

Preface



For many centuries history was associated with power. It legitimized rulers and created bonds between rulers and the ruled. Then it legitimized nation-states and reinforced citizenship. As societies became more complex, various kinds of histories helped define and reify the numerous components of religious, social, economic, technical, communal, and geopolitical existence. Those who wished to challenge power deployed their own histories to do so.

The individual's sense of identity and selfhood had to find its footing amidst available histories. This was true for historians as well as for those the historian wrote about. In the United States in the last half of the 20th century, women and black people in their battles for more equality demanded a more inclusive national history. As migration brought new people into the country—and, indeed, to many countries—culture wars were fought, using not only competing histories, but also competing definitions of what the craft or profession or art of history ought to be. History was a handmaiden to group polemics in struggles for legitimization, status, power, jobs, or markets.

Historians today are facing new challenges. First is the intensification of globalism. To be sure, the world has for millennia known mass migration, far-flung trading networks, and the contest of empires, but transportation and communication changes have linked the world together much more comprehensively and immediately than before. As advanced industrial countries increasingly share a single macro-economy and as more parts of the globe share common communication channels, approaches to history based on 19th-century presumptions of the nation-state have begun to seem obsolete. The frame of reference has to be the world, but whose premises about the nature of history are most relevant?

Historians in the western world and particularly in the United States have had to respond to other challenges. The social sciences have been developing for more than two centuries. Biology, geology, chemistry, and physics have also been evolving. DNA analysis is challenging old mythologies. Paleontology and archaeology have lengthened time horizons. Space exploration has put the world in a more cosmic perspective. The historian should not ignore the insights and methods of these other kinds of scholars and must take into account the facts they have uncovered.

This historian is not by nature a polemicist. Her aim—her odyssey—has been to see life and history holistically. Holistic history is not monistic history. It embraces pluralisms by finding the frame of reference within which pluralisms are interrelated. Holistic history could be like the score of a great symphony, not a symphony in the western tradition of that word but one that includes the music everywhere.

Many personal and contextual factors inevitably determine what ground the individual historian chooses to stand upon. This book is not intended to be a set of guidelines or a manifesto. It represents one historian's point of view about how to approach history. This historian, like others, has brought her own personal values, temperament, assumptions, and experiences to her undertaking. The values she brings to bear are belief in the virtue of individual uniqueness, but also a commitment to the common weal. It matters that the historian in question is an American born in Canada of Anglo-Norman and Scottish ancestry, that she is Protestant and female, that her family ties have been to landholders, preachers, teachers, judges, university presidents, American presidents, and men engaged in helping to create technological changes within today's global frame of reference. It matters that her children work in the realms of art, film, and music; that she has traveled extensively over the world; that much of her life has been spent in western North America, in Canada and the U.S., with forays into New England and Detroit, and that she lived for a time in Paris. It matters because these kinds of facts affect an historian's point of view and set of values. Readers must judge for themselves what to accept in the histories they read.

This book is a sampler of one historian's articles, scholarly papers, and other writings scattered over a lifetime. The book could be read as a case study of how one historian's life has shaped her approach to history, but the writings are not arranged in the chronological order in which they were first produced. They are arranged thematically. Addressing the issue of what history is, they invite discussion about what history ought to be. The author's intellectual biography—how ideas from one field of activity expanded into other fields—is imbedded as a subtext.

The book starts with the themes of self and values because these are fundamentals. Then come structure and symbol, which necessarily are influenced by changes in spatial scope of reference. Historical changes in behavior in and conceptions of space and time are important themes throughout the book. This historian's perspectives bridge the sciences, humanities, and social sciences—physiology, psychology, physics, geography, anthropology, sociology, socio-biology, political science, law, micro-economics, philosophy, literature, art, architecture, and urban form. Rhythm, she has concluded, is a common denominator for many aspects of life.

The historian who borrows from the physical and social sciences must address the issue of whether predetermination, contingency, or will have shaped history. While accepting that it is the scholar's task to recognize and map the order of things, this author also acknowledges the role of contingencies in history. Choices are made, decisions taken and change ensues. Man is not entirely a victim. He is architect.

With American presidents John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, and George Bush on branches of her family tree, and a direct ancestor who helped to found the Republican party, this historian continues a family tradition and creed that believes involvement in community governance is a moral responsibility. Therefore, this book contains discussions of the role history plays in the shaping of public policy.

This book's concluding vote is for history based on the values of personal responsibility—to the self and immediate others, to community, to craftsmanship, but also to joy and wonder, and above all to the great, though sometimes foolish, human enterprise.