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Learning the Historian's Craft

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Like so many others, I learned the historian's craft by watching the way the master craftsmen of our trade did their job. As an undergraduate at Columbia University, I watched with profound admiration an art historian Howard McParlin Davis, breathe life into early Netherlandish art. We took a look at other artists, including the Sienese and Florentine schools of the period. In the reading for this course, I was stopped in my tracks, as it were, while reading a splendid book by Millard Meiss on painting after the Black Death.[1] Meiss said his purpose was not to follow the towering figures of the period, but lesser mortals, whom he termed major, minor masters. These people intrigued me, and for a host of reasons I certainly did not understand at the time, I made up my mind to become one of them. Not a towering figure in the trade, but a craftsman among craftsmen, adding my voice to the chorus of scholarship.

This decision was a massive disappointment to my father, who pointed to a medical career as the destination he preferred for me. Columbia provided me with everything I needed to realize my dream. Above all, it gave me the chance to work with the masters. Two left a legacy I carry to this day. The first was James Shenton, who welcomed me to his seminar on the American Civil War. The second was Fritz Stern, whose seminar changed my life.

I had no idea that my decision to become an historian was taken at probably the most propitious moment to do so in the entire twentieth century. In the mid-1960s, the Carnegie Foundation and the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton launched a program to persuade more undergraduates in the humanities to follow scholarly careers, on the grounds that there were, in the massive expansion of higher education of the time, more jobs available than qualified candidates to fill them. Now, 60 years later, it is hard to believe that such were the conditions under which my fortunate generation entered academic life.

A summer grant from this program brought me to England in 1965. I immediately fell in love with London, then at the height of its cultural glory. It cost 2/6 (half a crown, or about 25 cents at the time) to hear a concert in a series of performances of works from Scarlatti to Scriabin by an unknown cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich. Beatlemania was everywhere, and so was the London stage, with Paul Schofield as Lear and Beyond the Fringe as the urbane predecessors of Monty Python.

Returning to Columbia, I joined Fritz Stern's seminar on the First World War, and in a very real sense, I have never left it. Over the years we became friends, but from the first, Stern showed me through his own example and his teaching how to confront the austere moral challenge of the historian's craft – to write truthfully and to write well. I still have an essay I

[1] Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951).

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wrote for him with the marginal comment that he is unhappy because I didn't leave him sufficient room in the margins of the essay for him to comment on it.

My choice of subject was a reflection of the times. The Vietnam War was reaching its murderous apogee, and after my visit to London, it became clear to me that Vietnam was emerging as America's First World War. By that I meant that the United States had been spared the bloodbath of the 1914-18 conflict. The toll of 50,000 American soldiers who died in conflict in 1917-18 was high enough, but it was about as significant as the losses suffered by the French army in two weeks of September 1914. Until Vietnam, Americans did not know the trauma of a stupid, bloody, meaningless conflict, utterly different from the anti-Communist crusade it was supposed to be. What Europeans learned in 1914-18 and after, Americans were beginning to learn in Vietnam, even though they were once again spared the agony of having to wage battle on their home soil.

I was absolutely clear that I would not serve in that conflict, and made my plans to live outside of the United States, for good if it came to it. Those plans included a place at Pembroke College, Cambridge, to study for a doctorate, something I owed to serendipity. One fall weekend, my mentor in British history, Bob Webb, couldn't host a visiting speaker from Cambridge, the economic historian David Joslin. In Webb's place, I showed Joslin around Manhattan, and at the end of a splendid day, he offered to help me secure a place at his Cambridge College.

Leaving America in 1966 was the best decision I have ever made. When I got to Cambridge, I realized that I had found a home, one which offered me complete freedom to develop my ideas and writing in any way I chose. There were very remarkable people there, with talents I could not ever hope to match. Simon Schama was one of the first people I met, and hearing him speak in full paragraphs with wit and learning convinced me yet again of the wisdom of my view that what I should aim to be was not a preeminent scholar like Schama, but rather one of Meiss's major minor masters.

After completing my dissertation in 1970 on socialist thought in Britain[2] – reflecting the influence of Stern's intellectual history – I took up a post at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It was a wonderful place to be, and yet again, sheer luck brought me there at a moment when everyone in Jerusalem had hope that peace could follow the Israeli victory of 1967. I learned Hebrew at an ulpan – an intensive immersion course in Hebrew – in Beit Ha'am, where Adolph Eichmann had been tried a mere nine years before, and learned to love the Hebrew language, in which I had to teach, a requirement that no doubt resulted in my inflicting a certain degree of pain on my student audience.

I taught the impact of twentieth-century warfare on European societies, a subject that I have made my life's work. And it was there in Jerusalem that my students gave me some pointers I have never forgotten. I was totally aware of the irony that I was teaching a subject to students who lived it in a way I have never had to do. And after surveying the impact of the 1914-18 war on intellectual currents, some of these students brought me up short by offering some practical wisdom. Don't teach about ideas, they said, because ideology (meaning either Zionism or Marxism) was simply superficial, and didn't touch the bedrock of social life. Have a look at family life, at birth rates, at marriages, if you want to understand what war does to societies. I listened and learned.

Jerusalem was a wonderful place in part because of the friends I made there. George Mosse, a star there, the only historian granted the privilege of teaching in English, became a life-long friend. He was among the last of the breed of European gentleman scholars, equally at home in Jerusalem, Rome or Madison, Wisconsin. We began to talk over the impact of the First World War, and though reaching different conclusions, carried on a delightful dialogue for 30 years.

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[2] Published as Jay Winter, *Socialism and the Challenge of War. Ideas and Politics in Britain, 1912-18* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974).

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Jerusalem had one drawback. It was very far away from the archives I needed to develop my work on the First World War. Brilliant and sensitive colleagues like Emmanuel Sivan and Yehoshua Arieli made it very hard for me to leave. But leave I did, helped along once again, by a very large dose of luck.

E.P. Thompson had established a unique centre for the study of social history at the University of Warwick. He retired, but still had a hand in the work of the centre. Together with the great historian of France, Richard Cobb, they orchestrated a job for one of Cobb's students. The catch was that the student had an alcohol problem. Thus after my interview at Warwick, I was told by Thompson's successor Royden Harrison that the appointments committee needed to interview one more candidate in two weeks' time. Fourteen days later I was offered the job, not knowing then that the candidate still could not get on a plane to get to the interview. My salary in 1973 was £2414 *for the year*. Believe it or not, that was higher than my Israeli salary.

The years at Warwick were also truly blessed. I had a very light teaching load, which enabled me to have the time to devote to my two newborn children and to start the slow and painstaking work on statistical material needed to produce a demographic history of the First World War. This was done by hand: before word processing, I had to draw all the graphs myself, and to do long calculations on a hand-held calculator. The argument of the book that emerged was that British war losses displayed a clear social structure: the higher the man's status in that society, the greater were his chances of getting his head blown off during the war. Paradoxically, there was a simultaneous overall increase in life expectancy of working-class men, especially those fortunate enough to stay out of the trenches. The bloodiest war in British history was also the time when the distance between the life chances of rich and poor narrowed.

I finished *The Great War and the British People*[3] a few years after I took up a post at Cambridge and returned to Pembroke as a Fellow in history. I had the good fortune of teaching a generation of talented students in one-on-one supervisions. For decades I taught students in a third-year course (a specified paper) on the Great War in Britain, France, and Germany. In that course they were assigned weekly reading, say, three books and eight articles on the causes of the First World War or three books and ten articles on war literature in comparative perspective, and then they were instructed to write a ten-page essay on it. If they got it to me the day before our weekly meeting, I read and annotated the text, remembering Fritz Stern's injunction to say more than a few words. If they couldn't get the essay to me a day before our meeting, they read it out loud, and I had to rely on my wits to stop them in full flight, and ask them to reread a sentence and tell me what it meant. That exercise in teaching good writing gave me immense pleasure. On many occasions, I was able to think through my own ideas on the war in a dialogue with students, of which most were totally unaware. Teaching what you are writing is a godsend.

In addition, graduate students flocked to the subject of the Great War in the 1980s and to the subject of memory. I think I coined the term 'the memory boom' at the time, but even if someone else got there first, I was certainly aware of the fact that by the mid-1980s, memory had displaced social class as the central focus of historical inquiry about war and its aftermath. The materialist moment in my own historical writing was not over, but more and more I began to focus on memory, or what I preferred to call historical remembrance. Remembrance is the process; memory, the product of the social action of groups of people who come together in public to recall past events.

This shift in emphasis and approach to history is visible at the end of *The Great War and the British People*. It reflected an uncomfortable moment of doubt. I wondered whether something was missing in my demographic history, and whether I had fallen into the trap of positivism, where explanations emerge from 'facts'. What was missing, I concluded, was memory. The unintended improvement in the life expectancy of the poorest, as important as that was, did not become imbedded in the stories ordinary people told about the war; understandably, what entered the collective memory were the staggering losses of the Lost Generation. That realization led me to conclude my demographic history with a chapter on memory and remembrance.

[3] Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (London: Macmillan and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

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And that chapter on memory emerged at precisely the time that I benefited from another happy accident. The President of the *Conseil Général of the Département de la Somme* had put his considerable political weight behind the creation of a museum to honor the men who (like his father) had fought on the Somme. He had two fine historians, Jean-Jacques Becker and Wolfgang Mommsen, as academic advisors. What he needed was a British historian of the war; after trying others, the designer of the museum, Gérard Rougeron, came to me, as one of the few historians in Britain who could work in French.

That piece of good fortune led me to propose creating a research centre in France before the museum we called the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* was built. We launched the research centre in 1989, three years before the museum was inaugurated. The Historial was half history and half memory. The existence of the research centre meant that the best-practice scholarship would inform the design and interpretation the museum would offer. After Rougeron left the project, Adeline Rispal and her team took over the museography, and together with her, over less than two years, we historians helped design the first transnational museum of the First World War at Péronne, on the Somme, on the site of German headquarters during the battle in 1916.

In the following years, the research centre took on a life of its own, in part because the *Département de la Somme* continued to fund it, and in part because it was run on a day-to-day basis by two talented young scholars Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, and a fine administrator, Caroline Fontaine. We can now speak of a 'Péronne school' of the cultural history of the war, emerging from the collective work of the research centre. Thirty years later, when I retired from the *comité directeur*, I had the satisfaction of feeling that my legacy would consist not solely of my teaching and my writing; it would also find a place in public history, in the form of a museum speaking to the general public. It was to them that we spoke in 1992, the year of the Treaty of Maastricht, and urged them to see that in order to appreciate the value of European integration, we had to go back to the moment of European disintegration in 1914-18.

At the inauguration of the museum in July 1992, a young television director Blaine Baggett, a Mississippian fascinated by the First World War, came to see what we had done. He was moved by our achievement, and asked me to join him as a producer in creating an 8-hour television series on the Great War which would be a visual braiding together of military history and cultural history. Our model was Ken Burns's magnificent television history of the American Civil War. We received the funding we needed from the National Endowment of the Humanities and the BBC. The result was *The Great War and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century*, which hit the jackpot, winning, among other honors, an Emmy Award as best television series of the year.[4]

Those years, 1995-97, were very happy and productive. My book *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* came out in 1995.[5] It is the only one of my books that has found an echo in many parts of the world and among people far removed from the academy. It focused on mourning as a phenomenon of family life and as reflected in the social agency of small groups of people engaged in public acts of remembrance. It was about the phenomenon of mass death and the shadow it cast on the survivors' world.

I drew on family history and memory here, recalling the traumatic events of the Shoah, in which my mother's family in Warsaw was wiped out. The Shoah overshadowed much of my early life. In a way, *Sites of Memory* is a book as much about the Shoah as it was about the Great War.

In addition, the book was a continuation of my long dialogue with George Mosse, who saw remembrance primarily as a political act. I had a different view, but I learned much from our 30-years' conversation on this matter, and still have trouble

[4] The book of the series was published as: Blaine Baggett and Winter, *1914-18. The Great War and the shaping of the twentieth century* (London: BBC Books, New York: Viking/Penguin, 1996).

[5] Winter, *Sites of memory. Sites of Mourning: the Great War in European Cultural His*tory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

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using the past tense when I think of this wonderful friend and colleague. Mosse, a friend from my time in Jerusalem in 1970, joined me both as a founding member of the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* at Péronne and as a visiting Fellow at Pembroke. He died in 1999.

In 1997, together with the French historian Jean-Louis Robert and 15 other scholars, we produced a social history of Paris, London, and Berlin during the First World War. It was collective scholarship, written by groups rather than individuals, and pointed the way to collective work in our profession, something radically different from the mainstream. A decade later the same collective, reinvigorated by newcomers, produced a second volume on the cultural history of the three cities at war. In the same years, I joined my former colleague at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Emmanuel Sivan, in producing a book of essays on war and remembrance in the twentieth century.[6] One of the authors contributing to that book, Antoine Prost, became a close friend and co-author of two books we wrote together, one on the historiography of the Great War,[7] and the other a biography of René Cassin.[8]

There were three other elements in my career as an historian dedicated to working and writing with other scholars, rather than in isolation on my own. I met demographer Michael Teitelbaum in 1965 during the summer we both enjoyed as scholars of the Carnegie Foundation and the Woodrow Wilson School. He did his doctorate in Oxford at the same time as I did mine in Cambridge, and the friendship we forged has lasted more than half a century. Teitelbaum and I coauthored three books on population history over the last century, with special reference to the political consequences of demographic change.[9]

The second was editing the three-volume *Cambridge History of the First World War,* with the *comité directeur* of the research centre of the *Historial de la grande guerre* at Péronne as the editorial board. These volumes were published in French and English in 2014, and will appear in Chinese this year.[10]

The third was joining the great Australian historian Ken Inglis in his project tracing the lives of 2500 German and Austrian refugees who would up in Britain, and were deemed to be enemy aliens in 1940. They were interned and deported on the transport ship the *Dunera* to Australia, where they spent years in internment camps in the Australian bush. Another group of refugees-turned-internees were sent to Australia from Singapore on the refitted liner the *Queen Mary*. I knew Ken Inglis

[6] Emmanuel Sivan and Winter, eds., *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[7] Antoine Prost and Jay Winter, *Penser la grande guerre* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2004). The English version was published under the title *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, 2nd edition, 2020).

[8] Antoine Prost and Jay Winter, *René Cassin et les droits de l'homme: le projet d'une génération* (Paris: Fayard, 2011). The English edition was published under the title *René Cassin and Human Rights: The Project of a Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[9] Michael Teitelbaum and Winter, *The Fear of Population Decline* (New York and London: Academic Press, 1986); Teitelbaum and Winter, *A Question of Numbers: High Migration, Low Fertility and National Identity* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998); and Teitelbaum and Winter, *The Global Spread of Low Fertility: Population, Fear, and Uncertainty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

[10] Winter, ed., *The Cambridge History of the First World War: Volume 1 Global war; Volume 2 The State; Volume 3 Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); published in French under the title *La première guerre mondiale: Tome 1 Combats, Tome 2 Les Etats; Tome 3 Sociétés* (Paris: Fayard, 2013).

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as the historian of Australian war memorials of the Great War and as a learned, generous and modest man.[11] When he became ill, I agreed to help him finish the project, but insisted on doing so with a group of Australian specialists of the Second World War. Among them were Robert Dare, Bill Gammage, Seumas Spark and Carol Bunyan. Ken saw the final version of volume 1 of this project before his death in 2017.[12] The second volume was published in 2020.[13] Both are achievements of collective history, that history which requires the input of a team of specialists to complete. Once again, I learned from Ken and from each member of this team how fruitful and personally rewarding collaborative work can be.

The *Dunera* project has had a sequel. Together with students at Duke Kunshan University in China, Kolleen Guy and I have launched a research project on the plight of Jewish refugees in Shanghai during the Second World War, compared to the fate of the *Dunera* internees. How refugees survive their loss of bearings and at times their loss of freedom, and how they restart their lives again after war are large questions, ones that require the contribution of groups of scholars to explore in a rigorous manner

In sum, my academic career has spanned the three major schools I encountered and learned from. The first was intellectual history, of German inspiration both at Columbia and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The second was social history, of Marxist or Marxisant inspiration at Warwick, and of cultural history at Cambridge, and then after my move in 2001, at Yale.

None of us knows the topography of our lives while we are living them. But there are two strands which in my view tie together my life as an historian. The first is the good fortune of having teachers and mentors who listened to what I was trying to say and urged me to continue to seek my own voice. The second was my deep sense that being an historian is an exercise in modesty. No one can solve the huge problems we sketch out in our scholarship. We work better together in groups than alone. And we can all say something that matters. That is what a major minor master does: he or she observes the craftsmen and craftswomen of the time, listens to what they say, teaches apprentices, and takes the risk of adding something small but significant to the store of knowledge we share with others about the past.

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[11] Ken Inglis, with Jan Brazier, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape* (Sydney: Miegunyah Press, 1999).

[12] Inglis, Seumas Spark, Winter, and Carol Bunyan, *Dunera Lives: A Visual History* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishers, 2018).

[13] Inglis, Bill Gammage, Spark, Winter, and Bunyan, *Dunera Lives: Profiles* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishers, 2020).

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