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Just the Facts, Ma’am

Fake memoirs, factual fictions, and the history of history.

by Jill Lepore March 24, 2008

What makes a book a history? In the eighteenth century, novelists called their books “histories,” smack on the title page. No one was more brash about this than Henry Fielding, who, in his 1749 “History of Tom Jones, a Foundling,” included a chapter called “Of Those Who Lawfully May, and of Those Who May Not Write Such Histories as This.” Fielding insisted that what flowed from his pen was “true history”; fiction was what historians wrote. Modern history arose when the novel did, but novelists had their truths to claim.

“I shall not look on myself as accountable to any Court of Critical Jurisdiction whatever: For as I am, in reality, the Founder of a new Province of Writing,” Fielding explained. Tom Jones’s claim to truth is different from Margaret Jones’s. Earlier this month, Jones, also known as Margaret Seltzer, tried to pass off a gangland bildungsroman as the story of her life. Pulped days after it was published, the book, titled “Love and Consequences,” is a fraud; “Tom Jones” is not. Fielding was playing; Seltzer was just lying.



But Fielding meant it when he said that “Tom Jones” was true, and there’s a sense in which he was right. History matters, but the best novels boast a kind of truth that even the best history books can never claim. And when history books are wrong they can be miserably, badly, ridiculously wrong, a point that wasn’t lost on Jane Austen, who, in 1791, when she was sixteen, wrote a brilliant parody of Oliver Goldsmith’s four-volume, march-of-the-monarchs “History of England, from the Earliest Times to the Death of George II.” (Goldsmith, the author of the novel “The Vicar of Wakefield,” wrote history to keep out of debtors’ prison.) Austen called her parody “The History of England from the Reign of Henry the 4th to the Death of Charles the 1st, by a Partial, Prejudiced & Ignorant Historian.” It consisted of thirteen perfectly dunderheaded character sketches of crowned heads of England. Of Henry V, she wrote, “During his reign, Lord Cobham was burnt alive, but I forget what for.” Of the Duke of Somerset: “He was beheaded, of which he might with reason have been proud, had he known that such was the death of Mary Queen of Scotland; but as it was impossible that he should be conscious of what had never happened, it does not appear that he felt particularly delighted with the manner of it.” Of the allegation that Lady Jane Grey, Edward VI’s cousin, read Greek: “Whether she really understood that language or whether such a study proceeded only from an excess of vanity for which I believe

she was always rather remarkable, is uncertain.” Once in a great while, Austen happened to bump into a fact or two, for which she apologized: “Truth being I think very excusable in an Historian.”

Historians and novelists are kin, in other words, but they’re more like brothers who throw food at each other than like sisters who borrow each other’s clothes. The literary genre that became known as “the novel” was born in the eighteenth century. History, the empirical sort based on archival research and practiced in universities, anyway, was born at much the same time. Its novelty is not as often remembered, though, not least because it wasn’t called “novel.” In a way, history is the anti-novel, the novel’s twin, though which is Cain and which is Abel depends on your point of view.

Among the ancients, history was a literary art, as John Burrow illustrates in his fascinating compendium “A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century” (Knopf; \$35). Invention was a hallmark of ancient history, which was filled with long, often purely fictitious speeches of great men. It was animated by rhetoric, not by evidence. Even well into the eighteenth century, not a few historians continued to understand themselves as artists, with license to invent. Eager not to be confused with antiquarians and mere chroniclers, even budding empiricists confessed a certain lack of fussiness about facts. In “Letters on the Study and Use of History” (1752), Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke condemned those who “store their minds with crude unruminated facts and sentences; and hope to supply, by bare memory, the want of imagination and judgment.”

The transformation of history into an empirical science began as early as the sixteenth century and became entrenched only in the nineteenth century. By the time the American Historical Association was founded, in 1884, the “cult of the fact” (as the intellectual historian Peter Novick has called it) had achieved ascendancy. Ever since, generations of historians have defined themselves by a set of standards that rest on the distinction between truth and invention, even when that has meant scorning everyone who came before them. Between 1834 and 1874, the American statesman and historian George Bancroft, much influenced by Sir Walter Scott, produced a ten-volume “History of the United States.” It is romantic and opinionated; it has a gritty voice and a passionate point of view. It’s a little . . . novel-ish. In the eighteen-seventies, one Young Turk suggested that a better title for it would be “The Psychological Autobiography of George Bancroft, As Illustrated by Incidents and Characters in the Annals of the United States.” A generation later, Bancroft’s monumental accomplishment looked even worse: now it was, as the Yale historian Charles McLean Andrews put it, “nothing less than a crime against historical truth.”

But is “historical truth” truer than fictional truth? The difference between history and poetry, Aristotle argued, is that “the one tells what has happened, the other the kind of things that can happen. And in fact that is why the writing of poetry is a more philosophical activity, and one to be taken more seriously, than the writing of history.” Historians have turned this thinking on its head. History, not literature, is the serious stuff.

In the nineteen-eighties and nineties, many historians worried that the seriousness of history, its very integrity as a discipline, was in danger of being destroyed by literary theorists who insisted on the constructedness, the fictionality, of all historical writing—who suggested that the past is nothing more than a story we tell about it. The field seemed to be tottering on the edge of an

epistemological abyss: If history is fiction, if history is not true, what’s the use? (The panic has since died down, but it hasn’t died out. Donald Kagan, in his 2005 Jefferson lecture, “In Defense of History,” grumbled about the perils of “pseudo-philosophical mumbo-jumbo.”) In 1990, Sir Geoffrey Elton called postmodern literary theory “the intellectual equivalent of crack.” The next year, the eminent American historian Gordon Wood, writing in *The New York Review of Books*, warned that if things were to keep on this way historians would soon “put themselves out of business.” Reviewing Simon Schama’s “Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)” —a history book in which Schama indulged in flights of fancy, fully disclosed as such—Wood wrote, “His violation of the conventions of history writing actually puts the integrity of the discipline of history at risk.” That review, along with twenty more (including one of a book of mine), appears in Wood’s new book, “The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History” (Penguin Press; \$25.95); each review has an afterword, and in an introduction the author catalogues the failings of “unhistorical historians.”

Revisiting his review of “Dead Certainties,” Wood takes the trouble to reproach Schama again for having “forgotten that he was not Walter Scott or E. L. Doctorow,” and for ignoring “both the epistemological climate of the early 1990s and the devastating effects such a work by such a distinguished historian could have on the conventions of the discipline.” As Wood sees it, these conventions need protecting because their novelty—“They are scarcely more than a century old”—makes them fragile. But they’re sturdier than he thinks. Margaret Jones is accountable to a court of jurisdiction in a way that Tom Jones was not. Historians and critics, readers and writers, haven’t given up on truth. And postmodernism turns out to be a bit of a bugbear. It’s premodernism that’s got all the teeth.

In the eighteenth century, the boundary between history and fiction was different from what it is now. For one thing, plenty of people wrote both history books and novels, including Voltaire, Fielding, Tobias Smollett, Oliver Goldsmith, Daniel Defoe, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Charles Brockden Brown. The century’s most influential historians, David Hume and Edward Gibbon, happen to have been particular fans of Fielding’s novels (and Fielding considered reading history essential preparation for writing novels). History books and novels alike aimed at seducing readers through plot and even suspense. “History, like tragedy, requires an exposition, a central action, and a dénouement,” Voltaire wrote in 1752. “My secret is to force the reader to wonder: Will Philip V ascend the throne?”

Eighteenth-century novels also pretended that they were true. Not only did they call themselves “histories”; they also often took the form of counterfeit historical documents, usually letters or journals—a form that was itself a parody of the conventions of historical writing. In the preface to “The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe” (1719), Daniel Defoe insisted, “The Editor believes the thing to be a just History of Fact; neither is there any Appearance of Fiction in it.” But of course Defoe was not the editor of a journal kept by a man named Crusoe; there was no journal. Defoe made it up. What Defoe meant by this imposture, one critic wrote, “I know not; unless you would have us think, that the Manner of your telling a Lie will make it a Truth.”

It’s easy to think that Defoe was joking, as if Robinson Crusoe’s journal were as much a gimmick as Esquire’s “diary” of Heath Ledger, but Defoe, like Fielding, was making a (mostly) straight-faced

epistemological argument. And less playful novelists did the same thing. Samuel Richardson insisted that he was merely the editor of Pamela’s letters, first published in England in 1740 as “Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded” (and published by Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia two years later). This was a lie, but not a hoax; Richardson wanted his novels to be read with “Historical Faith,” since they contained, he believed, the truth of the possible, the truth of human nature. The first American novels weren’t published until the seventeen-eighties and nineties, but they cluttered their title pages with the same claims: “FOUNDED ON FACT”; “A Tale of Truth.”

What this implies is nicely illustrated by David Hume (who, in his lifetime, was better known as a historian than as a philosopher). In “Of the Study of History” (1741), Hume told a story about how the same book can be read as both history and fiction. A “young beauty” asked Hume to send her some novels; instead, he sent her some history books—Plutarch’s Lives—but told her they were novels, assuring her “that there was not a word of truth in them from beginning to end.” She read them avidly, at least “ ’till she came to the lives of ALEXANDER and CAESAR, whose names she had heard of by accident; and then returned me the book, with many reproaches for deceiving her.” As fiction, Plutarch’s Lives was delightful; as history, it was unbearable. Hume toyed with the opposite idea in “A Treatise of Human Nature” (1739-40): two books, one a history, and one a novel, might contain the same truth. “If one person sits down to read a book as a romance, and another as a true history,” he wrote, “they plainly receive the same ideas, and in the same order; nor does the incredulity of the one, and the belief of the other hinder them from putting the very same sense upon their author. His words produce the same ideas in both.”

If a history book can be read as if it were a novel, and if a reader can find the same truth in a history book and a novel, what, finally, is the difference between them? This is a difficult question, Hume admitted. Maybe it just feels different—more profound—to read what we believe to be true (an idea assented to) than what we believe to be false (a fancy): “An idea assented to feels different from a fictitious idea, that the fancy alone presents to us.”

But there’s more between them. A novel, as Defoe put it, is a “private History,” a history of private life. “I will tell you in three words what the book is,” Laurence Sterne wrote in “The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy,” published beginning in 1759. He was talking about Locke’s account of how the mind worked and, by extension, his own. “It is a history.—A history! of who? what? where? when? Don’t hurry yourself. —It is a history-book, Sir, (which may possibly recommend it to the world) of what passes in a man’s own mind.” Fielding went farther. He called his writing “true history.” It is “our Business to relate Facts as they are,” Fielding told his reader, classing himself among historical writers who draw their materials not from records but from “the vast authentic Doomsday-Book of Nature.”

For Fielding, there are two kinds of historical writing: history based in fact (whose truth is founded in documentary evidence), and history based in fiction (whose truth is founded in human nature). Maybe—to take some license with Jane Austen’s “Pride and Prejudice” (1813)—these two manners of writing bear the same relationship to one another as Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham: “One has got all the truth, and the other all the appearance of it.” The question is: which is which?

“Dismiss me from the falsehood and impossibility of history, and deliver me over to the reality of romance,” the English writer William Godwin pleaded in “Of History and Romance,” in 1797. (Not

for nothing had Godwin called his novel, written a few years earlier, “Things As They Are.”) There is not and never can be any such thing as true history, Godwin insisted: “Nothing is more uncertain, more contradictory, more unsatisfactory than the evidence of facts.” Every history is incomplete; every historian has a point of view; every historian relies on what is unreliable—documents written by people who were not under oath and cannot be cross-examined. (That is to say, even the best historian has a good deal in common with Jane Austen’s “Partial, Prejudiced & Ignorant Historian.”) Before his imperfect sources, the historian is powerless: “He must take what they choose to tell, the broken fragments, and the scattered ruins of evidence.” He could decide merely to reproduce his sources, to offer a list of facts: “But this is in reality no history. He that knows only on what day the Bastille was taken and on what spot Louis XVI perished, knows nothing.”

Fortunately, there is yet another kind of history, Godwin argued, “the noblest and most excellent species of history”: the novel, or romance. The novelist is the better historian—and especially better than the empirical historian—because he admits that he is partial, prejudiced, and ignorant, and because he has not forsaken passion: “The writer of romance is to be considered as the writer of real history; while he who was formerly called the historian, must be contented to step down into the place of his rival, with this disadvantage, that he is a romance writer, without the arduous, the enthusiastic and the sublime licence of imagination that belong to that species of composition.”

Godwin’s essay wasn’t published until the twentieth century, which makes it all the more remarkable that the Philadelphian Charles Brockden Brown put forth a look-alike argument in “The Difference Between History and Romance,” an essay published in *The Monthly Magazine and American Review* in April, 1800. (To be sure, Brown was very much influenced by Godwin. Carl Van Doren once wrote, “His novels all bear the marks of haste, immaturity, and Godwin.”) “History and romance are terms that have never been very clearly distinguished from each other,” Brown began. “It should seem that one dealt in fiction, and the other in truth; that one is a picture of the probable and certain, and the other a tissue of untruths; that one describes what might have happened, and what has actually happened, and the other what never had existence.” Yet these distinctions are not as helpful as they at first appear: history concerns facts, but, because these have to be arranged and explained, the historian “is a dealer, not in certainties, but probabilities, and is therefore a romancer.”

In an 1806 essay called “Historical Characters Are False Representations of Nature,” Brown suggested that the historian’s grossest deception is promoting the idea that only the great are good: “Popular prejudice assists the illusion, and because we are accustomed to behold public characters occupy a situation in life that few can experience, we are induced to believe that their capacities are more enlarged, their passions more refined, and, in a word, that nature has bestowed on them faculties denied to obscurer men.” But great characters are not superior to obscure men, who are, alas, condemned to obscurity by history itself. “If it were possible to read the histories of those who are doomed to have no historian, and to glance into domestic journals as well as into national archives,” Brown speculated, “we should then perceive the unjust prodigality of our sympathy to those few names, which eloquence has adorned with all the seduction of her graces.”

Fiction, in other words, can do what history doesn't but should: it can tell the story of ordinary people. The eighteenth century's fictive history (not to be confused with what we call “historical fiction”) is the history of private life; the history of what passes in a man's own mind; true to the Book of Nature; and written in plain, simple style, exhibiting both judgment and invention. And it is the history of obscure men. Who are these obscure men? Well, a lot of them are women.

For every Tom Jones and Robinson Crusoe, there were a dozen Clarissas, Pamelas, and Charlotte Temples. If eighteenth-century novels are history, they're women's history. And they were adored, above all, by women readers. “Novel Reading, a Cause of Female Depravity” was the revealing title of an essay published in England in 1797 and in Boston five years later. Everyone from preachers to politicians damned novels as corrupting of both public and private virtue and, above all, of women's virtue. “Novels not only pollute the imaginations of young women,” one American magazine writer insisted in 1798; they give them “false ideas of life.”

What, pray, was the remedy for this grave social ill? Reading history. “There is nothing which I would recommend more earnestly to my female readers than the study of history,” Hume wrote in “Of the Study of History” (which is why he gave his lady friend Plutarch's Lives, and told her it was a novel). But, on the whole, women were not particularly interested in reading history. Hume attributed this to the fair sex's “aversion to matter of fact” and its “appetite for falsehood.” Men “allow us Poetry, Plays, and Romances,” Mary Astell wrote in 1705, “and when they would express a particular Esteem for a Woman's Sense, they recommend History.” But why read it? “For tho' it may be of Use to Men who govern Affairs, to know how their Fore-fathers Acted, yet what is this to us?” Much as writers of history tried to woo women readers, they made very little headway. Near the end of the century, Mary Wollstonecraft was left to ask of women: “Is it surprising that they find the reading of history a very dry task?” (After publishing her “Vindication of the Rights of Woman,”* in 1792, Wollstonecraft started writing a novel, “Maria; or, the Wrongs of Women,” to make sure that her arguments would reach women readers. Her husband, William Godwin, had it published in 1798, after she died, in childbirth.)

Women were not only not interested in history; they didn't trust it. In “Northanger Abbey” (completed by 1803), Jane Austen's comic heroine, who adores novels, confesses that she finds history both boring and impossible to credit: “It tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all—it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention.” Austen saw fit to echo this exchange in “Persuasion” (1818). “All histories are against you,” Captain Harville insists, when Austen's levelheaded heroine, Anne Elliot, argues that women are more constant than men. “But perhaps you will say, these were all written by men,” Harville guesses, and Anne agrees. “Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story,” she observes, saying, “I will not allow books to prove any thing.”

By the end of the eighteenth century, not just novel readers but most novel writers were women, too. And most historians, along with their readers, were men. As the discipline of history, the anti-novel, emerged, and especially as it professionalized, it defined itself as the domain of men. (Women might write biography, or dabble in genealogy.) Eighteenth-century observers, in other words, understood the distinction between history and fiction not merely and maybe not even

predominantly as a distinction between truth and invention but as a distinction between stories by, about, and of interest to men and stories by, about, and of interest to women. Women read novels, women wrote novels, women were the heroines of novels. Men read history, men wrote history, men were the heroes of history. (When men wrote novels, Godwin suggested, this was regarded as “a symptom of effeminacy.”)

As Burrow’s “A History of Histories” and Wood’s “Purpose of the Past” make clear, however, much of what distinguished eighteenth-century fiction from eighteenth-century history is now part of how academic historians write history. Most of the popular history books you’ll find in Barnes & Noble celebrate the public lives of famous men, but the history books that many academics have been writing for the past half century concern the private lives of ordinary people. (Memoirs constitute a related but distinct genre, chronicling the lives of both the famous and the not so famous, and borrowing from the conventions of history and of fiction. Fake memoirs, like Margaret Jones’s or Misha Defonesca’s, borrow from those genres, but without achieving the legitimacy of either.) “By the 1970s,” Wood writes, “this new social history of hitherto forgotten people had come to dominate academic history writing.” Maybe the topics that have seized professional historians’ attention—family history, social history, women’s history, cultural history, “microhistory”—constitute nothing more than an attempt to take back territory they forfeited to novelists in the eighteenth century. If so, historians have reclaimed from novelists nearly everything except the license to invent . . . and women readers. Today, publishers figure that men buy the great majority of popular history books; most fiction buyers are women.

Is “history at risk”? If women barely read it at all, and if men mostly read books with titles like “Guts and Guns,” it just might be. “A History of Histories” and “The Purpose of the Past” offer a useful reminder that history is a long and endlessly interesting argument, where evidence is everything and storytelling is everything else. But, as for telling stories, maybe historians still have a few things to learn from novelists. Reading Jane Austen being I think very excusable in an Historian. ♦

*Correction, May 19, 2008: The title of Mary Wollstonecraft’s book is “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,” not “A Vindication of the Rights of Women,” as originally stated.

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