched out 'behind' us which we could visit if only we had a time-travel machine. History as the surmises, interpretations and narratives constructed today is base on what those past events left for us — it survives in the form of documents, letters, diaries, ruins unearthed by the archaeologist, artefacts known or judged to be old. These are the residue of what has otherwise gone; historians study and arrange them, like pieces of an incomplete jigsaw puzzle, in order to fashion a coherent story. History, in the sense of past time, is accessible only through history in the sense of today's incomplete jigsaw puzzle; we can get at it in no other way.

Among the indispensable resources of the historian are contemporary accounts of past events written by witnesses. Of course these accounts have to be approached with scepticism; the historian must remember the human inclination to dramatize, enlarge a share or minimise a responsibility, write with bias, distort the facts whether deliberately or unconsciously, 'spin' the events or tell outright lies. (1)Even so, first-hand reports are valuable and important. Without diaries and reports, memoirs, newspapers and other contemporary records, historians would have a very hard if not impossible time. This was what Thomas Carlyle had in mind when he defined history as 'a kind of distilled newspapers', though of course he thereby ignores the task of checking and interpretation that the historian uses to turn those records into an organised whole. Moreover a great deal of the raw material used by historians consists of other less interesting factual records, such as lists of names, account books, legal documents, and the like: a far cry from, say, diary entries and personal letters, reportage and memoir.

It is these latter accounts, though, that give the freshest and most vivid impression of the past, however much spin and bias they contain. The documentary raw material of history has the immediacy of presence, the directness that characterises communication from someone who was there and felt and saw the things reported. Any policeman will tell you that four witnesses at the scene of an accident will give four different stories of what happened; so we must accept that every contemporary account is one person's account, filtered through subjectivity and the often unreliable channel of memory. (2)Nevertheless it is impossible not to be gripped, absorbed and often moved by letters, diaries and court records. It is quite different experience from reading novelised versions of the events, and even historical accounts of them. The consciousness that

the writer was there makes a big difference. If, as you read, you recall the cynical view of Santayana that ‘history is a pack of lies about events that never happened told by people who weren’t there’, you might not be able to resist a smile. (3)He meant today’s historians writing about the past; but the same applies to the creators of their resources. Some letters and diaries might indeed be a pack of lies, and their authors might not really have been where they claimed to have been — but it is reasonable to suppose that most are the authors’ version of the truth. And the fact that they were written close to the described events makes them compelling.

A.C.Grayling, 2010, Thinking of Answers