

What is Historiography?

Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction

‘Historiography’ has at least three meanings: the body of historical writing on a particular topic; the history of how history itself has been written; and the theoretical and philosophical principles that underpin historical research and writing. This annotated bibliography focuses on useful works for thinking about historiography in the second and third senses. It includes introductory works on the purpose of history, thematic overviews of the development of the historical discipline, and some more in-depth explorations of theories and concepts in historical practice. There are few publications that specifically tackle how to integrate historiography into your own essays and assignments (in other words, how to demonstrate your knowledge of the body of historical writing on a particular topic, or ‘historiography’ in the first sense given above). University history departments often produce their own guidance on this aspect of study, tailored to their own degree programmes, and so it is worth exploring what resources your own institution offers. However, if you can get to grips with what historiography is and why it matters, you will be well-equipped to apply that knowledge to analysing any historical topic that interests you.

General reference

Bloomsbury History: Theory & Method (online subscription-only database).

This database contains over 200 articles on different aspects of historical theory and method. It is divided into sections on key thinkers, key concepts,

essays on theory, method and historiography, critical readings, classic texts in context, and using primary sources. Students will find much of interest and use here, and it is worth browsing the contents list of each section carefully to find relevant material as there is some overlap between different sections.

Introductory texts

John Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

In the acknowledgements, John Arnold states that this book ‘presents my views on what history is, how it is researched, and what it is for’. It therefore represents one historian’s take on the purpose and methods of the discipline, rather than any attempt at a comprehensive overview – but it is astounding how much Arnold manages to cover, and how deftly he explains extremely complex matters, in what really is a *very* short introduction. He also describes the book as ‘a work of *enthusiasm*’, and the juicy examples he calls on to illustrate discussions, from Arion riding on a dolphin’s tail to cat massacres, constitute much of the appeal of the book. If you are struggling to understand the point of historiography at all, this is the best (and quickest!) place to start.

Lynn Hunt, *History: Why It Matters* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

This is another very short text, written in a more overtly polemical manner, that starts from the very distinct point of why history is necessary in the ‘post-truth’ era. Like Arnold, Hunt tackles some extremely big questions with a very light touch, including the status of historical ‘truth’ and the political dimensions of historical practice. She relates issues that are often discussed in more abstract terms to diverse historical examples, and also to contemporary conditions from the make-up of the historical profession to how history is taught in schools. If you dislike abstract theory, or if you are interested in politics in its broadest sense, this is an excellent introduction to what is at stake in historical debates within and beyond universities.

William Lamont (ed.), *Historical Controversies and Historians* (London: UCL Press, 1998).

The first section of this edited collection, on ‘historical controversies’, discusses heated debates in particular fields of history or even around specific texts such as Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996). The second section, ‘Historians’, looks at influential historians and schools of history. The book is now nearly thirty years old – contributors such as Alistair Thomson and Saul Dubow have since built careers that would justify their own inclusion in the ‘Historians’

section – and therefore should not be used as a guide to current historical debates. However, undergraduates looking for models on how to write about historical debates or about historians could gain a lot from using this accessible text as an exemplar for how to explain why a particular historical disagreement matters.

The history of history: chronological and thematic overviews

Daniel Woolf, *A Concise History of History: Global Historiography from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

All societies have had different ways of thinking about and memorializing the past, but most works that make any attempt at a comprehensive geographical or chronological overview of these systems of historical thought run to several volumes. Woolf, general editor of the *Oxford History of Historical Writing* (five volumes, 2011–2), here condenses his own 600-page *A Global History of History* (2011) to a mere 300 or so pages. The book starts in the ancient Near East and ends by looking to the future of historical research, along the way integrating historical traditions from across the globe into each chapter. Each chapter also includes useful guides to further reading.

Michael Bentley (ed.), *Companion to Historiography* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

Nearly three decades after publication, this volume remains a useful one-stop shop for getting to grips with multiple aspects of the history of history. Parts I–IV comprise 29 chapters by different contributors on the development of history from ancient to modern times in different parts of the world. Part V deals with the relationship between history and different adjacent disciplines, and with different historical approaches such as Marxism and the Annales school. Overall, the selection of topics might appear eclectic, but most historiography modules cover at least some of these areas, and so it remains a useful reference work – though students will want to consult more recent scholarship on any of these subjects to ensure an up-to-date view of the field.

Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore (eds), *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, 3rd edn (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

Now in its third edition, this edited collection focuses on developments in professional history from around 1800. The focus is mainly on Western traditions in historical writing, though chapters on postcolonial and environmental history provide extended discussions of other global contexts.

The book is useful for students in providing scholarly overviews, with many examples from historical writing, of major streams within historical scholarship (for example, political history, social history and cultural history), alongside explorations of more recent trends. Regular revision of chapters over the course of different editions means that discussions are up to date.

Conceptual and theoretical works

Sarah Maza, *Thinking About History* (Chicago, IL, and London: Chicago University Press, 2017).

This volume walks the reader through major shifts in approaches to historical research and writing since the 1960s or thereabouts (with, however, much reference to earlier works and ways of thinking), but through a series of questions and concepts rather than the more usual chronological or thematic approach. So, for example, the first three chapters address the whom, where and what of history, while subsequent chapters explore how history is produced, causes and meanings, and the status of history as fact or fiction. This brings key conceptual and theoretical issues about why history matters to the fore while also providing readers with a good sense of wider shifts in the discipline, and when, how and why they occurred.

Mary Fulbrook, *Historical Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

Fulbrook's central argument is that theoretical assumptions and perspectives always underpin historical research, even when its practitioners are explicitly opposed to theory. Her explanation of why this is the case covers such important areas as the nature of historical narrative, uses of evidence, and the dialogic relationship between structure and agency. While this work is more philosophical in orientation than any others included in this bibliography, Fulbrook always argues from the perspective of a historian rather than a philosopher and draws on examples from diverse historical contexts to work out answers to these questions.

Conclusion

It's not that common for students to decide to read about historiography out of pure interest. For the most part, reading on historiography is a requirement of a particular module. Sometimes that reading can feel quite dry and abstracted from the rest of the degree programme. However, particularly if you are struggling to understand why historiography matters, or you are finding it difficult to see how different schools of history connect

to each other, it is almost certainly worth doing at least a bit more reading rather than trying to avoid historiography altogether. Taking a step back and engaging with one or more of the works in this annotated bibliography might help you to see how it all links up. In turn, seeing the big picture will help you to make sense of its component parts.