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## Introduction

Why publish yet another book on ‘the nature of history’? Surely there are enough publications covering the topic already. Yes, there are several existing books, many of them extremely good. However, like the numerous teaching courses covering ‘the nature of history’, their prime focus is often directed towards such issues as defining history, justifying history, and studying the nature of the historian’s craft with special emphasis upon historical research techniques and the nature and value of sources. By contrast, the actual process of presentation responsible for communicating history to an audience is taken for granted, and hence frequently glossed over, even ignored. Nor does the nature, changing character, and potential responsiveness of audiences attract much attention, perhaps in part because the continued growth of higher education has always promised historians, at least on paper, a captive audience of fellow academics and students.

Against this background, the fundamental aim of *Presenting History: Past and Present* can be expressed in three words: ‘Presentation, Presentation, Presentation’. The intention is to encourage and enable readers to engage with and reflect upon in an informed manner the varying ways in which the past is presented to diverse audiences within and outside academia. For historians and history students, the book’s central message is to move on from discussing such questions as ‘What is history?’ and ‘How to conduct historical research?’ to a broader range of issues. These include ‘Who reads academic histories?’, ‘To what extent does the target audience actually access and engage with academic histories?’, and ‘Do alternative ways of presenting the past offer a more effective way of reaching the intended audience?’ There are, of course, many other possible debating issues, but the key point is to ensure that both presentation and audiences receive as much attention as earlier stages of the historical process.

## 2 Presenting History

Despite claims about the intrinsic merit of doing historical research, any historian's findings will only enhance historical knowledge and understanding if they reach an audience. Indeed, most present-day definitions of research, such as those adopted for research assessment exercises conducted for British universities, assume publication and impact. Nor should history students ignore this book's message. After all, throughout school and college, they are expected to write essays, dissertations and theses for an audience composed of academic markers/examiners.

Other questions posed increasingly frequently during recent decades have been along the lines of 'Can movies, television histories and historical novels teach history?' This trend reflects the fact that a growing number of people are accessing history, or what they are led to believe is history, from Hollywood filmmakers, television programme makers and historical novelists, not professional historians. Apart from raising serious questions about how far such alternative presentations rate as 'history', their popularity with audiences challenges historians to think seriously about engaging a wider audience, and particularly to consider 'How far should historians reach out from academia to a wider public in order to enhance public understanding of the past?' At first sight, presenting history to a wider audience might seem less demanding, but from personal experience – this point is confirmed by presenters featured in this book – it is not as easy as it appears.

Setting the scene for the main section of the book, **Part I** foregrounds the vital role played by history presenters in establishing why history matters and communicating the story of the past to diverse audiences within and outside academia. In **Part II** case studies centred upon individual presenters based on both sides of the Atlantic are used to explore critically and in depth alternative literary and visual ways of presenting the past as academic history and public history to diverse audiences. Presentation proves central throughout, but the fact that most chapters cover also the communication of history to a wider public means that Part II possesses also a strong public history dimension. Individual case studies cast light also on the nature of the historian's craft, including the use and abuse of sources, the translation and mistranslation of historical documents, historical methodology, theory and history, historical revisionism, different types of historical writing, history and literary style, referencing, and historical standards. Finally, **Part III**, framed by Alan Bennett's *The History Boys*, draws together key points raised throughout the book regarding history, presentation, and audiences within and outside academia.

Selecting presenters for inclusion was no easy task. For most case studies, it was possible to identify several presenters possessing strong

academic and/or public profiles within and outside Britain. Ultimately, the final choice was guided largely by the extent to which individual presenters promised not only to illuminate the key issues for discussion but also to offer readers a sound foundation for further study about presentation and audiences.

At the individual level specific reasons proved important. **A.J.P. Taylor** (chapter 4) died over two decades ago. Although he might appear a somewhat remote figure for today's history students, Taylor remains still an important reference point for many historians, as evidenced by the manner in which Niall Ferguson, Simon Schama and David Starkey acknowledge his pioneering role presenting the past to a broader audience on radio and television as well as in the press. Moreover, over time changing perspectives upon Taylor's career establish the way in which historical revisionism affects historians' reputations as well as historiography. **Eric Hobsbawm** (chapter 5) has never made any secret of his admiration of Karl Marx or membership of the British communist party. Thus, he offers an excellent example of the impact of Marxist theory upon presenting the past, such as by highlighting capitalism's troubled history and prioritising 'history from below'. Communist party membership explains both his reluctance to write a history of the Soviet Union and belief in taking history beyond the ivory tower. However, whereas he reached out from academia chiefly through lecturing and writing, **Simon Schama** (chapter 6), a self-confessed populariser of history, has proved a highly successful television historian setting a new course from that associated with Ken Burns, the producer of *The Civil War* television series. **Niall Ferguson** (chapter 7) followed Schama onto television, but here his studies of alternative pasts are central to a discussion about the historical merit of studying the past's 'what ifs?'

Significantly, given her role in helping to qualify Part II's apparent maleness, **Joan Wallach Scott** (chapter 8) has spent much of her career presenting histories challenging history's masculinist nature and recognising women's place in the past. Moreover, she found postmodernist theory, especially poststructuralism, useful in understanding and presenting the history of power, knowledge and gender. Scott's political activism means that she possesses also a lengthy track record as a public historian, most notably using history to support feminism or to intervene in French debates about national identity. Postmodernist theory appealed also to **Robert A. Rosenstone** (chapter 9), the leading historian of film as history and history as film. For most historians, Hollywood's history films, though playing an influential role in carrying historical messages to the general public, fall well short as 'history'.

#### 4 *Presenting History*

However, Rosenstone has adopted an alternative line when arguing that historical films remain capable of taking the past as history to cinema audiences.

During recent decades historical novels have not only proved remarkably popular but also acquired greater historical and literary gravitas. **Philippa Gregory** (chapter 10), one of Britain's most popular historical novelists, has boosted public interest in the Plantagenets and the Tudors. Selling in large numbers on both sides of the Atlantic, her novels have inspired adaptations for film and television. Reportedly **Terry Deary** (chapter 11), whose target audience is young children, has sold more histories than any presenter studied in this book. Furthermore, over time his 'Horrible Histories' have been adapted for a wide range of alternative forms of presentation – these include a computer game, museum exhibitions, plays and television programmes – to reach out to new audiences.

For academic historians, a high public profile can prove a double-edged sword, as highlighted when **Stephen Ambrose** and **Michael A. Bellesiles** (chapter 12) attracted unwelcome widespread media and public attention for alleged shortcomings in their histories. For some readers, the inclusion of **David Irving** (chapter 13) will appear problematic. In reality, the Irving–Lipstadt High Court trial, held in 2000, offers an illuminating case study centred upon a presenter whose use and abuse of the Nazi and Holocaust past for political reasons led to his ostracism by academia but failed to prevent him reaching a substantial popular audience. Moreover, this episode raised interesting questions about public history, memory laws, and the courts and history.

Highlighting the need to attach a higher priority to both presentation and audiences, hopefully this study will encourage readers to think more seriously about the alternative ways in which the past is presented within society in general and academia in particular, especially given ongoing debates about the future of both academic history and public history. In the present-day world mantras are frequently employed to encourage, empower, and give a sense of purpose to an audience. For historians and history students, the challenge is to ensure that the 'Presentation, Presentation, Presentation' mantra does not remain mere historical rhetoric, but is matched by action guided by the following maxim: 'The better their presentation of the past, the more effective their history will prove in accessing, engaging and impacting upon the target audience.'

## Index

Dates of birth and, if relevant, death for presenters mentioned in the text have been recorded *on a selective basis*, given this book's emphasis upon the value of studying individual presenters of the past. For today's presenters such information often proved difficult to discover, let alone check for accuracy, and hence their dates should be treated as *for guidance only*. Dates for public figures have been included also.

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