

5 People and historical study

A note to readers. It is suggested that you increase magnification to 125% or 150% to read the guide on screen. Click on the magnifying glass icon at bottom left of the screen and select your magnification.

Key points in Chapter 5

- To bring energy and interest to your study of the past, think of the people in the past as just as real as the people you know in the present.
- As you 'see' beyond the surface on events in the present, and as you gain more awareness of the possibilities of human nature, both yours and other people's, so your appreciation of the past increases.

THERE IS AN INTENTIONAL AMBIGUITY in the title of this chapter. 'People and historical study' can refer to persons who lived in the past and were therefore part of history or, on the other hand, the title can mean persons, such as you, who study the past. In both senses people are central in historical study. As I will show in the latter part of the chapter, these two but different meanings are linked.

People in the past

Most History studied before the undergraduate years is strong in political themes. I accept that there are economic and social History courses but most school courses are centred on politics, politicians, power, states and foreign policies. Later, during the undergraduate years there is more diversity in subject options and student choice. Many undergraduates, for example, as part of their course, follow gender studies, cultural History, diplomatic or racial History themes. Whatever the theme of the chosen course, people remain at the centre of the subject.

While films, CD-Roms, pictures or material remains (buildings, artifacts ...) may add to our appreciation of the past, the written word, in



People in History

the form of books, articles and documents, remain the dominant way into the past. Information in books, that is by the written word, presents a danger and a challenge, but the challenge provides an opportunity. The danger is that you will let the past you study remain a 'book past'. That is, that you allow an account of the events of the past, made from the lives of people and their actions, remain detached from you on the written page in the book before you. The challenge of the written past is to transfer it from the pages of books, a book past, to inside your head where you make it a *living* past in which a cast of people, as real as your family and friends, who you can be with in your mind even when they are not with you in the same room or building. If you make some progress towards capturing the past in this way your interest, understanding and enjoyment, as well as your insights and mastery, will markedly advance.

The key to unlock the life of the past, so that it lives in your mind, is to search for the people in the past. Decisions are made by people, implemented by people and effect the lives of people. Wars are made by people, mostly men, and are fought by men and women. Civilians' lives are changed by war: civilians are people just as your neighbours and friends are people. Even 'dry' administrative History is the result of decisions which, when implemented, influence people. People are party to every aspect of History. They provide a handle for us, in the present, because people are the constant in History. While economies and societies change, landscapes are transformed, nations become stronger or weaker, the people in these histories are substantially the same as you and me. They have the same needs, the same range of



emotions and capacity for virtue and vice. It is your direct access to human nature that can go direct to the heart of the real past – people whose lives were History.

The past, people and the present

I now refer to the other meaning of the chapter title. If you recognise my central positioning of people in History and the value of empathy with the lives of individual people in the past to enliven the past, how can this be done with most effect? Let us liken History, that is either the past or an account of the past in a History book, to a work of art, a Picasso or Henry Moore statue or Susan Hill novel. It is most improbable that two people will respond to the painting, statue or novel in exactly the same way. The painting, statue or novel, however, is always the same entity so if the response is not the same it is because the responders, the viewers or readers, are different. In short, any communication has three parts - a communicator, a communication and a communication receiver. If History, whether the past or an account of the past, is set then the extent of appreciation to that set History will vary dependent on the responder - the History student or historian. The more you move toward a fuller understanding of yourself and people in the present, the more you will understand the people of the past and therefore the past itself. The value of the present to help with the study of the past is implied by Marc Bloch's comment: 'This solidarity of the ages is so effective that the lines of communication work both ways. ... a man may wear himself out ... in seeking to understand the past, if he is totally ignorant of the present. ... This faculty of understanding the living is, in very truth, the master quality of the historian.' (*The Historian's Craft*, English edition 1954.) And how can your understanding of yourself be more full? By living a busy, rounded, challenging life and by a developing self awareness and curiosity about people and society and how institutions really work *today*. For these insights, gained from an interest in the present, which is more accessible, and more fully reported, and which is more open to immediate questioning than the past, is a really useful way towards an understanding of the people of the past.

A further turn in the relationship of past, present and people is the role of the past to help our understanding of the present and ourselves, a theme which is not explored here. The past, present and people can be seen as apexes in a triangle in which each furthers comprehension of the other two.