

The Nature and Variety of Historical Sources

As we saw in Chapter 1, history is an intellectual discipline marked by ongoing change, punctuated by the periodic appearance of major revisionist works. Historians are constantly reviewing and rethinking the past, discovering new patterns and meanings. In this process, they depend upon the tangible remains of the past for source materials. Any remnant of the past can serve the purpose. Although written records tend to predominate as source materials in most fields of history, in others (particularly ancient and medieval) there is often a heavy reliance on artifacts. Such materials are of importance to those studying modern history as well. Weapons, coins, household utensils, cathedrals, statues, and films can cast as much light on the past as diaries, letters, and newspapers. Whether these historical raw materials are written records or artifacts we refer to them as primary sources. The written histories that historians fashion from these (primary) sources in turn become (secondary) sources for subsequent investigators.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Written primary sources can be divided into two major categories: manuscript sources and published sources. For historians, a manuscript is any handwritten or typewritten record or communication that has not been printed or otherwise duplicated in significant quantities for public dissemination. It can be anything from a laundry list to the minutes of a cabinet meeting in the Oval Office. Usually manuscript materials were intended for private or at least restricted use, although something like the notes for a speech that was never delivered also would be considered a manuscript source. A manuscript can be

as intensely personal as a diary or as institutional as a list of Egyptian temple scribes. There is virtually no kind of written record that has not been used, or might some day be used, as a primary source. As social history and other new approaches to the past evolve, even the seemingly most trivial or mundane remnants may acquire significance.

Manuscript Sources

Most of our attention will be devoted to published primary sources, since undergraduate researchers in university libraries usually have only limited access to manuscript source materials. But in many cases, there may be significant manuscript collections close at hand. Perhaps your university library has a special collections or manuscript department containing important materials. There also may be nearby community libraries, local historical societies, or private individuals with such resources. A look through any of these collections might prove extremely rewarding, depending on your subject. If you are researching a topic of local history, you are more likely to be afforded the opportunity to get your hands on manuscript materials. In any event, it is worthwhile to investigate the availability of manuscript collections in your locality; this may even help you choose a viable research topic, though it should be realized that access to many major manuscript collections is limited to professional historians and advanced graduate students.

Published Sources

Published primary sources can be divided into two categories: 1) Manuscript materials such as letters, diaries, and memoranda, usually intended as private, sometimes intimate documents, often published *after* the death of their authors; 2) Materials that were intended from the outset to be printed and made public—for example newspaper articles, congressional debates, autobiographies, annual company reports, and reports of the United States Census.

There are few major political figures in the modern world, particularly the United States, whose writings have not been published. Library shelves groan with the massive collected works of our presidents and major public figures. Historical leaders of other societies are also well represented, so that when researching the activities of the wielders of power or shapers of opinion you will usually find no shortage of published primary sources. While many of these writings were not, strictly speaking, intended for public consumption, it is

scarcely surprising that they eventually appear in published form. Those attaining high office during the last couple of centuries could hardly expect that their papers would remain confidential for very long after their deaths. Indeed, the measure of immortality attainable through the posthumous publication of one's collected papers is apt to be a component of political ambition. Indeed, some leaders might be considered as "playing to posterity," at least part of the time; for this reason, their papers must therefore be read and considered with an additional measure of critical judgement.

The injunction to be critical of the papers of society's leaders applies with special force to personal memoirs and autobiographies written "after the fact," when these author/subjects were at the end of their careers or in retirement. These types of published sources require interpretive care on two grounds. First, it must be remembered that the validity of these sources depends to a considerable extent on the author's ability to recall events that may have occurred much earlier in his or her life. Obviously there must always be a presumed erosion of reliability in such recollections, one that increases with the amount of time that has elapsed. Second, autobiographies and memoirs are usually self-serving, or at least should be assumed to be so. As mentioned, in creating these accounts, politicians and other public leaders may have been anxious to secure their place in history. Certain episodes in their lives may therefore be given more prominence than they deserve as well as a highly favorable interpretation, while others, which may be less flattering, may be slighted, distorted, or ignored altogether. The same applies to the descriptions of the various other persons who are discussed in these accounts. This by no means renders memoirs or autobiographies worthless as source materials. Among other things, they provide invaluable insights into the personalities of leading figures. As with all source materials, however, the historian must begin by asking the purpose for which they were written or published, and then proceed with an appropriate measure of caution and skepticism.

A skeptical approach is also in order when considering materials like the published letters and diaries of public figures. These sources are perhaps more trustworthy in one respect, since they are contemporary with the events and not therefore subject to the corrosive effects of time on memory. Even in this case, however, we must consider the author's motives, ignorance, or capacity for self-deception. Moreover, published source materials are frequently only a selection,

and sometimes quite a small one, of the total body of the person's writings. We must therefore take into account the built-in bias of the selecting or editing process. How representative of the whole are the documents that are published? Did a favorably disposed editor (perhaps a member of the family) suppress unflattering material? Even the most professional and even-handed editor must make painful choices about what materials to leave out. This is why historians always consult the largest and best-edited collection of primary sources available, assuming of course that they do not have access to manuscript sources.

Somewhat different considerations apply to those written primary sources particularly valued by social historians. The development of interest in "history from below" has encouraged the finding and publication of the writings of ordinary people who, presumably, never dreamed their words would be published. The chance survival and later publication of the diary of an American pioneer woman or the letters of a soldier in the Crimean War can vividly illuminate the lives and experiences of ordinary people. This does not mean, of course, that such writings can be accepted uncritically. While the authors of such documents were no doubt blissfully unconcerned about the opinion of posterity, their writing, too, can be expected to reflect the normal human biases and blind spots. These "shortcomings" need not necessarily get in the way of our understanding; they may indeed be precisely the sort of thing for which we are looking.

Let us now turn to primary sources materials like newspapers, magazines, and official reports of government or private institutions. Not only were these intended from the outset to be made public, in many cases they were designed to influence public opinion. This is certainly the case with newspapers, whose editorial policies must usually be taken into account. Thus to accept a newspaper account of one of the Lincoln-Douglas debates without considering the paper's political orientation would be a major critical lapse. Even if an article displayed no detectable bias, we would have to consider the problems inherent in relying upon a single reporter's account of the event: his vantage point, his ability to hear all that was said from the podium, the reactions of those in the crowd that were closest to him, and so on. Diligent historians assemble as many such accounts as they can, treating each of them critically, sorting out obvious biases and errors, and fashioning as accurate a reconstruction as possible.

Other examples of print media must be approached in much the same way. Magazines, journals, and pamphlets all offer a vast storehouse of facts and prejudices. Like newspapers, they can reveal a great deal that the authors and editors never intended. Popular literature, sheet music, sermons, and plays also can tell us much about a society's common, unexamined assumptions. Consider the value of sources like this for, say, investigating nineteenth-century American attitudes toward gender roles or racial stereotyping. However, it is necessary to read such material in two quite different ways. On the one hand, the historian must try to see the work as contemporaries did, an approach that requires both knowledge of the time and empathy for its people. Simultaneously, the material must be viewed through the critical, dispassionate eyes of a modern scholar who is posing questions that nineteenth-century people could not or did not ask.

There is an enormous variety and range of primary sources, only a few of which have been touched upon here. When undertaking a research paper on a particular topic, it is well worth your time to first consider all the types of sources that might be used. A little investigation and imagination may make it possible for you to use different kinds of sources than those employed by any previous scholars who have researched your same topic. Or it may enable you to approach the sources from a whole new perspective. Conversely, if you are in the midst of trying to decide upon a good topic, an awareness of the range of sources available to you might point you towards a highly interesting topic that you otherwise might not have considered.

SECONDARY WORKS

Secondary works or sources come in a great variety as well—from multivolume works of collective scholarship to short essays, and from general histories to the most specialized monographs. Next we will consider some of the different forms written histories can take: books, essays, and articles.

Books

Books are such a universal and commonplace feature of academic life that students seldom ponder their diversity or unique structures. We can begin our consideration of the diversity of the types of history books with the breadth or narrowness of the subject. The extremes

would be a textbook on the history of the world from the advent of human life to the present, and a study of a single individual or small community over a short span of time. In between these extremes are histories of such entities as civilizations, regions, nation-states, or social classes. Moreover, the approach can be political, social, economic, cultural, or some combination of these. Furthermore, its style can be narrative or analytical. The focus can be on individuals or social aggregates. The tone and style may be “popular” or “scholarly”—that is, it may be calculated to appeal to a wide, nonprofessional readership, or it may bristle with footnotes, statistics, and closely reasoned analysis designed for the author's scholarly peers.

Another method of distinguishing between history books is whether they are based chiefly on primary or secondary sources. As a rule, the broader the topic, the more the author relies on secondary works. Thus a book entitled *A History of the World* (or even *A History of the United States*) will probably not have many primary sources in its bibliography. You can see this for yourself by examining the bibliographies of one of the textbooks you have used (or are using) in a history survey course. Notice that the author's or authors' (many textbooks have multiple authors) account is fashioned out of the more specialized studies of other historians. New editions of texts are issued not only to bring the story up to the present, but to revise in light of the most recent specialized scholarship. In this way the fruits of the latest scholarship enter the general survey texts and hence the classroom.

Survey textbooks and other general accounts are sometimes referred to as works of synthesis, because they synthesize or bring together the more specialized works of others. Those more specialized works, especially when fairly narrow in scope and based on primary sources, are called monographs. Some monographs are simply detailed narrative accounts of particular subjects, but others attempt to break fresh interpretive ground and are thus important vehicles for historical revisionism. This does not mean, however, that works of synthesis cannot offer revisionist interpretations, for many of the most important revisionist works are those that offer fresh ways of interpreting the recent secondary literature. Also, this discussion of monographs and works of synthesis might imply a sharper barrier between them than in fact exists. Many history books, having elements of both types, cannot be so tidily classified. Furthermore, the

author of even the narrowest monograph is expected to take fully into account the other specialized scholarship on the topic, that is, to place his or her analysis within a historiographic frame of reference.

The historian's craft is both an individual and a collective enterprise. It is a fact that historians need and depend upon the contributions of other scholars, and it is also true that many works of history are jointly written. In some cases two or more scholars may work closely together in both the research and writing. More commonly a general editor will coordinate the efforts of a team of historians, each of whom is given primary responsibility for a portion of the whole. A couple of examples are *The Oxford History of England* and *The Cambridge History of Islam*, both of them sponsored by large university presses. Other "joint" projects are published under the auspices of organizations like the United Nations, such as the UNESCO-sponsored *General History of Africa*. Collective authorship can be an effective means of bringing to bear a degree of expertise that would not be attainable if such vast projects were undertaken by a single author. There is also a significant saving of time involved, though large joint projects have their own pitfalls, delays, and frustrations that sorely test the skill and patience of general editors.

Whether scholarly monographs or survey texts, all history books have structural similarities that are important to note, especially when you are trying to determine quickly the approach, interpretation, and scope of a particular volume. The proper approach to your reading will be taken up in more detail in Chapter 4, but a few pointers are in order here. A book's title will usually be descriptive of its scope, but the subtitle (if there is one) will often tell you more. Recall the psychobiography of Jefferson by Fawn Brodie discussed in Chapter 1. The title itself, *Thomas Jefferson*, indicates nothing more than that it is a biography. But the subtitle, *An Intimate History*, gives you a strong clue that this is not a standard political biography of Jefferson the public figure. By looking at the chapter headings in the book's table of contents and reading the introduction, the approach and scope of the work should become clear. Also, a look at the index will let you preview a book quickly for desired information.

Essays

An essay (sometimes simply called a "chapter") is a short, self-contained study, usually bound with similar works in book form. An essay can be narrow or broad in scope, based on primary or secondary

sources, and chiefly narrative or assertively interpretive. It is a versatile, effective literary form for historians, as it is for scholars in the other humanities. Usually, essays by different authors writing on different aspects of the same general topic or field are combined into a single work with a title such as *Essays in Business History*. The range of essays in such a volume might be very wide, for example from an analysis of merchant enterprise in fourteenth-century Florence to a study of the start-up of high-tech industries in California.

Sometimes the essays will have been published previously, perhaps in a different form such as an article in a scholarly journal. Often the earlier articles and essays of eminent historians will be gathered together and published. Sometimes each member of a group of historians who were trained by or highly admire the same scholar will contribute an essay to a book published in the mentor's honor, sometimes on the occasion of that person's retirement. Such a collection is called a *Festschrift*, a German word meaning a presentation volume of essays dedicated to someone.¹

Articles

Similar to essays in structure, length, and purpose, scholarly articles are an even more important segment of the body of secondary works. They are published in scholarly periodicals, or journals, of which there is an enormous variety. Articles are often the format in which historians launch new interpretations. The process of revisionism would be greatly retarded if scholarly journals were not able to publish and disseminate historical findings. For you, the student researcher, to ignore articles and confine your attention to the available books would be to miss much of the freshest and most provocative literature on your subject. An appreciation of this large, diverse body of scholarship requires some understanding of the journals themselves, which, in turn, will lead us to a consideration of the structure of the historical profession itself.

Usually, a periodical publication in which scholarly articles are published is called a journal. The term "magazine" should, for the most part, be confined to those periodicals of a more popular bent

¹ An example is *Ideas and Institutions of Victorian Britain: Essays in honour of George Kitson Clark*, ed. Robert Robson (London: Bell & Sons, 1967). The title of this book gives no clue to the specialized essays it contains. For this reason, essays are sometimes called the "hidden literature." How to find this "hidden literature" will be one of our concerns in Chapter 3.

such as *Newsweek* or the *Atlantic Monthly*. There are a few historical periodicals, like the British publication *History Today*, that have a popular magazine format, with short, amply illustrated articles designed to appeal to a wider readership. For the most part, however, historical journals are designed for a professional readership and feature lengthy, detailed articles, some of which can be daunting to the nonspecialist. But this should not intimidate the undergraduate researcher; a history student who is properly launched on a particular topic should find most of the scholarly articles on his or her topic both readable and stimulating.

Many historical journals are published by associations of historians, with the costs of publication defrayed in part by membership subscriptions. In the United States, one of the leading historical journals is the *American Historical Review*, the official organ of the American Historical Association (AHA). The AHA is the major "umbrella" organization for historians in the country; its thousands of members include historians of almost every conceivable specialization or field of interest. Accordingly, the *American Historical Review* does not specialize in any one historical field. In each of its five annual issues, there might be articles on such diverse topics as modern Europe, Tang Dynasty China, Hellenistic Egypt, and colonial America. Methodologically, the many articles represent all approaches to the past. Similarly, the hundreds of pages of book reviews that appear in each issue of this journal cover titles in all fields of history. Book reviews play a vitally important role in the evaluation and analysis of historical works. They are part of the elaborate apparatus by which new views in history are subjected to close critical scrutiny.

The *American Historical Review* is notable not just for its size and importance, but also because it is atypical of historical journals, the great majority of which have some kind of special focus. For example, *The Journal of American History* is published by the Organization of American Historians (OAH), whose members' primary interest is the history of the United States. This journal, as its name suggests, publishes articles and book reviews in the field of American history. The scope of many other journals is defined by their titles, e.g. *The Journal of Modern History*, *The Journal of African Studies*, *The Journal of Contemporary History*, and *Byzantine Studies*. Some specialize not in time periods or geographic areas, but on methodological approaches, such as *The Journal of Social History* and *The*

International Journal of Psychohistory. Most are produced under the auspices of some professional organization. The North American Conference on British Studies, for example, supports the publication of two, *Albion* and *The Journal of British Studies*.

Many have a narrow focus. Journals of local history are a prime example, and there is a great abundance of such publications in the United States. State historical societies and many societies devoted to the history of cities and other localities publish their own journals, which researchers ignore at their peril. Many important revisionist interpretations are produced in the form of article-length studies in local history journals.

Local studies are not only important in and of themselves, but they also offer a valuable means of validating or refuting general historical hypotheses. Any assertion about a society's characteristics can be tested by examining particular localities in great detail. How, for example, would you attempt to test the claim that there was a high degree of social mobility in nineteenth-century America? Since searching for an answer to this question involves data that must be tracked over successive generations, the analysis of massive amounts of occupational data from the U.S. Census as well as plenty of other material, a local study is often the most feasible procedure. One town's records would be much easier to decipher than those of the nation. Obviously, no single study of any single town could sustain or overturn the general hypothesis, but a number of investigations might. Local studies, therefore, can and do contribute to an ever-emerging picture of regional or national history. Sometimes, they serve the important purpose of pointing out significant differences among states, regions, or localities.

Dissertations and Conference Papers

Turning from those secondary sources readily accessible in published form, such as books, essays, and articles, let us consider two other forms in which new findings are presented, scholarly dissertations and conference papers.

A Doctorate of Philosophy (Ph.D.) is the highest academic degree in history, and its completion requires the writing of a scholarly dissertation, usually on a rather narrow topic and based on intensive research in primary sources. The granting of a Ph.D. in history follows the certifying by a committee of historians that the candidate's

dissertation meets the standards of the profession. A dissertation is expected to demonstrate its author's critical acumen, writing abilities, and knowledge of the relevant primary and secondary sources. Dissertations are also usually expected to offer original analyses and interpretations. They can therefore be important works of new scholarship, and even of revisionist interpretation. Some are published subsequently as books. Others will be substantially revised before ultimately being published or will eventually appear, after some modification, as journal articles. Even in their unrevised form, recent dissertations can be important tools for researchers. Not only do they offer new interpretations, but their bibliographies are apt to be especially complete and are therefore excellent guides to the topic's sources.²

Conference papers, delivered by historians to their peers at scholarly conferences (often the meetings of organizations like the AHA), might be described as the "cutting edge" of new scholarship. In many cases, this is the initial form in which the results of a historian's findings are made public and subjected to scrutiny and criticism. Often on the basis of the criticism received at a conference, a historian will revise his or her work before submitting it for publication. Typically, a conference paper will be presented as part of a panel discussion that will hear and consider two or three papers on similar topics. After an introduction by the scholar chairing the panel, each presenter will read his or her work. After the papers have been read aloud (each requiring twenty minutes or so), a commentary on the papers is given by a scholarly expert (in the field) on the panel. Sometimes printed versions of the papers are made available to prospective members of the audience beforehand, so they come to the session already familiar with the presenter's arguments. After all the papers have been read, the commentator offers criticism, advice, and often the delineation of some themes or threads that tie the papers together. At this point the audience is free to question, challenge, help refine, or offer counterinterpretations to points made in the papers. This can be a highly stimulating, sometimes acrimonious exchange, but it is one of the principal means by which new views are expressed and modified prior to publication.

² A bound copy of each dissertation is available in the library of the university granting the Ph.D., and very frequently an extra copy is available through the interlibrary loan system. For those wishing to acquire their own copy, dissertations are available on microfilm and can be purchased from University Microfilms Corporation.

To get some idea of how this process operates, let us consider the largest historical conference of them all: the annual meeting of the AHA. Held over a four-day period, the AHA's annual meeting is a vast smorgasbord of offerings, with clusters of panels running simultaneously. At the January 1997 meeting in New York, for example, there were no fewer than 154 panels on everything from "The Renaissance Quest for Spiritual and Moral Renewal" to "Aviation, Business, and Government between the Wars."³ Each of the panels tends to attract for its audience specialists in the particular field, though many participants find it stimulating to attend at least a few panels well outside their primary areas of interest.

In addition to the panels, the annual meeting is an occasion for publishers of scholarly books in history to display their wares. This is an important source of information for historians about the latest publications in the field. There are also numerous opportunities for social and intellectual exchanges during conferences: individual encounters, receptions, and the luncheons of the many historical societies affiliated to the AHA. It is these affiliated societies (subgroups of the AHA's membership) that are apt to be the primary focus of most historians' professional involvement. Many if not most of these smaller groups also hold their own regular meetings and conferences independently of the AHA meeting. Like the specialized journals that cater to particular fields, the hundreds of historical societies are organized along geographic, cultural, chronological, or methodological bases. Such groups as the Medieval Academy of America, the American Conference on Irish Studies, the Society for the History of Technology, and the World History Society represent crucial parts of the infrastructure of the historical profession.

This account of the basic organizational features of the profession is introduced in order to give some sense of the dynamic and cooperative character of modern scholarship. It is important for you to realize that most books and articles you will encounter were not written by "ivory tower" types working in complete isolation, but by men and women developing and refining their views in relation to the methods and criticisms of others. This is what we mean when we

³ Sharon K. Tune, ed., *Program of the American Historical Association's One Hundred Eleventh Annual Meeting, January 2-5, 1997* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1996).

describe the historical profession, or some segment of it, as a “community of scholars.”

But now it is time to go the sources. In the next chapter we will explore the various methods of finding the works you will need to research your topic.

Finding Your Sources: The Library Catalog and Beyond

A child who asks for an item of general information will often be told to “look it up.” This response, though it may sometimes stem from an unwillingness to admit ignorance, is an educationally sound one. Its tendency is to make the child a self-directed learner and to develop basic research skills. A children’s encyclopedia or a “book of knowledge” may be the extent of the materials available in the home, but the lesson imparted is invaluable: that a storehouse of accumulated information is literally at one’s fingertips. Beyond the home, the maturing student discovers the richer offerings of community and school libraries, which open up additional layers of knowledge and nourish the spirit of inquiry. Admission to college brings with it the highest stage of access to the written word in the form of the university library, the resources of which are usually much more voluminous and varied than anything encountered previously.

In spite of the impressiveness of most campus libraries, however, many students remain unaware of the great diversity of materials and services they offer. Typical written assignments, such as term papers and book reviews, rarely require anything more than a few books from the library stacks. The procedure is simple and straightforward. Find some titles in the library catalog, jot down the call numbers, go to the shelves and collect them, and check them out. At home, the selected volumes can be mined for information, including perhaps a few choice quotations. If additional material on a particular person or historical incident is needed, one of the large and authoritative encyclopedias in the library’s reference room can be consulted. Having filled up some note cards or notebooks during this process, the student uses them to write the paper. The library can then be ignored,