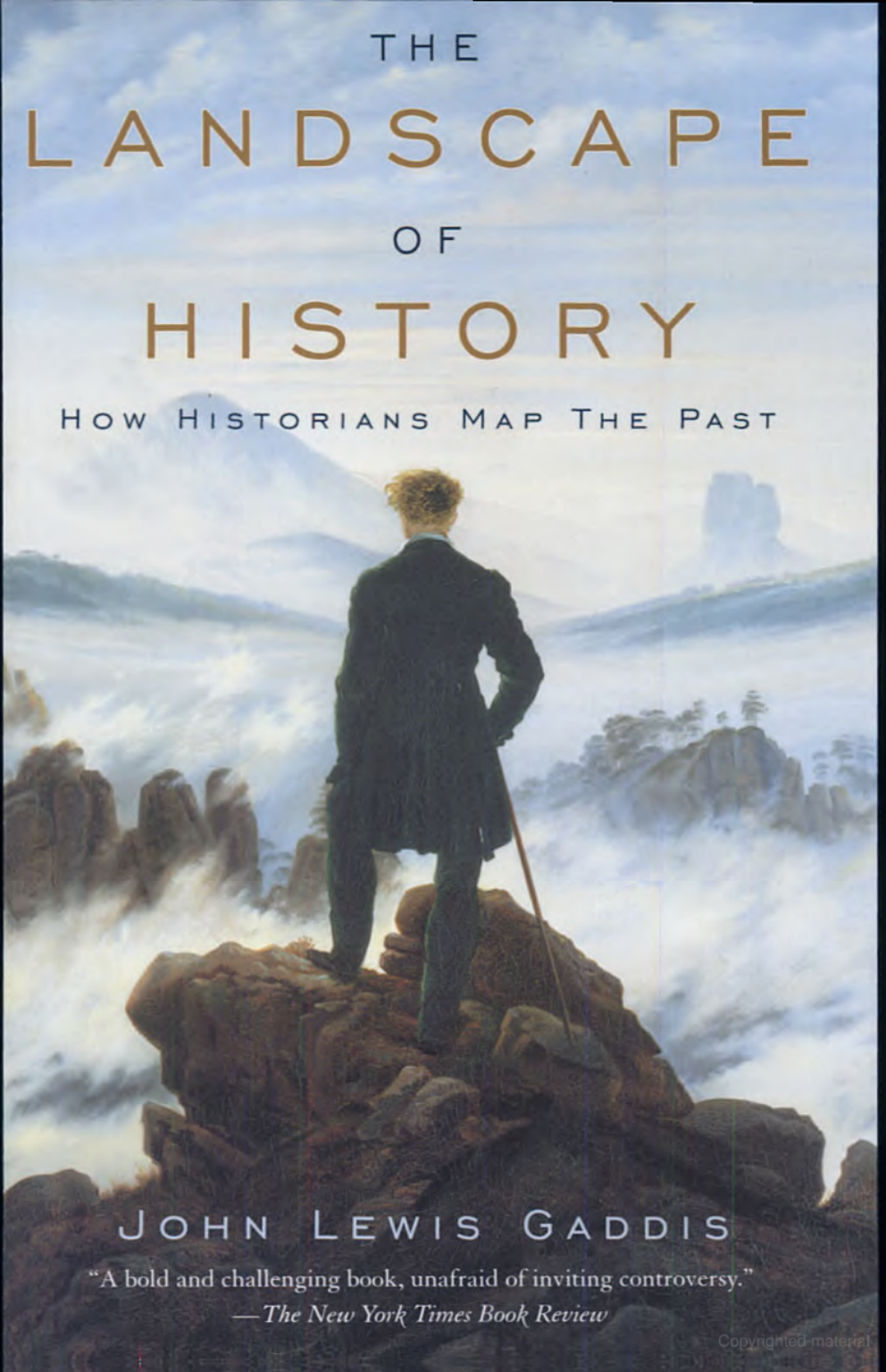


THE  
LANDSCAPE  
OF  
HISTORY

HOW HISTORIANS MAP THE PAST



JOHN LEWIS GADDIS

"A bold and challenging book, unafraid of inviting controversy."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

# THE LANDSCAPE OF HISTORY

---

*How Historians Map the Past*

JOHN LEWIS GADDIS

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford New York  
Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires Cape Town Chennai  
Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi Kolkata  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi  
São Paulo Shanghai Taipei Tokyo Toronto

Copyright © 2002 by John Lewis Gaddis

First published by Oxford University Press, Inc., 2002  
First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 2004  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016  
www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Gaddis, John Lewis.

The landscape of history : how historians map the past / John Lewis Gaddis.  
p. cm. Includes index.

ISBN 0-19-506652-9 (CLOTH) ISBN 0-19-517157-8 (PBK.)

1. History—Philosophy. 2. History—Methodology.

3. Aesthetics—History. I. Title.

D16.8 .G23 2002 901—dc21 2002010392

*Book design and composition by Mark McGarry, Texas Type & Book Works.  
Set in Linotype Fairfield.*

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

## CONTENTS

---

*Preface ix*

- ONE    The Landscape of History 1
- TWO    Time and Space 17
- THREE    Structure and Process 35
- FOUR    The Interdependency of Variables 53
- FIVE    Chaos and Complexity 71
- SIX    Causation, Contingency, and Counterfactuals 91
- SEVEN    Molecules with Minds of Their Own 111
- EIGHT    Seeing Like a Historian 129

*Notes 153*

*Index 183*

## PREFACE

---

THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD has again provided a hospitable setting in which to write a book. The occasion this time was the 2000/1 George Eastman Visiting Professorship in Balliol College, a chair dating back to 1929 whose occupants have included Felix Frankfurter, Linus Pauling, Willard Quine, George F. Kennan, Lionel Trilling, Clifford Geertz, William H. McNeill, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Robin Winks. As befits a position with such diverse and distinguished predecessors, the Eastman electors do not find it necessary to provide current chairholders with detailed instructions as to what they are expected to do. My own letter of appointment specified only "participation in twenty-four academic functions during the three terms of the academic year." It then added, accurately enough as I discovered, "that the Eastman Professor enjoys considerable scope for flexibility in adjusting the pedagogical activities in combination with scholarly projects which the holder may wish to pursue."

Confronted with so much latitude in so congenial a setting, I was at first at a loss to know how to use my time. One possibility, I suppose, would have been simply to dine: high table at Oxford is definitely an "academic function." Another would have been to spend the

year doing research, but this would have disappointed my hosts, who clearly expected some sort of visibility. A third would have been to lecture on Cold War history; but I'd done that as Harmsworth Professor eight years earlier and had since published the lectures.<sup>1</sup> Even in a rapidly changing field like this one, would there be that much new to say? I rather doubted it.

So in the end, I settled on something completely different: a set of lectures, delivered as before in the Examination Schools building on High Street, on the admittedly ambitious subject of how historians think. I had several purposes in mind in undertaking this project, the first of which was to pay homage to scholars now dead and to students very much alive, both of whom had taught me. The scholars, in particular, were Marc Bloch and E. H. Carr, whose respective introductions to the historical method, *The Historian's Craft* and *What Is History?*, first forced me to think about what historians do. The students were my own, undergraduates and graduates at Ohio, Yale, and Oxford universities, with whom I'd spent a good deal of time discussing these and other less familiar works on historical methodology.

A second purpose derived from the first. I'd begun to worry that all this reading and talking might soon begin to produce, in my own mind, something like the effect Cervantes describes when a certain man of La Mancha read too many books on knight-errantry: "he so bewildered himself in this kind of study that . . . his brain . . . dried up, [and] he came at last to lose his wits."<sup>2</sup> I felt the need, at this stage in life, to begin to sort things out, lest I start attacking windmills. It's possible, of course, that I've already arrived at that stage, and that these lectures were the first offensive—but I'll leave that for my readers to judge.

My third purpose—whether or not I'd dodged the dangers implied in the second—was to do some updating. A lot has happened since the Nazis executed Bloch in 1944, leaving us with a classic that breaks off, like Thucydides, in mid-sentence; and since the more fortunate Carr completed his George Macaulay Trevelyan lectures, which became his classic, at Cambridge in 1961. It's my impression, though,

that it's not so much they as we who need the updating. For Bloch and Carr anticipated certain developments in the physical and biological sciences that have brought those disciplines closer than they once were to what historians had been doing all along. Most social scientists have hardly noticed these trends, and most historians, even as they read and teach Bloch and Carr, neglect what these authors were suggesting about a convergence of the historical method with those of the so-called "hard" sciences.<sup>3</sup>

That suggests my fourth purpose, which was to encourage my fellow historians to make their methods more explicit. We normally resist doing this. We work within a wide variety of styles, but we prefer in all of them that form conceal function. We recoil from the notion that our writing should replicate, say, the design of the Pompidou Center in Paris, which proudly places its escalators, plumbing, wiring, and ductwork on the *outside* of the building, so that they're there for all to see. We don't question the need for such structures, only the impulse to exhibit them. Our reluctance to reveal our own, however, too often confuses our students—even, at times, ourselves—as to just what it is we do.

Bloch and Carr had little patience with such methodological modesty,<sup>4</sup> and that brings me to my final purpose, which has to do with teaching. It's striking that, with all the time that's passed since their introductions to the historical method came out, no better ones for use in the classroom have yet appeared.<sup>5</sup> The reason is not just that Bloch and Carr were accomplished methodologists: we've had many since and some more skilled. What distinguished them was the clarity, brevity, and wit—in a word, the elegance—with which they expressed themselves. They showed that you can discuss ductwork gracefully. Few methodologists attempt this today, which is why they speak mostly to themselves and not to the rest of us. I'm sure it's quixotic, on my part, even to aspire to the example of these two great predecessors. But I should like at least to try.

It remains only to thank the people who made this project possible:

Adam Roberts, who kindly suggested a return visit to Oxford eight years ago as I was completing my first; the Association of American Rhodes Scholars, for supporting the Eastman Professorship and for providing such comfortable lodgings in Eastman House; the master and fellows of Balliol College, who in so many ways made my wife Toni and me feel welcome there; the students, faculty, and friends who attended my lectures, and who provided so many insightful comments on them in the question period afterwards; my indefatigable Yale research assistant Ryan Floyd; and, finally, several careful and critical readers of these chapters in draft form, especially India Cooper, Toni Dorfman, Michael Frame, Michael Gaddis, Alexander George, Peter Ginna, Lorenz Lüthi, William H. McNeill, Ian Shapiro, and Jeremi Suri. I should also like to thank the Oxford microbes, which were much more manageable than they had been eight years earlier.

Portions of what follows have appeared elsewhere, in "The Tragedy of Cold War History," *Diplomatic History* 17 (Winter 1993), 1–16; *On Contemporary History: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered before the University of Oxford on 18 May 1993* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); "History, Science, and the Study of International Relations," in *Explaining International Relations since 1945*, ed. Ngaire Woods (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 32–48; "History, Theory, and Common Ground," *International Security* 22 (Summer 1997), 75–85; "On the Interdependency of Variables; or, How Historians Think," *Whitney Humanities Center Newsletter*, Yale University, February 1999; and "In Defense of Particular Generalization: Rewriting Cold War History," in *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations*, ed. Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 301–26. The overall argument, I hope and trust though, is a new one.

The dedication, this time, can only go to the person who changed my life.

NEW HAVEN  
APRIL 2002



## THE LANDSCAPE OF HISTORY



Caspar David Friedrich, *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*  
(c. 1818. Hamburg Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany /  
Bridgman Art Library.)

## THE LANDSCAPE OF HISTORY

A YOUNG MAN STANDS hatless in a black coat on a high rocky point. His back is turned toward us, and he is bracing himself with a walking stick against the wind that blows his hair in tangles. Before him lies a fog-shrouded landscape in which the fantastic shapes of more distant promontories are only partly visible. The far horizon reveals mountains off to the left, plains to the right, and perhaps very far away—one can't be sure—an ocean. But maybe it's just more fog, merging imperceptibly into clouds. The painting, which dates from 1818, is a familiar one: Caspar David Friedrich's *The Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*. The impression it leaves is contradictory, suggesting at once mastery over a landscape and the insignificance of an individual within it. We see no face, so it's impossible to know whether the prospect confronting the young man is exhilarating, or terrifying, or both.

Paul Johnson used Friedrich's painting some years ago as the cover for his book *The Birth of the Modern*, to evoke the rise of romanticism and the advent of the industrial revolution.<sup>1</sup> I should like to use it here to summon up something more personal, which is my own sense—admittedly idiosyncratic—of what historical consciousness is all about. The logic of beginning with a landscape may not be immedi-

ately obvious. But consider the power of metaphor, on the one hand, and the particular combination of economy and intensity with which visual images can express metaphors, on the other.

The best introduction I know to the scientific method, John Ziman's *Reliable Knowledge: An Exploration of the Grounds for Belief in Science*, points out that scientific insights often arise from such realizations as "that the behavior of an electron in an atom is 'like' the vibration of air in a spherical container, or that the random configuration of the long chain of atoms in a polymer molecule is 'like' the motion of a drunkard across a village green."<sup>2</sup> "Reality is still to be embraced and reported without flinching," the sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson has added. "But it is also best delivered the same way it was discovered, retaining a comparable vividness and play of the emotions."<sup>3</sup> It's here, I think, that science, history, and art have something in common: they all depend on metaphor, on the recognition of patterns, on the realization that something is "like" something else.

For me, the posture of Friedrich's wanderer—this striking image of a back turned toward the artist and all who have since seen his work—is "like" that of historians. Most of us consider it our business, after all, to turn our back on wherever it is we may be going, and to focus our attention, from whatever vantage point we can find, on where we've been. We pride ourselves on *not* trying to predict the future, as our colleagues in economics, sociology, and political science attempt to do. We resist letting contemporary concerns influence us—the term "presentism," among historians, is no compliment. We advance bravely into the future with our eyes fixed firmly on the past: the image we present to the world is, to put it bluntly, that of a rear end.<sup>4</sup>

## I.

Historians do, to be sure, assume *some* things about what's to come. It's a good bet, for example, that time will continue to pass, that grav-

ity will continue to extend itself through space, and that Michaelmas term at Oxford will continue to be, as it has been for well over seven hundred years, dreary, dark, and damp. But we know these things about the future only from having learned about the past: without it we'd have no sense of even these fundamental truths, to say nothing of the words with which to express them, or even of who or where or what we are. We know the future only by the past we project into it. History, in this sense, is all we have.

But the past, in another sense, is something we can never have. For by the time we've become aware of what has happened it's already inaccessible to us: we cannot relive, retrieve, or rerun it as we might some laboratory experiment or computer simulation. We can only *represent* it. We can portray the past as a near or distant landscape, much as Friedrich has depicted what his wanderer sees from his lofty perch. We can perceive shapes through the fog and mist, we can speculate as to their significance, and sometimes we can even agree among ourselves as to what these are. Barring the invention of a time machine, though, we can never go back there to see for sure.

Science fiction, of course, has invented time machines. Indeed two recent novels, Connie Willis's *Doomsday Book* and Michael Crichton's *Timelines*, feature graduate students in history at, respectively, Oxford and Yale, who use these devices to project themselves back to England and France in the fourteenth century for the purpose of researching their dissertations.<sup>5</sup> Both authors suggest some things time travel might do for us. It could, for example, give us a "feel" for a particular time and place: the novels evoke the denser forests, clearer air, and much louder singing birds of medieval Europe, as well as the muddy roads, rotting food, and smelly people. What they don't show is that we could easily detect the larger patterns of a period by visiting it, because the characters keep getting caught up in complications of everyday life that tend to limit perspective. Like catching the plague, or being burned at the stake, or getting their heads chopped off.

Maybe this is just what it takes to keep the novel exciting, or to

make the movie rights marketable. I'm inclined to think, though, that there's a larger point lurking here: it is that the direct experience of events isn't necessarily the best path toward understanding them, because your field of vision extends no further than your own immediate senses. You lack the capacity, when trying to figure out how to survive a famine, or flee a band of brigands, or fight from within a suit of armor, to function as a historian might do. You're not likely to take the time to contrast conditions in fourteenth-century France with those under Charlemagne or the Romans, or to compare what might have been parallels in Ming China or pre-Columbian Peru. Because the individual is "narrowly restricted by his senses and power of concentration," Marc Bloch writes in *The Historian's Craft*, he "never perceives more than a tiny patch of the vast tapestry of events. . . . In this respect, the student of the present is scarcely any better off than the historian of the past."<sup>6</sup>

I'd argue, indeed, that the historian of the past is *much better off* than the participant in the present, from the simple fact of having an expanded horizon. Gertrude Stein got close to the reason in her brief 1938 biography of Picasso: "When I was in America I for the first time travelled pretty much all the time in an airplane and when I looked at the earth I saw all the lines of cubism made at a time when not any painter had ever gone up in an airplane. I saw there on earth the mingling lines of Picasso, coming and going, developing and destroying themselves."<sup>7</sup> What was happening here, quite literally, was detachment from, and consequent elevation above, a landscape: a departure from the normal that provided a new perception of what was real. It was what the Montgolfier brothers saw from their balloon over Paris in 1783, or the Wright brothers from their first "Flyer" in 1903, or the Apollo astronauts when they flew around the moon at Christmas 1968, thus becoming the first humans to view the earth set against the darkness of space. It's also, of course, what Friedrich's wanderer sees from his mountaintop, as have countless others for whom elevation, by shifting perspective, has enlarged experience.

This brings us around, then, to one of the things historians do. For if you think of the past as a landscape, then history is the way we represent it, and it's that act of representation that lifts us above the familiar to let us experience vicariously what we can't experience directly: a wider view.

## II.

What, though, do we gain from such a view? Several things, I think, the first of which is a sense of identity that parallels the process of growing up. Taking off in an airplane makes you feel both large and small at the same time. You can't help but have a sense of mastery as your airline of choice detaches you from the ground, lifts you above the traffic jams surrounding the airport, and reveals vast horizons stretching out beyond it—assuming, of course, that you have a window seat, it isn't a cloudy day, and you aren't one of those people whose fear of flying causes them to keep their eyes clamped shut from takeoff to landing. But as you gain altitude, you also can't help noticing how small you are in relation to the landscape that lies before you. The experience is at once exhilarating and terrifying.

So is life. We are born, each of us, with such self-centeredness that only the fact of being babies, and therefore cute, saves us. Growing up is largely a matter of growing out of that condition: we soak in impressions, and as we do so we dethrone ourselves—or at least most of us do—from our original position at the center of the universe. It's like taking off in an airplane: the establishment of identity requires recognizing our relative insignificance in the larger scheme of things. Remember how it felt to have your parents unexpectedly produce a younger sibling, or abandon you to the tender mercies of kindergarten? Or what it was like to enter your first public or private school, or to arrive at places like Oxford, or Yale, or the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?<sup>8</sup> Or as a teacher to confront your first class-

room filled with sullen, squirmy, slumbering, solipsistic students? Just as you've cleared one hurdle another is set before you. Each event diminishes your authority at just the moment at which you think you've become an authority.

If that's what maturity means in human relationships—the arrival at identity by way of insignificance—then I would define historical consciousness as the projection of that maturity through time. We understand how much has preceded us, and how unimportant we are in relation to it. We learn our place, and we come to realize that it isn't a large one. “Even a superficial acquaintance with the existence, through millennia of time, of numberless human beings,” the historian Geoffrey Elton has pointed out, “helps to correct the normal adolescent inclination to relate the world to oneself instead of relating oneself to the world.” History teaches “those adjustments and insights which help the adolescent to become adult, surely a worthy service in the education of youth.”<sup>9</sup> Mark Twain put it even better:

That it took a hundred million years to prepare the world for [man] is proof that that is what it was done for. I suppose it is. I dunno. If the Eiffel Tower were now representing the world's age, the skin of paint on the pinnacle knob at its summit would represent man's share of that age; and anybody would perceive that the skin was what the tower was built for. I reckon they would, I dunno.<sup>10</sup>

Here too, though, there's a paradox, for although the discovery of geologic or “deep” time diminished the significance of human beings in the overall history of the universe, it also, in the eyes of Charles Darwin, T. H. Huxley, Mark Twain, and many others, dethroned God from *his* position at its center—which left no one else around but man.<sup>11</sup> The recognition of human insignificance did not, as one might have expected, enhance the role of divine agency in explaining human affairs: it had just the opposite effect. It gave rise to a secular conscious-



ness that, for better or for worse, placed the responsibility for what happens in history squarely on the people who live through history.

What I'm suggesting, therefore, is that just as historical consciousness demands detachment from—or if you prefer, elevation above—the landscape that is the past, so it also requires a certain displacement: an ability to shift back and forth between humility and mastery. Niccolò Machiavelli made the point precisely in his famous preface to *The Prince*: how was it, he asked his patron Lorenzo de' Medici, that “a man from a low and mean state dares to discuss and give rules for the governments of princes?” Being Machiavelli, he then answered his own question:

For just as those who sketch landscapes place themselves down in the plain to consider the nature of mountains and high places and to consider the nature of low places place themselves high atop mountains, similarly to know well the nature of peoples one needs to be [a] prince, and to know well the nature of princes one needs to be of the people.<sup>12</sup>

You feel small, whether as a courtier or an artist or a historian, because you recognize your insignificance in an infinite universe. You know you can never yourself rule a kingdom, or capture on canvas everything you see on a distant horizon, or recapture in your books and lectures everything that's happened in even the most particular part of the past. The best you can do, whether with a prince or a landscape or the past, is to *represent* reality: to smooth over the details, to look for larger patterns, to consider how you can use what you see for your own purposes.

That very act of representation, though, makes you feel large, because you yourself are in charge of the representation: it's you who must make complexity comprehensible, first to yourself, then to others. And the power that resides in representation can be great indeed,

as Machiavelli certainly understood. For how much influence today does Lorenzo de' Medici have, compared to the man who applied to be his tutor?

Historical consciousness therefore leaves you, as does maturity itself, with a simultaneous sense of your own significance and insignificance. Like Friedrich's wanderer, you dominate a landscape even as you're diminished by it. You're suspended between sensibilities that are at odds with one another; but it's precisely within that suspension that your own identity—whether as a person or a historian—tends to reside. Self-doubt must always precede self-confidence. It should never, however, cease to accompany, challenge, and by these means discipline self-confidence.

### III.

Machiavelli, who so strikingly combined both qualities, wrote *The Prince*, as he immodestly informed Lorenzo de' Medici, "considering that no greater gift could be made by me than to give you the capacity to be able to understand in a very short time all that I have learned and understood in so many years and with so many hardships and dangers for myself." The purpose of his representation was *distillation*: he sought to "package" a large body of information into a compact usable form so that his patron could quickly master it. It's no accident that the book is a short one. What Machiavelli offered was a compression of historical experience that would vicariously enlarge personal experience. "For since men almost always walk on paths beaten by others . . . , a prudent man should always . . . imitate those who have been most excellent, so that if his own virtue does not reach that far, it is at least in the color of it."<sup>13</sup>

This is as good a summary of the uses of historical consciousness as I have found. I like it because it makes two points: first, that we're bound to learn from the past whether or not we make the effort, since

it's the only data base we have; and second, that we might as well try to do so systematically. E. H. Carr elaborated on the first of these arguments when he observed, in *What Is History?*, that the size and reasoning capacity of the human brain are probably no greater now than they were five thousand years ago, but that very few human beings live now as they did then. The effectiveness of human thinking, he continued, "has been multiplied many times by learning and incorporating . . . the experience of the intervening generations." The inheritance of acquired characteristics may not work in biology, but it does in human affairs: "History is progress through the transmission of acquired skills from one generation to another."<sup>14</sup>

As his biographer Jonathan Haslam has pointed out, Carr's idea of "progress" in twentieth-century history tended disconcertingly to associate that quality with the accumulation of power in the hands of the state.<sup>15</sup> But in *What Is History?* Carr was making a larger and less controversial argument: that if we can widen the range of experience beyond what we as individuals have encountered, if we can draw upon the experiences of others who've had to confront comparable situations in the past, then—although there are no guarantees—our *chances* of acting wisely should increase proportionately.

This brings us to Machiavelli's second point, which is that we should learn from the past systematically. Historians ought not to delude themselves into thinking that they provide the *only* means by which acquired skills—and ideas—are transmitted from one generation to the next. Culture, religion, technology, environment, and tradition can all do this. But history is arguably the best method of enlarging experience in such a way as to command the widest possible consensus on what the significance of that experience might be.<sup>16</sup>

I know that statement will raise eyebrows, because historians so often and so visibly disagree with one another. We relish revisionism and distrust orthodoxy, not least because were we to do otherwise, we might put ourselves out of business. We have, in recent years, embraced postmodernist insights about the relative character of all

historical judgments—the inseparability of the observer from that which is being observed—although some of us feel that we've known this all along.<sup>17</sup> Historians appear, in short, to have only squishy ground upon which to stand, and hence little basis for claiming any consensus at all on what the past might tell us with respect to the present and future.

Except when you ask the question: compared to what? No other mode of inquiry comes any closer to producing such a consensus, and most fall far short of it. The very fact that orthodoxies so dominate the realms of religion and culture suggests the absence of agreement from below, and hence the need to impose it from above. People adapt to technology and environment in so many different ways as to defy generalization. Traditions manifest themselves so variously across such diverse institutions and cultures that they provide hardly any consistency on what the past should signify. The historical method, in this sense, beats all the others.

Nor does it demand agreement, among its practitioners, as to precisely what the “lessons” of history are: a consensus can incorporate contradictions. It's part of growing up to learn that there are competing versions of truth, and that you yourself must choose which to embrace. It's part of historical consciousness to learn the same thing: that there is no “correct” interpretation of the past, but that the act of interpreting is itself a vicarious enlargement of experience from which you can benefit. It would ill serve any prince to be told that the past offers simple lessons—or even, for some situations, any lessons at all. “The prince can gain the people to himself in many modes,” Machiavelli wrote at one point, “for which one cannot give certain rules because the modes vary according to circumstances.” The general proposition still holds, though, that “for a prince it is necessary to have the people friendly; otherwise he has no remedy in adversity.”<sup>18</sup>

This gets us close to what historians do—or at least, to echo Machiavelli, should have the odor of doing: it is to interpret the past for the purposes of the present with a view to managing the future,

but to do so without suspending the capacity to assess the particular circumstances in which one might have to act, or the relevance of past actions to them. To accumulate experience is not to endorse its automatic application, for part of historical consciousness is the ability to see differences as well as similarities, to understand that generalizations do not always hold in particular circumstances.

That sounds pretty daunting—until you consider another arena of human activity in which this distinction between the general and the particular is so ubiquitous that we hardly even think about it: it's the wide world of sports. To achieve proficiency in basketball, baseball, or even bridge, you have to know the rules of the game, and you have to practice. But these rules, together with what your coach can teach you about applying them, are nothing more than a distillation of accumulated experience: they serve the same function that Machiavelli intended *The Prince* to serve for Lorenzo de' Medici. They're generalizations: compressions and distillations of the past in order to make it usable in the future.

Each game you play, however, will have its own characteristics: the skill of your opponent, the adequacy of your own preparation, the circumstances in which the competition takes place. No competent coach would lay out a plan to be mechanically followed throughout the game: you have to leave a lot to the discretion—and the good judgment—of the individual players. The fascination of sports resides in the intersection of the general with the particular. The practice of life is much the same.

Studying the past is no sure guide to predicting the future. What it does do, though, is to *prepare* you for the future by expanding experience, so that you can increase your skills, your stamina—and, if all goes well, your wisdom. For while it may be true, as Machiavelli estimated, “that fortune is the arbiter of half our actions,” it's also the case that “she leaves the other half, or close to it, for us to govern.” Or, as he also put it, “God does not want to do everything.”<sup>19</sup>

## IV.

Just how, though, do you present historical experience for the purpose of enlarging personal experience? To include too little information can render the whole exercise irrelevant. To include too much can overload the circuits and crash the system. The historian has got to strike a balance, and that means recognizing a trade-off between literal and abstract representation. Let me illustrate this with two well-known artistic portrayals of the same subject.

The first is Jan van Eyck's great double portrait *The Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini*, from 1434, which documents a relationship between a man and a woman in such precise detail that we can see



Two representations of the same subject,  
one from a particular time and the other for all time.

Jan van Eyck, *The Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini*, 1434.  
London, National Gallery (Alinari / Art Resource, New York), and Pablo  
Picasso, *The Lovers*, 1904, Musée Picasso, Paris (Réunion des Musées  
Nationaux / Art Resource, New York; © 2002 Estate of Pablo Picasso /  
Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York).

every fold in their clothes, every frill in the lace, the apples on the windowsill, the shoes on the floor, the individual hairs on the little dog, and even the artist himself reflected in the mirror. The picture is striking because it's as close as anything we have to photographic realism four hundred years before photography was invented. This can only have been 1434, these can only have been the Arnolfinis, and they can only have been painted in Bruges. We get the vicarious experience of a distant but very particular time and place.

Now, contrast this with Picasso's *The Lovers*, an ink, watercolor, and charcoal drawing dashed off quickly in 1904. The image, like van Eyck's, leaves little doubt as to the subject. But here everything has been stripped away: background, furnishings, shoes, dog, even clothes, and we're down to the essence of the matter. What we have is a transmission of vicarious experience so generic that anyone from Adam and Eve onward would immediately understand it. The very point of this drawing is the abstraction that flows from its absence of context, and it's this that projects it so effectively across time and space.

Switch now, if you can manage this leap, to Thucydides, in whom I find both the particularity of a van Eyck and the generality of a Picasso. He is, at times, so photographic in his narrative that he could be writing a modern screenplay. He tells us, for example, of a Plataean attempt against a Peloponnesian wall in which the soldiers advanced with only their left feet shod to keep from slipping in the mud, and in which the inadvertent dislodgment of a single roof tile raised the alarm. He places us in the middle of the Athenian attack on Pylos in 425 B.C. just as precisely as those remarkable first moments of Steven Spielberg's film *Saving Private Ryan* place us on the Normandy beaches in 1944 A.D. He makes us hear the sick and wounded Athenians on Sicily "loudly calling to each individual comrade or relative whom they could see, hanging upon the necks of their tent-fellows in the act of departure, and following as far as they could, and when their bodily strength failed them, calling again and again upon heaven and shrieking aloud as they were left behind."<sup>20</sup> There is, in short, an

authenticity in this particularity that puts us there at least as effectively as one of Michael Crichton's time machines.

But Thucydides, unlike Crichton, is also a great generalizer. He meant his work, he tells us, for those inquirers "who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it." He knew that abstraction—we might even call it a Picasso-like separation from context—is what makes generalizations hold up over time. Hence he has the Athenians telling the rebellious Melians, as a timeless principle, that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must": it follows that the Athenians "put to death all the grown men whom they took, and sold the women and children for slaves, and subsequently sent out five hundred colonists and inhabited the place themselves." Thucydides also shows us, though, that there are exceptions to any rule: when the Mityleneans rebel and the Athenians conquer them, the strong suddenly have second thoughts and send out a second ship to overtake the first, countermanding the order to slaughter or enslave the weak.<sup>21</sup>

This tension between particularization and generalization—between literal and abstract representation—comes with the territory, I think, when you're transmitting vicarious experience. A simple chronicle of details, however graphic, locks you into a particular time and place. You move beyond it by abstracting, but abstracting is an artificial exercise, involving an oversimplification of complex realities. It's analogous to what happened in the world of art once it began, in the late nineteenth century, to depart from the literal representation of reality. One objective of impressionism, cubism, and futurism was to find a way to represent motion from within the necessarily static media of paint, canvas, and frame. Abstraction arose as a form of liberation, a new view of reality that suggested something of the flow of time.<sup>22</sup> It worked, though, only by distorting space.

Historians, in contrast, employ abstraction to overcome a different constraint, which is their separation in time from their subjects.



**"A MASTERFUL STATEMENT ON THE HISTORICAL METHOD."**

—*Foreign Affairs*

*The Landscape of History* provides a searching look at the historian's craft, as well as a strong argument for why a historical consciousness should matter to us today. John Lewis Gaddis points out that while the historical method is more sophisticated than most historians realize, it doesn't require unintelligible prose to explain. Like cartographers mapping landscapes, historians represent what they can never replicate. In doing so, they combine the techniques of artists, geologists, paleontologists, and evolutionary biologists. Their approaches parallel, in intriguing ways, the new sciences of chaos, complexity, and criticality. They don't much resemble what happens in the social sciences, where the pursuit of independent variables functioning with static systems seems increasingly divorced from the world as we know it. So who's really being scientific and who isn't? This question too is one Gaddis explores, in ways that are certain to spark interdisciplinary controversy. Written in the tradition of Marc Bloch and E. H. Carr, *The Landscape of History* is at once an engaging introduction to the historical method for beginners, a powerful reaffirmation of it for practitioners, a startling challenge to social scientists, and an effective skewering of post-modernist claims that we can't know anything at all about the past.

"Turns the old argument over science and history upside down."

—*The Washington Post Book World*

"Will...never allow either the reader of history or the writer of it to think about the past in quite the same way as before."—*The New York Times*

"Never before have I come across a book that so illuminated the craft of the historian."

—*The Baltimore Sun*

"A real tour de force: a delight to read, and a light-hearted celebration of the odd, 'fractal' patterns that intellectual and other forms of human and natural history exhibit."

—William H. McNeill

**JOHN LEWIS GADDIS** is the Robert A. Lovett Professor of Military and Naval History at Yale University. His books include *We Now Know*, *The Long Peace*, and *Strategies of Containment*.

COVER DESIGN BY KATHLEEN M. LYNCH

COVER PAINTING: *The Wanderer above the Sea of Clouds*, 1818  
(OIL ON CANVAS) BY CASPER DAVID FRIEDRICH (1774-1840). HAMBURG  
KUNSTHALLE, HAMBURG, GERMANY/BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

www.oup.com



ISBN 0-19-517157-8