

The History Guide

What is History?

What follows are a series of quotations about history and the historian's craft. They have been culled from a variety of sources and they appear here in totally random order. Their purpose is to incite, energize and stimulate your historical imagination.

* * *

"History,' Stephen said, 'is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.'" **James Joyce**

"Since history has no properly scientific value, its only purpose is educative. And if historians neglect to educate the public, if they fail to interest it intelligently in the past, then all their historical learning is valueless except in so far as it educates themselves." **G. M. Trevelyan.**

"To each eye, perhaps, the outlines of a great civilization present a different picture. In the wide ocean upon which we venture, the possible ways and directions are many; and the same studies which have served for my work might easily, in other hands, not only receive a wholly different treatment and application, but lead to essentially different conclusions." **Jacob Burckhardt**

"History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illuminates reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life, and brings us tidings of antiquity." **Cicero**

"The past is useless. That explains why it is past." **Wright Morris**

"Faithfulness to the truth of history involves far more than a research, however patient and scrupulous, into special facts. Such facts may be detailed with the most minute exactness, and yet the narrative, taken as a whole, may be unmeaning or untrue. The narrator 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**

"History . . . is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind." **Edward Gibbon**

"There is properly no history; only biography." **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

"The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind; for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see; and in that record you can find yourself and your country both examples and warnings; fine things to take as models, base things rotten through and through, to avoid." **Livy**

"What experience and history teach is this-that people and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it." **G. W. F. Hegel**

"Everything must be recaptured and relocated in the general framework of history, so that despite the difficulties, the fundamental paradoxes and contradictions, we may respect the unity of history which is also the unity of life." **Fernand Braudel**

"The function of the historian is neither to love the past nor to emancipate himself from the past, but to master and understand it as the key to the understanding of the present." **E. H. Carr**

"If you do not like the past, change it." **William L. Burton**

"History does nothing, possesses no enormous wealth, fights no battles. It is rather man, the real, living man, who does everything, possesses, fights. It is not *History*, as if she were a person apart, who uses men as a means to work out her purposes, but history itself is nothing but the activity of men pursuing their purposes." **Karl Marx**

"An historian should yield himself to his subject, become immersed in the place and period of his choice, standing apart from it now and then for a fresh view." **Samuel Eliot Morison**

"History is *for* human self-knowledge. Knowing yourself means knowing, first, what it is to be a person; secondly, knowing what it is to be the kind of person you are; and thirdly, knowing what it is to be the person *you* are and nobody else is. Knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what they can do until they try, the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is." **R. G. Collingwood**

"History is more or less bunk." **Henry Ford**

"That historians should give their own country a break, I grant you; but not so as to state things contrary to fact. For there are plenty of mistakes made by writers out of ignorance, and which any man finds it difficult to avoid. But if we knowingly write what is false, whether for the sake of our country or our friends or just to be pleasant, what difference is there between us and hack writers? Readers should be very attentive to and critical of historians, and they in turn should be constantly on their guard." **Polybius**

"You have reckoned that history ought to judge the past and to instruct the contemporary world as to the future. The present attempt does not yield to that high office. It will merely tell how it really was." **Leopold von Ranke**

"Time in its irresistible and ceaseless flow carries along on its flood all created things and drowns them in the depths of obscurity. . . . But the tale of history forms a very strong bulwark against the stream of time, and checks in some measure its

irresistible flow, so that, of all things done in it, as many as history has taken over it secures and binds together, and does not allow them to slip away into the abyss of oblivion." **Anna Comnena**

"Only a good-for-nothing is not interested in his past." **Sigmund Freud**

"Every past is worth condemning." **Friedrich Nietzsche**

"The historian does simply not come in to replenish the gaps of memory. He constantly challenges even those memories that have survived intact." **Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi**

"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

| [The History Guide](#) | [Feedback](#) |

Last Revised -- May 13, 2004