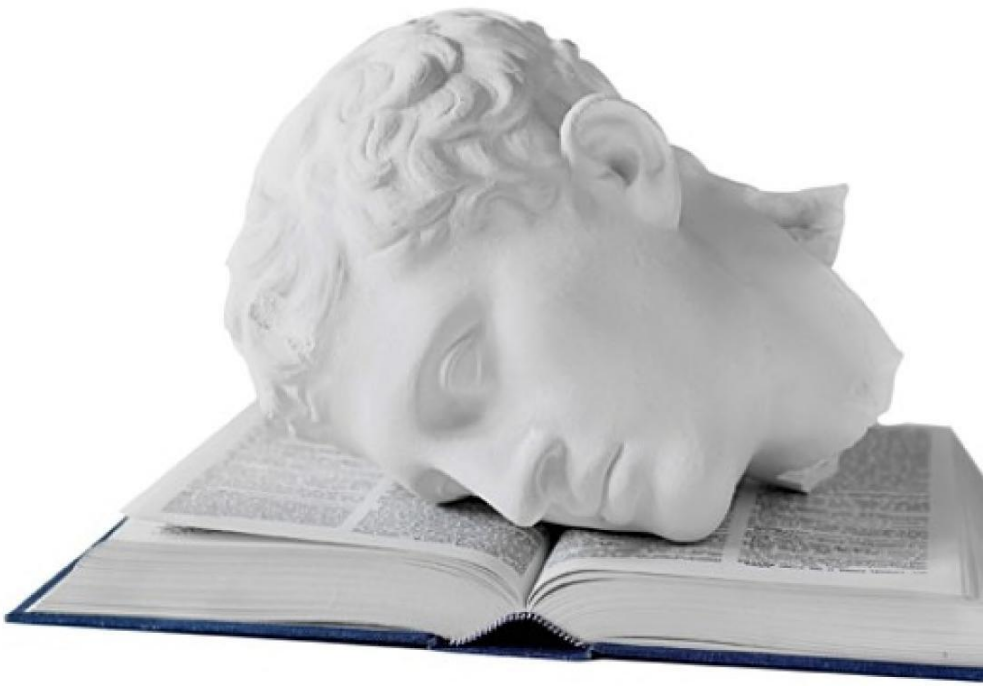
RICHARD WHATMORE

What is Intellectual History?



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What is Intellectual History?

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Dedication

To my mother, Brenda Whatmore

Preface

The aim of this short book is to give general readers a sense of what intellectual history is and what intellectual historians do. Intellectual history is currently a highly active research field. Intellectual historians are at the forefront of the current global, transnational, comparative, spatial, visual and international turns in the historical profession. There are intellectual histories of scientific doctrines, passions and senses, of urban planning and nation-states, of cannibalism and (more natural forms of) consumption, of the working classes, of biography and of hymns. Any attempt at a definition is going to be seen to be partial. Equally, it has to be acknowledged to be personal; hopefully this is forgivable in an introductory text such as this one. A book defining intellectual history could deal more directly with the intellectual history of science or of art or music or anthropology, where remarkable work has been done since the 1950s. Equally, the relationship between intellectual history and the history of philosophy, or intellectual history and the history of literature, have proved fertile ground in recent times. In the text I try to push the reader towards what I think are useful guides to these areas. This book's contents, inevitably, has been shaped by my own interests. These developed through what might now be termed the traditional route. I was fortunate to have been educated at the University of Cambridge, where I was introduced to intellectual history in the 1980s through two undergraduate courses with the inspirational titles of 'Political Thought before 1750' and 'Political Thought after 1750'. John Dunn, Mark Goldie, Duncan Forbes, Quentin Skinner, Gareth Stedman Jones, Richard Tuck and other luminaries were the lecturers and tutors. It was only after graduating, when I spent a year at Harvard, that I realized I had become a member of a distinctive tribe.

At Cambridge Massachusetts I took a course on

'Enlightenment Political Theory' with the incomparable Judith Shklar. In the classes Shklar encouraged graduate students to connect the texts of the historical authors being studied with contemporary political questions. The key was to work out what stand the author would have taken had they been faced with the controversies of today. In consequence, one of the issues discussed at length was 'whether Montesquieu would have burned the flag [of the United States]'. I found such discussions odd because there did not seem to be any point in trying to work out an answer to such a question, which it appeared to me at the time, and still does, added neither to our knowledge of Montesquieu nor to our knowledge of the nature of political ideas, historic or contemporary. I had been taught that the point of reading the work of historical authors was to find out what they thought about the issues that mattered to them. There might well be a connection to present politics, but this would be complicated and indirect. By contrast, Shklar wanted those in her seminar to discuss the arguments they found in the texts they were reading, to evaluate them and to measure them against contemporary argument. Shklar was an inspirational teacher, ever-questioning and pushing her students to work things out for themselves. Unlike tutors I had had in Cambridge UK, she refused to give her own view of the subject in question, or to turn the seminars into an exercise in conveying information about how people thought in the past. I felt frustrated because I knew that Shklar had a better grasp of eighteenth-century politics than I would ever have, and wanted her to do the instructing.

Making this point will mark out my approach to intellectual history. Some readers may think it declares membership of a group frequently identified as 'The Cambridge School' of intellectual history, which is often associated with the assertion that intellectual history is identical to the history of political thought. This was never the case. For Cambridge authors and for intellectual historians elsewhere, there was always more to the history of ideas than politics, and politics in any case might be approached through economics, anthropology, natural philosophy or a host of other

disciplinary areas. One of the aims of this book is to show that such a label as The Cambridge School, while useful in describing a series of path-breaking justifications of intellectual history, can be abandoned today. It no longer describes the research questions addressed by some of the best intellectual historians, many of whom are still linked in one way or another with that university. Intellectual historians associated in the popular mind with Cambridge represent divergent approaches to intellectual history, replicated across the Anglophone world, that need to be recognized. This said, the contribution of individuals labelled historians of political thought to the establishment of intellectual history cannot be overlooked; the fact that some of them continue to set the agenda for intellectual historians is underlined here. Many of the examples and illustrations of the arguments have been drawn from the history of political thought, especially during the long eighteenth century. This is the ground where I feel most secure. An anonymous reviewer of the first draft of this book asked whether the title of the book ought to be 'What is the history of political thought?' The intention has been to write an introduction to intellectual history, and in doing so to deal with the relationship between these still interlinked fields. One of the points made in the book, which has also been made elsewhere, is that intellectual history is at a crossroads. What may well be the final works of several of the founders of intellectual history as presently constituted are currently being published; at the same time the methods and attitudes of these leading figures are being applied to a host of new research fields and problems. Where intellectual history goes next is anybody's guess.

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Introduction

On the eastern side of Lake Windermere in Cumbria, in the north west of England, there was once a quarry at Ecclerigg Crag producing slate and stone for the remarkable buildings of the region. Active between the eighteenth and the early twentieth century, the quarry was sufficiently large to have its own dock. Having passed into history, what remains in the grounds of the hotel now standing on the site are five large slabs with detailed carvings made into the bedrock, in addition to ad hoc rocks both submerged in and out of the water. Some of the carvings are dated between 1835 and 1837. One of the master craftsmen employed at the quarry evidently took it upon himself to carve messages into the bare slate. The carvings include names of national and local significance, including 'Nelson', 'Newton', 'Walter Scott', 'Wordsworth', 'Jenner', 'Humphry Davy', 'Richard Watson', as well as the owner of the site, 'John Wilson', the friend of the Lake Poets and a well known local personage through his writing for *Blackwood's Magazine* and his being Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh (1820–51), and 'John Laudon McAdam', of road-repairing fame, in addition to the names of several individuals who had endowed local schools. One of the largest slabs, almost five metres high, gives an indication of the opinions of the mason, declaring in gigantic letters 'National Debt L800,000,000 / O, Save My Country, Heaven! / George 3, William Pitt / Money is the Sinews of War / Field Marshal Wellington / Heroic Admiral Nelson.'[1]

What can historians make of these carvings? The social historian might seek to find out information about the social status of quarry workers, their working conditions, their lives beyond the workplace, and the nature of the society in which they lived by reference to class, gender, ritual and identity. The economic historian might seek information about the comparative wages of the workers, the economic

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