

How history matters now

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This paper is an expanded version of a speech given by Ludmilla Jordanova at the launch of John Tosh's book [Why History Matters](#) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) at Birkbeck College, London, on 28 May 2008.

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Executive summary

History is woven into daily life, yet even there it is complex and contested. Emotions play a major part in personal history, and it is useful for historians to have ways of thinking coherently about their effects on all accounts of the past.

It is not at all obvious how to engage the wider public in historical debate, especially when they themselves have little connection to the debates in question.

Although policy makers and the general public operate within the same broad environment, they are distinct constituencies, and historians, if they are to be effective in communicating to both, need to reflect upon, understand and respond to the differences between them.

If historians are to communicate their ideas to non-specialist groups, they need to comprehend the obstacles that lie in their path. I suggest that deeply held myths about the past are indeed obstacles, which need to be understood, using a variety of disciplines.

A nuanced and sophisticated understanding of audiences is vital here, in order that the term 'the public' is not used in a vague, unfocussed way. Audiences for history may be explored through a consideration and critical evaluation of the wide range of existing public history initiatives.

For people to become actors in historical discussions, as opposed to audiences for the discussions of others, they need to feel some affinity with the topics debated. We might usefully think of this in terms of identification, originally a psychoanalytic term.

Specific mechanisms for communicating with publics and policy makers need to be explored and developed.

It remains unproven whether historians are able to overcome the strong interests that guide those who make major decisions, and indeed whether those decisions would in any sense be "better" when taken under the influence of historical knowledge, especially since there is often no consensus among historians.

This does not mean that history does not matter, only that the ways in which it might come to matter in the future require considerable further reflection. This is a huge project that is best done collaboratively.

Introduction

When I gave a short talk in May at the launch of John Tosh's intriguing book *Why History Matters*, I began with a personal story in order to illustrate the direct ways in which the past shapes lives and how it does so in complex ways. When it comes to families, there is frequently little consensus on the key stories and their interpretation. There may not even be a shared account about the nature and timing of key events. People constantly make myths that take deep roots and use existing myths that relate to their pasts. Myths are dense and apparently simple stories, which speak to core human issues, such as origins, forms of dominance and the distribution of power. All these points apply to history in a more formal sense. It is banal to say that the past has shaped the present, but the statement is nonetheless important. It is extremely challenging to take two further steps: the first is to demonstrate, precisely, how the impress of past times on the contemporary world may be convincingly delineated; the second is to reveal the consequences of that impress in ways that assist in policy making. Just as in families, so in larger groups, there can be little consensus on major events, their meanings and any actions they might imply.

I had, however, a further and somewhat different motive for telling a personal story. There are immediate reasons for curiosity about our own lives, things that have happened to us, and to those we are close to, even if they occurred some time ago, because we *feel* their impress directly. They mobilise an array of emotions, which can be formidably complicated and hard to disentangle. Few people lack a *personal* curiosity about their pasts. Ideally, in a personal context, both emotional and intellectual intelligence are mobilised, so that an understanding of where we as individuals, families and friends come from helps to inform a thoughtful, self-aware way of living. This is precisely an ideal, one that is extraordinarily hard to attain, and more often personal pasts are characterised by pain, misunderstandings, guilt and enforced silences. It is here that I think the parallel between personal history and larger history breaks down. Why would people without either direct personal or professional motivation pay close attention to the complexities of history? Here I mean history in a strong sense - a formal discipline, demanding specialised skills, expertise and knowledge, including a critical understanding of source material and a familiarity with a wide range of ways in which evidence can be interpreted.

My argument so far suggests that history is likely to matter to a wide public in highly selective ways. Any claim that it should matter more formally needs to address the obstacles it faces. Of course, the claim that policy makers should pay more attention to history in the sense I outlined above does not logically entail the public doing the same. But both operate within the same broad environment, hence at a pragmatic level it makes sense to encourage both constituencies to develop a more informed understanding of the past. The central claim of *Why History Matters* is that this goal is both desirable and attainable. But it does not consider the deep obstacles that lie in its way. I have already mentioned the idea that people hold myths about the past, and that includes policy makers. To change the public role of history we have to look such myths in the face, work out why they are held and also how they may be changed. In my view it is naïve to suppose that historical evidence alone can perform such tricks.

Questioning the ways in which history matters

In engaging with *Why History Matters*, I have formulated a number of questions, which it is not possible to answer here, but which are worth stating nonetheless.

How can more people be motivated to pay attention to the complexities of history?

What mechanisms of communication and debate can be developed to avoid the pitfalls that John Tosh outlines in his book?

How do we define 'the public'?

Is it realistic to think that literally everyone, potentially, could and would engage with history in ways would be desirable, especially in the context of widespread dissatisfaction with politics broadly defined?

Why do so many people prefer accounts of the past that are, from a historian's point of view, demonstrably untrue? How can we work out the wide and deep appeal of historical myths?

What would be effective ways of counteracting them?

These are genuine questions; they raise huge and complex issues that require a range of disciplines to tackle them. They are questions that imply some of my concerns with John Tosh's book - his claims would certainly be enhanced if some of the answers to them were forthcoming. In general it seems hard to deny that history matters in some sense, and that it matters at all levels of a polity, to individual citizens, to networks of friends and kin, to institutions, including those that educate and govern, to the nation as a whole, even to the entire world. It follows that debating not just how, *precisely*, it matters, but also what can be done to change the ways in which it matters, is of considerable importance. And, why we may sceptically ask, do we need to change these ways at a time when, it might seem, history, in many forms, *is* already everywhere?

Public history

From John Tosh's point of view, the history that is everywhere is clearly inadequate for forming engaged, historically well-informed citizens. This is necessarily the case, since that is not its goal. Most public history is for entertainment, whether in movies, magazines, museums, the media, or books. Yet 'entertainment' does not quite capture the quality of involvement many people have with the past. We must note the huge increase in the practice of genealogy, where participants have precisely that highly personal impetus to study the past with which I began. There is no doubt that identity is involved, and no matter how complex we acknowledge that notion to be, it palpably informs much popular history. I would take another step and say that processes of *identification* are involved in public history, as indeed they are in professional history. Identification is a complex concept, but for my purposes here it alludes to the sense of connection that is felt with people and events in the past. Such senses are not static and mechanical, but folded into people's emotional and working lives. They change, evolve, develop. They may be most readily experienced at an individual level, but they are surely collective phenomena - and the dramatic growth of interest in tracing ancestors in recent decades suggests a big shift that needs to be understood more deeply. We might conclude that when the public can feel a connection with the past, they can be highly engaged, and indeed can become researchers with considerable expertise. One further question therefore might be - how can such commitment, enthusiasm and knowledge be turned to good account in the ways that John Tosh would like?

Public history is far more than genealogy. The vast appetite for visiting museums and galleries is striking. The *consumption* of history in many forms is a vast industry. Yet this does not form a basis for what John Tosh is advocating, since he wants to see historical insights inform decision-making, voting, the making of judgements within and about public life. It is true that critical discourses are not part of most public history, which does not seek to prompt active political responses. It is also true that the history that is already in the public domain shapes public life, not least because a lot of it panders to the very myths about the past that many commentators would like to see dislodged. It does so for some quite urgent economic reasons - public history needs to sell itself in order to survive - a point that applies as much to government-funded museums as it does to TV and books. Thus if we want to change public cultures connected with history, the ways in which it is presented currently need to be reconsidered.

The power of interests

Why History Matters offers many reasons why change is vital. For example, when history is used poorly in public life, there are, John Tosh asserts, serious repercussions. He suggests that our world would be better governed and administered if a better understanding of the past were available to both decision makers and the public. It is vital to note that political cum moral values are always present in judgments about the quality of government, and no historical understanding, however sophisticated and effectively disseminated, will reconcile those with different value systems and agendas. Hence an enhanced sense of the past does not remove ideological difference, nor the power of interests, which in the end guide political judgment. So even if the public role of history were to change, there is no guarantee at all that this would alter the actual decisions taken by those in power. Under what conditions might historical knowledge override ideologies, interests and power groupings?

One possible answer is that it is impossible to know until it has been tried. It seems plausible that historians should become active citizens, putting their skills and expertise in the service of their fellow citizens. I see this as a generic not a specific argument. There is an urgent need for a higher proportion of the population to be politically active, and many groups have something special to offer. (Some) historians are well-qualified to do this, but I am not sure they are uniquely so. Nonetheless, it is worth asking what mechanisms historians might use to reach those in power and to wield enough influence to affect their decision-making? And, how could we overturn powerful prevailing preconceptions that are *not* soundly rooted in 'historical perspective', a phrase that recurs in the book. Note that it is singular, not plural.

Understanding myths of the past

As I have already hinted, one way forward would be to work out the appeal of these prevailing conceptions and the manner in which they are generated and propagated.

In order to do this analytical tools are needed that can deal with myth, belief, prejudice, fantasy and so on. Arguably, this might be a more interdisciplinary exercise than is suggested by a focus on history alone. I agree with many of the points the book makes about the distinctiveness of history as a discipline. Nonetheless historians might do well to make common cause with sociology, media studies, political science, art history, literary studies, and psychology generously defined so as to include psychoanalytic perspectives. I include psychoanalysis because I think it has a contribution to make in understanding processes of identification to which I have already alluded. This is one of

the most significant tasks that historians need to undertake if they want to change widespread myths of the past.

Two different approaches will be required to the public and to decision makers respectively. To change historical understandings in the former case involves not only grasping the emotional appeal of simplified stories, but a profound alliance with all forms of media and with museums and galleries, since preconceptions of the past about the past are constantly fed visually and aurally, as well as through texts. I suspect historical novels play an extremely important role in shaping responses to the past, and here the help of literary scholars would be essential. Thus in the case of the general public, historians' responses should *meet and match* the cultural strands that shape popular views of the past. Surely decision-makers need to be treated rather differently? An array of forces shape politics, such as individual, group, and national self-interest, ideology, perceptions of public opinion, international pressures, economic forces and so on. So how might the historical profession *meet and match* these strands? This is difficult to answer, although ensuring the intellectual status of the discipline is as high as possible might help.

Is history a bank account for publics?

In reality history is treated by many people, including those in power, as a kind of bank account, to be dipped into as and when necessary without any hesitation about how those resources are used. History is a handy rhetorical tool, not something that elicits the profound commitment of civil servants, politicians and commentators. So a further question seems to me to be how can people of influence be encouraged to deploy, cherish and even revere the results of historical scholarship. My suspicion is that as a community, the professional makers of historical knowledge have not yet thought deeply about this matter, which hinges on the nature of historical authority. This is a massively important area for Josh Tosh's thesis, which presupposes that historians should have more of it. Yet we still need to deal with the lack of consensus among historians about most key issues - what effect does a lack of consensus have on a profession's authority? We should note that since the public prestige of historians varies markedly from one country to another, it may well have a lot to do with national political cultures. *Why History Matters* is, understandably enough, primarily concerned with the United Kingdom and to some extent the United States, but a broad comparative approach to these questions might well be generative. Indeed I would advocate such an approach as a way of thinking about decision-making, popular history and public history. Furthermore, all the issues I have raised lend themselves to a generous interdisciplinary approach, while keeping history centre stage. Explaining the grip of current preconceptions of the past seems to me to be a goal worthy of the best historians, and an integral part of changing current practices.

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Read [Why history matters](#) by John Tosh.

Read [Why history matters - and why medieval history also matters](#) by John Arnold.

About the author

Ludmilla Jordanova is Professor of Modern History at King's College, London. She has previously held posts at the Universities of Cambridge, East Anglia, York, Essex and Oxford. She is drawing here on *History in Practice*, 2nd edition, London, 2006 and on 'Marking Time' in Holger Hock, ed., *History, Commemoration, and National Preoccupation: Trafalgar 1805-2005*, Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2007, pp. 7-17. A Trustee of the National Portrait Gallery in London since 2001, and a former President of the British Society for the History of Science, she is interested in many aspects of public history and in how historians can speak to wide audiences. She has contributed to *History Today* and the *BBC History Magazine*.

History Matters, in a joint project with the AARC and the Mary Ferrell Foundation, has launched a personal JFK assassination research disk. See the JFK Assassination Archive's home page on the Mary Ferrell website for full details, screenshots, and to order. The Assassinations of the 1960s as "Deep Events".^Â The goal of this website and History Matters' other offerings is to shed needed light on the darker aspects of post-World-War-II American politics, and in particular the tumultuous assassinations of the 1960s. The lies and myths about these assassinations have created what has been called a "black hole in history" which warps our understanding of the entire period. Ultimately, an inability to confront our real history endangers democracy and freedom.