
Present-Centred History and the Problem of Historical Knowledge

Author(s): T. G. Ashplant and Adrian Wilson

Source: *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Jun., 1988), pp. 253-274

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2639213>

Accessed: 19/03/2011 09:28

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=cup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Cambridge University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Historical Journal*.

PRESENT-CENTRED HISTORY AND THE PROBLEM OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE*

T. G. ASHPLANT

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Liverpool Polytechnic

and

ADRIAN WILSON

Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine, Cambridge

In a previous article,¹ we examined Herbert Butterfield's identification of a certain pattern of anachronism in historical writing, in his classic book *The whig interpretation of history* (1931). In the decades since that book was originally published, Butterfield's designation has been extended far beyond its original domain of political and religious history. The terms 'whig history' and 'whiggish history' have passed into the common parlance of historians. This very success, however, has masked a failure to *define* the nature of such anachronistic writing, its causes and remedies. Such definition is all the more necessary since Butterfield's own attempts were clearly inadequate. Building upon and amending certain tentative formulations of Butterfield's, we defined the root of the anachronistic error as *present-centredness*: that is, that the historian, in seeking to study, reconstruct and write about the past, is constrained by necessarily starting from the perceptual and conceptual categories of the present.

In the light of this analysis, the problem of anachronism must be far more widespread than simply the 'whig interpretation' to which Butterfield initially drew attention. The fallacies of 'whig' history arise from the act of viewing the past through the categories of the present. But the 'whig' historian need not be the only perpetrator of this error. Butterfield himself, we argued, viewed the history of science in just this way, while at the same time priding himself on having rescued that field from whiggish distortions. And the categories of the present are surely much more disparate than the 'whig' form: the latter is specifically the outlook of a triumphant and long-lived elite, but history is not written solely by (or for the benefit of) such elites. Indeed, present-centredness

* For their help with various aspects of this paper, we wish to thank David Amigoni, Andrew Cunningham, Patrick Curry, Geoffrey Elton, Rob Iliffe, Susan Morgan, Simon Schaffer, and Stephen Yeo. For financial support in this study Adrian Wilson wishes to thank the Wellcome Trust.

¹ Adrian Wilson and T. G. Ashplant, 'Whig history and present-centred history', *The Historical Journal*, 30, 1 (1988), 1–16.

as we have defined it resides in the very categories, interests and preconceptions with which historians approach the past. It further follows that the category 'present' as we use it is neither single, nor solely temporal. Present-centred history can be written from within a range of different, even conflicting, categories and interests of the present. And some of these categories and interests will themselves have a considerable history. What collectively distinguishes them as belonging to the present is the gap which separates them from the categories and interests of the past society being studied – a gap which in the discipline of history is most directly constituted by social changes associated with the distance of time.

Thus it is implicit in our formulation of the problem that present-centredness is by no means confined to 'whig' history writing, but may take many other forms. To support this claim, we shall examine current historiographic practice, looking first at two major historical works both of which are in significant ways present-centred, but neither of which is adequately described as whiggish; and then at the overall constitution of the historical profession in the form of separate subdisciplines. Finally, we shall look more closely at the processes of research, to see how the historian's initial present-centred categories can be modified.

I. PRESENT-CENTRED HISTORY: GENUS AND SPECIES

Our first example is a pioneering work in the history of the Western European family: Philippe Ariès's *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (1960), best known in Britain in its English translation, *Centuries of childhood* (1962). Like several subsequent books in this field, this study depicted the modern child-centred, inward-looking, nuclear family as having evolved during the early-modern period from different, medieval forms.² But Ariès's approach was (and remains) distinctive, in that he saw this development not as progress but rather as *decline*. His purpose in writing the book was to celebrate the medieval and early-modern 'sociability' which he saw as having been displaced by the ascendancy of the child-centred nuclear family. Ariès depicted the rise of the nuclear family as bound up with two other historical changes, rooted in the Renaissance but coming to fruition in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the emergence of an 'awareness of childhood', and the growth of school education. In his eyes, these developments were to be bemoaned, since they produced the monotonous uniformity of modern suburban life:³

The evolution of the last few centuries has often been presented as the triumph of individualism over social constraints, with the family counted among the latter. But where is the individualism in these modern lives, in which all the energy of the couple is directed to serving the interests of a deliberately restricted posterity? Was there not

² For instance, Edward Shorter, *The making of the modern family* (New York, 1975); Lawrence Stone, *The family, sex and marriage in England 1500–1800* (London, 1977).

³ Philippe Ariès, *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (Paris, 1960; subsequent editions Paris, 1973, 1975); *Centuries of childhood* (trans. Robert Baldick, London, 1962). The quoted passage is in *Centuries*, p. 406.

greater individualism in the gay indifference of the prolific fathers of the ancien régime?

Here was a study which resembled classical 'whig' history in offering a broad, synthetic sweep spanning several centuries – but which was diametrically opposed to 'whig' history in its animating value judgment. The book can therefore be regarded as an interesting test case for Butterfield's methodological prescriptions. Insofar as it was clearly a work of 'generalising abridgment', *Centuries of childhood* might be expected to suffer from the 'whig fallacy'. However, the evaluative standpoint from which it was written might well have rendered the work free from that fallacy.

As we have demonstrated in an earlier paper, *Centuries of childhood* turns out to be fundamentally flawed in conception, method, and logic.⁴ The 'discovery of childhood' is in fact an optical illusion, based in the main upon a naive reading of iconographic material. People in medieval society *did* have 'an awareness of the particular nature of childhood' – though probably an awareness different from the modern one. There was no foundation for Ariès's assertion that before the seventeenth century, people 'hesitated to recognize' their affection for children. Early-modern attitudes which Ariès depicted as transitional states, halfway between medieval and modern mentalities, had actually existed in the middle ages too. The disciplining of children, which Ariès described as a product of school education, had in fact also characterized the earlier system of service or apprenticeship. Relations between young and old in medieval and early-modern French society were structured in terms of power, and did not comprise the diffuse 'mingling' which Ariès portrayed. The transition at the age of seven represented, not the child's entry into adulthood, but instead a shift into a different phase of childhood itself. In short, the entire argument of *Centuries of childhood* was unsound. The fundamental reason was that for all his relativistic intentions, Ariès was trapped within a present-centred framework. In the published critique (1980), we expressed this as follows:⁵ 'In his reading of the evidence...all is filtered through the categories of the present; anything that does not fit into those categories either fails to appear in his work, or enters it (in the reproduced evidence) unnoticed by Ariès.'

We need not reiterate that whole argument here, but it will be worth drawing out three specific points from that discussion.⁶ In the first place, this case-study shows that the source of anachronistic historiographic error resides not in the historian's value judgments, but rather in the *substantive categories* which he/she deploys. Ariès's evaluative stance, the very opposite of that of the 'whig' historian, had not freed him from the viewpoint of the present, with its

⁴ Adrian Wilson, 'The infancy of the history of childhood: an appraisal of Philippe Ariès', *History and Theory*, xix (1980), 132–53.

⁵ Ibid. p. 148. The use of the term 'evidence' here was, of course, inadequate. See Wilson and Ashplant, 'Whig history and present-centred history', pp. 12–13.

⁶ Wilson, 'Infancy of the history of childhood', pp. 147–9 (categories); 139, 143, 151 (absences); 152 (evidence).

distorting historiographic effects. Hence the way in which such distortion occurred was not through the deploying of present-favouring values, but rather through the operation of present-centred categories.

The means by which the categories of the present produced historiographic fallacies in Ariès's work can be illustrated by a second point, namely, what may be termed the problem of *absences*. The past which Ariès celebrated turns out, on inspection, to consist of the posited absence-of-the-present. Even though he was concerned to bring to life and to celebrate a medieval way of life which differed from the present, Ariès could conceive the medieval world only as the absence of various features of the modern world. Thus medieval 'sociability' was the absence of the nuclear family; medieval education was the absence of the age-structured school; the medieval attitude to the child was the absence of the modern 'awareness of the distinctive nature of childhood'. No concrete findings emerged about the past: instead, the past was pure negation. The reason for this structure of absences was that Ariès conceived the past through the categories of the present. As a result, history consisted of the cumulative, continuous and inevitable emergence of elements-of-the-present. The ironic result of this approach was that Ariès seemed to be endorsing and celebrating the very thing (the modern 'awareness of childhood') he was in fact wishing to relativize and to criticize.

The third observation we wish to draw from this earlier paper is of much wider application, and concerns the status of the *evidence* deployed by the historian. Like many historians, Ariès used a wealth of quotations and summaries from the sources themselves to support his argument and, on occasion, to carry that argument. The effect of this mass of 'evidence' was almost overpowering: readers of the book experienced it as an immersion in the sources themselves, and critics were daunted by the great weight of apparent support for Ariès's argument. However, this effect was illusory. While the plentifully cited material had the appearance of innocence, in fact this evidence had a very different status. In order to come to the eyes of the reader, it had necessarily been first selected and removed from the sources by the historian. Raw though the evidence seemed, it had in fact been subjected to the specific human labour of extraction; it contained Ariès's argument, since that argument had been put into this evidence by the very process of its extraction from the sources and (we would now add) deployment within the book. Hence the evidence in *Centuries of childhood* had a very different status from source materials which readers might, in principle, have consulted for themselves. To read the evidence as it was presented in the book was to experience oneself as reading innocent materials from the past, while in fact what one was reading had all been filtered through the categories of the present.

We shall be returning to the nature of historical evidence in the final section of this paper. At this stage, however, the central point to be drawn from the case of *Centuries of childhood* is that present-centredness can indeed take other forms than the classical 'whig' approach. Specifically, Ariès's work exemplifies

the inversion of the 'whig' value judgment, accompanied by the preservation of the distorting effects of the categories of the present. This particular form of historiographic anachronism cannot be captured by Butterfield's conception. The concept of present-centredness, by contrast, enables us both to perceive and to theorize the specific flaws and fallacies which are involved.

A further variety of present-centredness is displayed by our second example: Keith Thomas's *Religion and the decline of magic* (1971). As its foreword makes explicit, the starting-point for this work was a contrast between past and present:⁷ 'This book began as an attempt to make sense of some of the systems of belief which were current in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, but which no longer enjoy much recognition today.' But this contrast was seen as asymmetrical. One side of the contrast required explanation; the other did not. Specifically, what were regarded as modern beliefs required no explanation; the false beliefs held in the past, by contrast, had to be explained:⁸ 'Astrology, witchcraft, magical healing, divination, ancient prophecies, ghosts and fairies, are now all rightly disdained by intelligent persons. But they were taken seriously by equally intelligent persons in the past, and it is the historian's business to explain why this was so'. The framework of such explanation was itself derived from the present – specifically, from functionalist anthropology:

I have tried to show their importance [i.e. that of astrology, witchcraft, etc.] in the lives of our ancestors and the practical utility which they often possessed. In this task I have been much helped by the studies made by modern social anthropologists of similar beliefs held in Africa and elsewhere.

Magical beliefs were to be explained, then, by the fact that the people of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England lived in a material environment which subjected them to many hazards and uncertainties, and over which they had little control. The epigraph, taken from the sixteenth-century minister George Gifford, summed up the explanatory framework: 'For this is man's nature, that where he is persuaded that there is the power to bring prosperity and adversity, there will he worship.'

The book itself consisted of a massive exploration, conducted within this framework, of the false beliefs of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English people. The range of its sources was vast, and the coverage of the topic seemingly exhaustive. Within each of the main themes (magic, astrology, ancient prophecies, witchcraft) the work went down a rich variety of complex byways. Every claim was backed up by numerous quotations from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources, creating a powerful impression of authenticity. Nevertheless, as we shall now see, this apparent authenticity was spurious, for reasons which stem directly from the present-centred problematic of the work.

⁷ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the decline of magic* (Harmondsworth, Peregrine edition, 1978), p. x. The epigraph from George Gifford appears on p. xxi.

⁸ Compare Butterfield on Aquinas, cited in Wilson and Ashplant, 'Whig history and present-centred history', p. 4.

The explanatory asymmetry – the assumption that the beliefs of the present did not require explanation – was necessarily carried into the past itself. Just as the beliefs ascribed to the present required no explanation, so too, similar beliefs – or putatively similar beliefs – held in the seventeenth century required no explanation. Thus the book made no systematic attempt to account for the emergence, from a general matrix of magical beliefs, of the apparent rationalism and scepticism of such favoured observers as Thomas Ady, Reginald Scot, John Selden, and Thomas Hobbes.⁹ The attitudes of men such as these were placed in a privileged position, outside the circle of explanation, for two reasons. In the first place, since those attitudes seemed to be identical to those of ‘intelligent persons today’, the acceptance of the viewpoint of the present extended also to those proto-modern or proto-rationalist attitudes. Attitudes of this kind thus required no explanation. Secondly, these observers provided putative support for the functionalist interpretation of magical beliefs.¹⁰ To have sought to explain Ady, Scot, Selden or Hobbes would have been to undermine the privileged status which their accounts had to be given.

It is thus unsurprising that *Religion and the decline of magic* was unable to explain the disappearance of magical beliefs from the attitudes of the English elite after about 1688. Discussing that change in his final chapter, Thomas surveyed the possibilities for a functionalist explanation, suggesting for the sake of argument that such developments as the rise of fire-insurance obliterated the fears which had previously sustained magical beliefs. With commendable scrupulousness, he showed that these changes were unable to account for the ‘decline of magic’. He then explored the further possibility that the mechanical philosophy had done the work of displacing magic; yet this, too, he found did not fit with the evidence. This left him with the final explanatory resource of ‘new aspirations’: ‘The change which occurred in the seventeenth century was thus not so much technological as mental. In many different spheres of life the period saw the emergence of a new faith in the potentialities of human initiative.’ But Thomas acknowledged that this was not a satisfactory explanation, concluding that ‘the ultimate origins of this faith in unaided human capacity remain mysterious.’¹¹

Thus the import of the final chapter of the book was that the functionalist explanatory programme had failed. It was unable to provide an explanation for the major phenomenon announced in the title: the decline of magic. The alternative explanation which Thomas offered was itself at the attitudinal level: a change in ‘beliefs’ was to be explained by a change in ‘aspirations’. This was no less than the abdication of the functionalist project. Moreover, the

⁹ See, however, *Religion and the decline of magic*, pp. 689, 691.

¹⁰ See for example *ibid.* pp. 640, 661 (Ady); 663, 674 (Scot); 501 (Hobbes and Selden).

¹¹ *Ibid.* pp. 767–800, particularly 785–94. We quote from pp. 791–2, 794. Compare also pp. 331–2 (magic); 415–18 (astrology); 507–14, especially 513 (ancient prophecy); 691 (witchcraft). In each case, the root cause of the decline of magical beliefs is seen as mental. A functional or technological explanation is, however, supplied for the decline of two ‘allied beliefs’: ghosts (723–4) and the observance of times (744–5).

finding that magic declined before there had been any relevant improvement in human control of the material environment refuted the very premises of the functionalist interpretation. For this finding showed that lack of control over the environment had not been a sufficient condition for the holding of magical beliefs.

In the light of these conclusions, which undermine the functionalist interpretation in general, what is the status of the myriad particular findings which make up so much of the work? By examining the research procedures on which the book is based we shall see that these findings concern an object which may not in fact have existed at all. That object, the very topic of research, constituted by the present-centred problematic of the work, was defined as 'systems of belief...now all rightly disdained'. Hence the central goal of the research was to reconstruct these posited 'systems'; and this took place in two steps. The first step involved the extraction from the sources of notional evidence for unit-beliefs. In this procedure, each and every apparent instance of such a belief, or of practices which putatively implied such a belief, was taken as unproblematical evidence for the existence of the belief in question. The seventeenth-century treatise became the historian's equivalent of the anthropologist's informant. To this end, every such relic of the past was exactly the same; and the context had no bearing on the meaning, the textual informant was unbiased. The second step was the reassembling of the unit-beliefs into systematic clusters, which made up the 'systems' which the functionalist problematic required. From this point onwards, these historian-made belief-systems constituted the raw material for analysis, interpretation, and writing. It was these belief-systems which were the objects for functionalist explanation; it was these belief-systems, too, which were used to organize the form of the book itself.

The effect of this procedure was that all beliefs were removed from their actual contexts, and inserted into the new context of the historian's problematic. This reified the original present-centred asymmetrical dichotomy between modern and past beliefs, science and superstition, reason and magic. It became impossible to test that dichotomy; all the substantive findings were posited on the assumption of its existence. Thus only if we are prepared to accept this present-centred assumption can those findings be regarded as having historical meaning, since all those findings contain this organizing assumption. The chain of inference of which the book consists is only as strong as the link of assumption on which every page is based. None of the documentation can verify that assumption, since it is all based upon it.

In order to assess this underlying assumption, it is necessary to refer to research which has not been organized around it, but has instead tested it. In fact, research in the independent tradition of the history of science has effectively demolished the dichotomous and asymmetrical division of seventeenth-century beliefs into the two domains of the 'scientific' and the

'magical'.¹² Such seeming anomalies as Newton's 'secret alchemical investigations', his 'diffidence about renouncing the miracles of the Bible', the fact that he 'subscribed to the hermetic notion that the true knowledge of the universe had been earlier revealed by God to the ancients, the *prisci theologi*' – these were neither anomalous nor unusual. On the contrary, Newton's cosmos was a spiritual cosmos: gravity was divine, not material, and in this Newton was simply characteristic of the natural philosophers of the seventeenth century. The science/magic dichotomy, and the reconstruction of 'systems' of putatively false 'beliefs', systematically obscure precisely this fact. The way forward in our understanding of the 'new philosophy', it is now emerging, is precisely to abandon such present-centred concepts and to reconstruct the activities of agents in their original context. The meaning of statements about witches, spirits, demons, prophecies, celestial influences, was context-dependent: one man's natural explanation was another man's 'occult influence', and public utterances were different in principle from private ones. The work of historical reconstruction has as its first task the clearing away of the misleading dichotomy between 'magic' and 'science'. This does not mean that magical beliefs should not arouse our curiosity. But what will disappear in such studies, if recent trends continue, is the assumption that the commonsense way that we see these beliefs should be held constitutive of our object of study. That is, an adequate understanding of the thinking of seventeenth-century men and women requires that we go beyond our own initial present-centredness.

We have seen that the research underlying *Religion and the decline of magic* was conducted within a specific framework of assumptions, and therefore could not produce any modification of the framework nor any test of the assumptions. And independent testing of those assumptions has effectively demolished them. Thus the extensive quotation and citation within the book, though immensely powerful as a rhetorical device, is indeed merely rhetorical, and does not go to produce findings which have any reliable meaning. In fact, Thomas was troubled by a sense that his research procedures lacked rigour; but this doubt was assuaged by the fact that rigour was itself conceived on the model of the natural sciences, which he rightly inferred was inappropriate for the historical study of attitudes.¹³

I particularly regret not having been able to offer more of the exact statistical data upon which the precise analysis of historical change must so often depend.... In my attempt to sketch the main outlines of the subject I have only too often had to fall back upon the historian's traditional method of presentation by example and counter-example. Although this technique has some advantages, the computer has made it the

¹² See Charles Webster, *The great instauration* (London, 1975) and *From Paracelsus to Newton* (Cambridge, 1982); Patrick Curry, 'Revisions of science and magic', *History of Science*, xxiii (1985), 299–325; Simon Schaffer, 'Occultism and reason', in A. J. Holland (ed.), *Philosophy, its history and historiography* (London, 1985), 117–43. Quotes concerning Newton are from Thomas, *Religion and the decline of magic*, pp. 771, 93, 268.

¹³ Thomas, *Religion and the decline of magic*, Foreword, p. x.

intellectual equivalent of the bow and arrow in a nuclear age. But one cannot use the computer unless one has suitable material with which to supply it, and at present there seems no genuinely scientific method of measuring changes in the thinking of past generations.

Clearly, *Religion and the decline of magic* offers us a striking example of present-centredness, and of the distortions that this entails. But what we should also notice is that the form of its present-centredness is quite different from that of traditional 'whig' history. For a classically whiggish account of the subject would have made no attempt to explain the false beliefs of the past: it would simply have bemoaned those beliefs as benighted. The initial premise of *Religion and the decline of magic* was that although the beliefs of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English people were inferior to the beliefs of the modern world, the people themselves had no such inferiority. Indeed, it was precisely this disjuncture which posed the explanatory problem to which the book was addressed. This is indeed a form of what has been called 'the enormous condescension of posterity'¹⁴ – but a form very different from that displayed by classical whig history.

What is the significance of these examples? We have seen that two different historians have both produced major works which embody an uncorrected present-centredness. In neither of these cases can the classical label of 'whig historian' be meaningfully applied. Yet the distortions inherent in the works we have discussed can be shown to result precisely from the act of viewing the past anachronistically, that is, through the categories of the present. From our analysis of these examples three points emerge. First, the 'whig fallacy' is but one species of the larger genus of present-centredness. The 'whig' species consists in the specific fusion of present-centred categories with present-favouring values: but other species manifest radically different relationships between categories and values. Second, it is the substantive categories of the historian, rather than the values which he/she deploys, which produce errors of historiographic anachronism. Third, Butterfield's view of the corrective powers of 'historical research' is simply untenable. Present-centred categories can well survive the experience of research, for that research can be subordinated to those categories.

II. THE STRUCTURE OF THE DISCIPLINE

Each of these points goes to support the argument advanced in our earlier paper, that the problem of present-centredness is inherent in the actual tasks of the historian. The question at once arises as to just how widespread its manifestations are. We shall indicate that the problem is indeed a pervasive one by turning from selected historical works to the wider question of the constitution of the whole historical discipline. Historians today are generally labelled by one or another of a set of qualifiers: political historians, economic

¹⁴ E. P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class* (London, 1963; Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1968), p. 13.

historians, social historians, historians of art, of medicine, of science, of ideas. Such labels are of the greatest consequence for what counts as a topic of research, what counts as a phenomenon in the past, what counts as an explanation, what counts as a source. This problem has been briefly discussed by J. H. Hexter, who calls it 'tunnel history'. His invective against certain historiographical tunnels bears quoting:¹⁵

The supreme illustration of the artificial basis on which these kinds of history rested is the existence side by side of diplomatic history, military history, and naval history. No one has ever much improved on Clausewitz's definition of warfare: 'War is a mere continuation of policy by other means'. So if ever three human activities were inextricably bound together, scarcely intelligible save when conjoined, they are diplomacy, land warfare, and naval action. Yet only rarely did historians write about them together.

Though Hexter here identified a very important problem, he did not offer a particularly persuasive explanation of its cause. His argument was that the source of these 'tunnels' was the division of archives: 'Historians simply adapted their classification of and concern with the past to the convenience of dead bureaucrats'. But this begs the question as to why historians allowed themselves to be so constrained. In fact, of course, the 'tunnels' into which the historical discipline is divided arise not from the locations of the sources but from the interests of the historians. The rise of the new subdiscipline of 'social history' in Britain during the last fifteen years represents a major recent example of the way in which such interests can shift.

Once constructed, these tunnels take on an identity, a life of their own. At the same time as focusing historical enquiry they also narrow it, eliminating great tracts of the past from the historian's field of vision. The new subdisciplines import a form of present-centredness into the very shape and structure of historical investigation. This has powerful effects on the constitution of the object of historical enquiry. But to those working within the given subdiscipline, those effects are invisible – which is precisely what maintains them. Such effects might conceivably be visible to someone examining such a subdiscipline from the outside; but it is seldom that anyone is either moved to attempt this, or qualified to achieve it in a systematic way. The result is that it is extremely rare for subdisciplines of history to receive any challenge or reasoned critique: instead, they proceed on their respective paths, mostly ignoring each other's existence and all untroubled by the overall, structural present-centredness which is constituted by their very complementarity.

It will thus be illuminating for us to consider one of those unusual cases when an entire subdiscipline has been subjected to such an examination. We refer to Quentin Skinner's classic critique of the history of ideas, and more specifically of the history of political thought: 'Meaning and understanding in

¹⁵ J. H. Hexter, *Reappraisals in history* (London, 1961), pp. 194–6 (we quote from p. 195).

the history of ideas' (1969).¹⁶ This paper, examined in terms of the framework we have been advancing, *both* reveals a previous present-centredness in the constitution of that subdiscipline, *and* betrays a new form of present-centredness in the reconstitution of the subdiscipline which it proposes.

Skinner was concerned to examine two prevalent ways of understanding texts from the past – one which focused on the text itself, another which focused on the historical context which gave rise to it – and to argue that both were inadequate. Most of his argument was concerned with the former approach, which was the dominant one in the tradition he was considering. In criticising that approach, he argued forcefully that there were no timeless ideas, such as (in political thought) 'the social contract' or 'government by consent', to which all classic authors within a discipline addressed themselves (or should have done), or which featured somewhere in each classic text. 'Ideas' in this sense simply were not units which endured through the centuries. In support of this critique, Skinner demolished a whole range of characteristically present-centred approaches and their accompanying formulas: 'this does seem to be a vague statement of the doctrine'; 'transcended [the] obstacles to its appearance'; 'never quite managed fully to materialise'; 'remarkable anticipation'. Instead, he claimed (using the terminology of analytical philosophy), the meaning of any text was to be found in the complex intention of its author; the meaning of any utterance within the text, in the use to which the underlying statement was being put. Viewed in this light, the aim of historians of ideas became to reconstruct the complex intentions which lay behind, and gave rise to, particular texts.

These methodological injunctions rested upon a particular form of historical relativism. Skinner's explanation of that relativism makes it clear that the fallacies he was considering were precisely a form of present-centredness:¹⁷

...It is the very fact that the classic texts are concerned with their own quite alien problems, and not the presumption that they are somehow concerned with our own problems as well, which seems to me to give not the lie but the key to the indispensable value of studying the history of ideas. The classic texts...help to reveal – if we let them – not the essential sameness, but rather the essential variety of viable moral assumptions and political commitments.

Despite this, and despite also alluding to the fact that the source of these fallacies was the position from which the historian approaches the past,¹⁸ Skinner did not construe the problem in terms of present-centredness. Consequently, his own methodological solution simply displaced the anachronism inherent in the subdiscipline: it did not supersede it. In place of the

¹⁶ Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', *History and Theory*, viii (1969), 3–53. Quotations which follow are from pp. 10–11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 52.

¹⁸ 'There is a tendency...to suppose that the best, not merely the inescapable, *point of vantage* from which to survey the ideas of the past must be our present situation, because it is by definition the most highly evolved' (*ibid.* p. 52), our emphasis.

continuity of unit-ideas, which his own relativistic critique had successfully demolished, Skinner put forward a new continuity – that of ‘a stable vocabulary of characteristic concepts’. This posited continuity of vocabulary entailed a deeper assumption of the historical continuity of certain *activities*, whose histories were to be written.¹⁹

there can be no question that the histories of different intellectual pursuits are marked by the employment of some ‘fairly stable vocabulary’ of characteristic concepts. Even if we hold to the fashionably loose-textured theory that it is only in virtue of certain ‘family resemblances’ that we are able to define and delineate such different activities, we are still committed to accepting *some* criteria and rules of usage such that certain performances can be correctly instanced, and others excluded, as examples of a given activity.

And Skinner’s final justification for this framework showed that these assumptions were grounded neither in logic nor in the nature of the past, but rather in the existence of his own subdiscipline: ‘Otherwise [he continued], we should eventually have no means – let alone justification – for delineating and speaking, say, of the histories of ethical or political thinking as being histories of recognizable activities at all.’

Thus Skinner’s masterful demonstration of the previous present-centredness of his subdiscipline unwittingly bore witness to the fact that such present-centredness is inherent in the very existence of that subdiscipline at all. The limits of Skinner’s relativism, and of his historiographic critique, were constituted by the boundaries of ‘the history of political thought’.

The same applies, we believe, to all such subdisciplines: thus Cunningham has demonstrated that the identity ascribed to ‘science’ in the past is precisely a construct of the subdiscipline history of science.²⁰ Thus there is a strong sense in which the very structure of the discipline of history is present-centred, by its division into subdisciplines or ‘tunnels’.²¹ And it is easy to show, in this wider

¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 5–6.

²⁰ This is argued in Andrew Cunningham, ‘Getting the game right: some plain words on the identity and invention of science’, *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* (forthcoming).

²¹ The ways in which, and the extent to which, the discipline of history is necessarily present-centred are difficult questions which demand extended treatment. Some considerations are offered in our conclusion, below. The fact that both object of study, and interpretation, shift as history is written from different presents has often been noted in the context of particular historiographical issues. Among many examples, note Pieter Geyl, *Napoleon for and against* (first published Paris, 1946), which examines successive interpretations of Napoleon by French historians during the nineteenth century; David Cannadine, ‘The present and the past in the English industrial revolution 1880–1980’, *Past and Present*, 103 (1984), 131–72, which delineates four different periods in the interpretation of the industrial revolution during the past century, and links each of them to contemporary economic experience (e.g. optimistic histories being written during the post-war boom of the 1950s and ‘60s); Raphael Samuel, ‘British Marxist historians 1880–1980: Part I’, *New Left Review*, 120 (1980), pp. 21–96, which shows how even a group of historians with a shared intellectual and political commitment have, over the past hundred years, taken widely differing views as to what constitutes the object of their historical enquiry; and Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, ‘Why does social history ignore politics?’, *Social History*, v (1980), pp. 249–71, which uncovers the ways in which British and German historians, writing about their own labour movements in the twentieth century, each compare it with an implicit ideal type drawn from the other country.

dimension too, that the constitution of these 'tunnels' actively distorts the past. What if, for instance, political interests determined the very genesis and the content of 'demographic' writings? (As they did; we shall subsequently be citing an instance of this.²²) What if demography and economics and familial customs formed an interlocking system? (As they did: this is the major import of the most recent and authoritative work in English historical demography.²³) What if science and medicine were bound up with, and transformed by, religious beliefs? (As was the case in the seventeenth century – a point we have made already.²⁴) These instances should suffice to show that the present-centred structure of the discipline and its subdivisions can be just as distorting as the present-centred approach of an individual historian.

Yet pervasive as the problem is, we have already glimpsed the possibility of combatting it. For we have been able to support our argument against present-centred 'tunnels' by citing the products of historical research; and thus the particular products we have been using for this purpose must have themselves broken the bounds of these 'tunnels'. This development is not a single, once-for-all step, but a process: a process of the transformation of one's questions in and through the process of research and writing, the process of historical investigation. But this poses a major problem: how is this achieved? For we have seen that there is nothing automatic about it – that Butterfield's naive confidence in the supposedly inherent lessons of 'historical research' was wholly misplaced. In the final section of this paper we shall suggest the means by which historians set about the transformation of their present-centred questions and the constructing of historical knowledge.

III. HISTORICAL KNOWING

The examples we have already considered have demonstrated that the truth does not force itself upon the historian by the sheer pressure of the historical evidence. We are thus led to the same terrain to which Leon Goldstein has drawn attention: the terrain which he calls *historical knowing*.²⁵ It will be remembered that this was the very terrain which Butterfield obscured in *The whig interpretation of history*. And it is also the terrain on which, and on which alone, can be solved the problem which we posed above: the problem as to how present-centredness can be combatted. Within this terrain, a double question arises. First, how do historians actually proceed to 'constitute' the historical past on the basis of historical sources? (This is Goldstein's, descriptive, formulation.) Second, how should they proceed in this task? (This is our own, prescriptive, formulation.)

To the question, how does historical knowing happen? two answers have

²² See note 31 below.

²³ E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The population history of England 1541–1871: a reconstruction* (London, 1981).

²⁴ See note 12 above.

²⁵ Leon J. Goldstein, *Historical knowing* (Austin, Texas, 1976).

generally been given. The first and simpler answer is that the historian finds the history within the sources. Given a chosen object of investigation, the historian first identifies the right corpus of sources: this is itself an act of 'finding', namely of finding the right source(s) from within the much larger corpus of all possible available sources. And then, having found his/her sources, the historian finds the history within them. The sources contain historical facts; the historian extracts those facts from the sources and then presents them to his/her readers through the medium of prose, organizing the unit-facts into a coherent story by means of narrative, or into a coherent framework by means of interpretative analysis. So far as we can tell, this seems to have been Butterfield's view of the historian's procedures. Notice, incidentally, that the nature of the units extracted from the sources under this procedure can differ from one historian to another. For the narrative political historian, the principal unit will be the event; for the historian of science, it will be the statement; for the historian of popular attitudes, it will be the belief.

The second conventional answer to the epistemological question, which is also embodied in practical research, involves applying what is called the 'criticism of sources'. In this approach the sources are regarded with a more or less rigorous scepticism. The animating notion is that sources cannot necessarily be trusted, and that the historian's task is to establish which sources can be trusted, and how far they can be trusted. Thus this method proceeds by two stages. The purpose of the first stage is to eliminate those whole sources, and those portions of sources, which cannot be trusted, leaving the historian with a trustworthy residue. The second stage is then exactly the same as before: that is, the historian finds the history within the sources – in units of events, attitudes, statements, or whatever else he/she deems relevant – and then joins them up in prose.

Historical writing based on these methods takes the form which Collingwood described as *scissors-and-paste*, and which we have elsewhere characterized as a belief that *history is inscribed in the sources*.²⁶ This is, of course, the natural method of writing history: given the historian's interests, he/she will naturally assume that the relics of the past (or rather, some given section of these relics) comprise a direct record of the substantive topic being researched. Thus for Ariès, attitudes and behaviour are recorded in works of art; for Thomas, beliefs are recorded in printed and manuscript works of all kinds. But in fact, scissors-and-paste history always rests upon covert inference. The scissors-and-paste historian has 'seen' something 'in the sources', and believes that the item he/she has seen contains a certain meaning in an unproblematical way. Hence the historian reproduces the fragment-of-source in the belief that this fragment entails that meaning. Thus sundered from its original context, the fragment in isolation seems to sustain that meaning; in fact, it does so only by its insertion into a new context, namely that of the historian's argument.

²⁶ R. G. Collingwood, *An autobiography* (Oxford, 1939), chapter 8, and *The idea of history* (Oxford, 1946), pp. 257–81; Wilson, 'Infancy of the history of childhood', p. 146.

Both of the procedures we have been considering – naive scissors-and-paste, and source-critical scissors-and-paste – build their history from fragments of the sources taken out of context. Neither of these procedures is actually appropriate to the historian's task, since there is an epistemological fault at the heart of both of them. The historian's task is to reconstruct the human past. But *the past is not in the sources*. The sources, no matter what form they take, and no matter what the topic of our research, lie at a definite remove from our object of study. The so-called sources are in reality merely a pile of relics from the past. Of course, the temptation is enormous to believe that the history is contained in the sources, and merely requires to be extracted from it; how wonderfully that would simplify the historian's task! But this belief, however tempting, is always mistaken. Whatever actual portion of the sources the historian is using as evidence at any given moment, it cannot have been intended for the use to which the historian is putting it. The historian's task is one of reconstruction; and so there will always be a discrepancy between what a source actually was, in its original genesis, and the use to which the historian is putting it. This is how historical misunderstanding becomes possible.

This consideration enables us to specify more precisely what the problem of present-centredness is. Present-centredness is the condition of not being able to ascertain whether, and in what ways, one is misunderstanding the sources. The present-centred historian is trapped within one form or other of the scissors-and-paste method. Armed with the categories of the present (questions to be asked, objects of enquiry to be found), the historian goes to the sources looking for them. That is, the historian treats the sources as though they could answer those initial questions, in a direct and unmediated way. But that would be possible only if those sources were constructed within the same category-system, and had been created for the same purposes, as those of the historian. Since the relics of the past are not like this, all that can happen is for the historian to mis-take items within the sources as answers to the initial questions, mis-recognize the objects of enquiry as present or absent. Only in that way can items be cut out of the source-texts, and pasted into the historian's scrapbook, there to sit as the seeming answers to the initial questions.

Curiously, there is a symmetry about the error. On the one hand, such a historian is acting as if his/her own purposes had no distorting effect, as if he/she had a sovereign right to view the past through his/her own categories, as if those categories in no way distorted the reality under his/her gaze. On the other hand, such a historian is positing the same sovereignty within his/her sources, or rather, in those sources and those portions of sources which he/she is assigning to the privileged position of historical evidence. Just as the historian is a neutral or privileged observer of the past, so his/her chosen (portions of) sources are neutral or privileged witnesses to that past. Eliding the effects of the historian's own subjectivity necessarily entails eliding also the effects of the subjectivity of the sources. The only exception such a historian

makes is through the process of 'source criticism', whose purpose is to impugn and thus to eliminate some of the sources, some of the witnesses.

Thus the epistemological difficulty inherent in the historian's position as observer (namely, present-centredness) is left untouched by many standard practices of historical research. How can historians confront this difficulty? There is another form of historical methodology which, by going beyond a simple attempt to extract history from the sources, tackles directly the present-centredness of the historian's observing position. It consists of explicit *investigation of the process by which the historical source was generated*. Such an approach is regularly practised by historians in particular contexts; but its nature, and above all its implications, have received scant attention from commentators on historical epistemology. In this methodology, then, the historian's object-of-study undergoes a determinate, though temporary, shift: from some set of substantive questions to the nature of the process which generated that body of relics which (the historian believes) might act as sources to help answer the original questions.

This procedure is precisely the superseding of the 'scissors-and-paste' method, for it takes as its axiom that the nature of any historical source is problematic, and that no inferences can be made from that source until its nature is clarified. The historian achieves this clarification by elucidating the process of genesis of the source. Any 'source' we study is in fact a relic; before it was a relic it came into being somehow. The basis of scissors-and-paste methodology, by contrast, is either to ignore the process by which the source came into being, or (as sometimes occurs within the method of source-criticism) to use that process as a means of impugning the 'testimony' of some given part of the source.

An example taken from our own research may help to explain our conception, by illustrating the practical meaning of investigating the source-generating process. A medical practitioner working in Derby in the 1660s writes a treatise for the education of midwives, and illustrates this treatise with 'observations' or case-histories.²⁷ The cases appear to include repeated instances of incompetence on the part of midwives. Do these cases prove that midwives were incompetent and that they needed a male practitioner to tell them what to do? Or do the cases merely represent a 'stereotype', the male practitioner's stereotype of the ignorant midwife?²⁸ Simply extracted from the source the case-histories cannot resolve these questions. We have first to establish how the treatise was generated; and we can do this, within certain limits of course, thanks to the presence of internal clues. Recovering its genesis involves several layers of reconstruction: the author's purposes in writing the treatise; the ways in which he selected cases from his practice for inclusion as 'observations'; the nature of that practice itself, that is, the occasions of his

²⁷ Percival Willughby, *Observations in midwifery* (Warwick, 1863; reprint, Wakefield, 1972; originally written c. 1660-72).

²⁸ See David Harley, 'Ignorant midwives - a persistent stereotype', *The Society for the Social History of Medicine Bulletin*, 28 (1981), 6-9.

own experience as a practitioner in childbed; and finally, the origins of that practice within the more routine management of birth by midwives. This reconstruction requires analysis of the treatise and its contents, with the process of its genesis as the object of study. The effect of this exercise is that the initial questions have been not only answered, but also transformed and enlarged. The results make it possible to understand how on the one hand midwives could indeed appear incompetent to certain observers (notably, male practitioners), while also seeming competent to other observers (notably, mothers). Moreover, the findings have contributed to an understanding both of the routine management of childbirth by midwives (despite the fact that the document in question contains almost no explicit testimony on this) and of provincial male medical practice in general (despite the fact that this was not amongst the historian's initial purposes).²⁹

We have sketched this specific example, of the knowledge to be gained from examining the genesis of a source, in the hope that other historians will recognize a description of practices that they themselves already use and have found fruitful. Our general claim is as follows. For any relic of the past approached as a historical source, there was a source-generating process. It is possible for the historian to investigate that process: partly by the use of internal clues, partly by consulting other sources. Such an investigation represents the most sophisticated technique available to historians, and the only method which goes beyond scissors-and-paste. It is not that this investigation of the source-generating process is a new practice; but it is a practice which has not hitherto been theorized.³⁰

It is precisely this practice which enables the historian to challenge the present-centred position from which his/her researches inevitably start. It will be remembered that the causes of present-centred misunderstanding, according to our earlier analysis, are twofold: first, the probable disjunction between the category-systems of the past and the present, and second, the inevitable discrepancy between the historian's use for any given relic and the use or uses which that relic originally sustained. The investigation of the source-generating process makes it possible to overcome both these sources of historiographical error. For the source-generating process comprehends both the category-system underlying the relic in question, and the uses of that relic in its original context. By investigating that process, the historian actively

²⁹ Adrian Wilson, 'Participant or patient? Seventeenth century childbirth from the mother's point of view', in Roy Porter (ed.), *Patients and practitioners* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 129-44, and 'William Hunter and the varieties of man-midwifery', in W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter (eds.), *William Hunter and the eighteenth-century medical world* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 343-69, particularly p. 364. In applying this approach to Willughby's *Observations*, A.F.W. was greatly helped by the critical advice of Andrew Cunningham, William Lamont and Roger Schofield.

³⁰ In *The practice of history* (London, 1967; London, Fontana, 1969), Geoffrey Elton has enunciated the following principle of historical method: 'There is a single question which the researcher must ask himself in assessing his evidence: how and why did this come into existence?' (p. 100). This and similar injunctions in the same work (e.g. pp. 93, 102, 103, 111) seem to approach closely to the methodological conception which we have been advancing. However, as will become clear below, Elton's formulation differs importantly from our own.

struggles against his/her own present-centredness. It is thus that the historian turns from asking what a given source 'means' to asking what it meant; it is thus, too, that the historian ceases to assume what activities generated a given relic, and begins to ask what those activities actually were. Only in this way can the historian cease to uncover, in the past, the presence or absence of the present; and learn to recognize instead the presence of the past. It is this, we believe, which lay behind the sensibility which Butterfield tried to evoke but was unable to define; it also underlies the recurrent, though impossible, injunction to 'let the past speak for itself'.

No historian can in any one work investigate the whole of the relevant source-generating process. That process is very large and very complex: it embraces personal intentions, institutional procedures and forms, and wider social relations such as those of class, gender and religion. Take any specific document, for instance, ask how and why it came into being at all, came into being at this particular time in this particular place, at the hands of this author and no other, with this content and no other – and it is at once apparent that these questions open out onto the entire field of historical investigation. Hence the impossibility of completeness. But some segment of the source-generating process can be investigated. Naturally, it will be investigated for some 'ulterior' reason – that is, as a means to the substantive ends of the given historian. Thus the historian's initial questions provide the motive force which animates the enquiry. That dimension of historical research which investigates the source-generating process provides the means whereby those substantive questions can be so modified, away from their initial present-centredness, as to mesh with the past through the relics it has left. Such investigation accomplishes a shift of the object of historical study, a shift which makes possible an engagement between, on the one hand, the historian's questions (which are always derived from the present) and, on the other hand, the past which actually happened (as distinct from a fantasy-past, a past which is a mere projection of the present). It is only in and through the investigation of the source-generating process, only via such a shift of the object of study, that the historian's substantive questions become answerable at all.

The move to an investigation of the source-generating process may well be resisted by the historian. It feels like a sideways move, a move away from the substantive questions. And it feels as if its implications, its effects, would be to narrow the range of what can be inferred from the sources. But in fact it turns out that these apprehensions are false. When one submits to this exigency, that is to say when one really does investigate the source-generating process, one returns to the substantive questions with which one began. And it turns out, too, that the range of what can be inferred from the sources is not narrowed, but enlarged. To be sure, there is also a transformation of the substantive questions taking place as part of this process. But that transformation, as we have already indicated, is in the direction of concreteness and accuracy: it is a move from badly- to well-posed questions. The fundamental reason for this is that the source-generating process is a social and human process which

really took place in the past. It is just such processes which constitute the valid objects of historical enquiry. In enlarging their substantive questions so as to comprehend the source-generating process, historians are simply attuning their enquiry to the nature of their object. Only by thus attending to the past social and human processes which generated the sources, and shaped their meanings, can the historian avoid reifying them into (texts containing) answers to our questions, evidence for our enquiry.

We have examined three procedures which have been employed in historical research: (1) scissors-and-paste; (2) source-critical scissors-and-paste; and (3) investigation of the source-generating process. This third procedure offers the possibility of superseding the present-centred approach which is the natural starting-point of historical enquiry. All three of these procedures are in common use; it is possible to find works of modern historical scholarship based upon all of them, applied to different segments of their chosen sources.

To illustrate this point, we shall consider Geoffrey Holmes's classic essay on 'Gregory King and the social structure of pre-industrial England' (1977).³¹ This paper was written because Holmes, who was trained as a political historian of early eighteenth-century England, later began work in the social history of the period. His initial research took the form of criticizing existing scholarship, and Holmes did this by arguing that that scholarship had all been based on an uncritical reading of Gregory King's 'Scheme of the Income and Expense of the Several Families of England', written down in 1695. For this purpose Holmes's previous training served him well, for he was able to show that the 'Scheme' was literally constituted by King's tory politics, frustrated career ambitions, and profound conviction that England was going to ruin under the whig policies of William III. In the light of Holmes's argument, it is clear that previous social historians have indeed used King's 'Scheme' in the scissors-and-paste manner, and that this has produced a host of misunderstandings, not only of King's 'Scheme' but also of the social structure of late seventeenth-century England. Indeed, Holmes's paper is a masterful demonstration of the importance of the source-generating process and of the fact that that process can and should be reconstructed by the historian. However, it was not Holmes's intention either to make a general methodological point, or to exemplify this method at work. For his examination of the source-generating process is subordinated to a different end – namely, source-criticism! Holmes's purpose was not to establish the nature of King's testimony, but to impugn that testimony; not through analysis to determine what we can learn from it, but rather through criticism to argue that we can learn nothing from it.

Holmes's paper thus displays, in different ways, each of the three methodologies we have been distinguishing. The scissors-and-paste method is exemplified in the scholarship Holmes was criticizing. The method of source-criticism is embodied in the purposes of the paper itself. And the investigation

³¹ *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, xxvii, 41–68.

of the source-generating process is displayed in the means which Holmes adopted in order to achieve those purposes. Our belief, of course, is that Holmes should have proceeded rather differently; that he should have pursued this third method, not as a means to the end of discrediting Gregory King's testimony, but instead for the purpose of recovering the meaning of that testimony. And it is precisely by this means, and only by this means, that the historian can break out of the present-centredness inherent in such historiographical tunnels as 'social history'. In our view, this does not mean that the historian has to cast aside the questions of the present, and descend into a self-effacing antiquarianism. On the contrary: although the historian's questions will necessarily be transformed in the process of investigating the source-generating process, they need not be simply thrown away. Instead, they will be sharpened, enriched and brought into line with the concrete nature of the past.

The investigation of source-generating processes, then, has a dual potential. On the one hand, it can be used (as for instance by Holmes on Gregory King) as a device *within* source-criticism. On the other hand, it can be used in a very different spirit, as an approach which undermines the very stance from which the sources could conceivably be 'criticized'. It is the latter practice which we are advocating as the proper basis of historical method. And it is over this issue that we differ from the one historian who has explicitly discussed and championed the investigation of source-generating processes: Geoffrey Elton. For, although Elton insists upon the necessity of investigating the genesis of sources, he conceives that investigation as part and parcel of source-criticism.³² Elton's precepts, then, correspond to what we have already seen of Holmes's practice. In our view, it is only when the investigation of source-generating processes is liberated from the confines of source-criticism that it can achieve its full potential. That potential, we have been arguing, is that this method can work against the historian's inevitable present-centredness. Source-criticism, by contrast, inevitably posits the historian as sovereign, thereby immobilizing him/her in some form or other of present-centredness.

Our conception that historical knowledge advances as the historian comprehends the source-generating process formalises, we believe, what is a common practice in historical research and writing today. It is, however, characteristic of historians that they do not attempt to articulate their practices at this level; instead, they use such phrases as 'historical understanding', 'historical sensitivity', 'dialogue between past and present', 'the discipline of historical context', and the like. We contend that it is

³² Elton, *Practice of history*, pp. 96–108. Relatedly, Elton's usage of 'source' and 'evidence' differs from our own. For Elton, 'the sources' are 'the physical survivals from the events to be studied' (ibid. 88); or, in another place, 'Evidence is the surviving deposit of an historical event' (113). We introduce the term *relic* to describe materials surviving from the past independently of the historian's use of those materials; and we distinguish between 'sources' and 'evidence'. See Wilson and Ashplant, 'Whig history and present-centred history', pp. 12–13. This helps to make visible the fact that the relationship between the events of the past and the relics of the past is much more complex than the process of 'deposit' which Elton's formulation assumes.

precisely the investigation of the source-generating process to which these formulations refer, albeit indirectly and inadequately. There can be little doubt that there is something which historians are doing, of which no formal description has ever been given, and which makes possible some superseding of the present-centred viewpoint and its associated scissors-and-paste methodology. It is not surprising that the nature of this practice should remain highly obscure: it is hidden within such seemingly simple acts as reading, note-taking, and writing. Equally, it is entirely intelligible that philosophers of history have not seen what is involved; for these philosophers, as Goldstein has pointed out, simply lack access to the process of historical reasoning, and have to content themselves with a study of its products.

We have sought both to criticize and to supersede the historiographic argument of Butterfield's *The whig interpretation of history*. To recapitulate, we have suggested that a central form of historiographical error is present-centredness – the act of viewing the past through the categories of the present, in such a way as inevitably and irredeemably to distort what is seen. What Butterfield called 'whig history', we have suggested, is a special case of this present-centredness. As a critical category, the concept of 'whig' history is inadequate because epistemologically vacuous. Butterfield himself offered only gestures, some of them internally contradictory, towards clarifying problems of research and writing; and later historians have largely been content simply to deploy the concept as a pejorative label. We have demonstrated that the tenacity of present-centred approaches to the past derives from the objective position of the historian in the present; and that the resultant distortions are contained not simply within individual pieces of historical writing, but within the very structure of the discipline itself. To go beyond that standpoint requires an investigation of the source-generating process. It is this procedure, which is practised if not theorised by historians, which alone makes it possible to produce reliable historical knowledge.³³

Our purpose has been to open up a space for methodological discussion, not to close it. It may help to make this clear if we mention briefly some of the new problems which we believe our analysis has raised. One such problem concerns the historian's value judgments. We have claimed that it is the substantive categories of the historian which really cause the present-centred fallacy, and its associated anachronisms; and thus that Butterfield's stress on value judgments, which was central to his critique of the whig interpretation, was misplaced. Nevertheless, this bracketing-off of the issue of value judgments means that their relationship, if any, to present-centredness remains to be systematically explored.

³³ Another response to the structural nature of the present-centred approach to the past would be to take it as an argument in favour of some version of historical relativism. All there ever can be, it might be argued, are a variety of present-centred readings of past sources, present-centred constructions of past activities. We hold that there can be more and less reliable interpretations of past sources, and hence that it is meaningful to talk of historical 'knowledge' and 'misunderstanding'. But the relationship between our delineation of present-centredness, and the question of historical relativism, demands a fuller treatment elsewhere.

A second issue is raised by our methodological prescription. We have suggested that historians should (and do) investigate the source-generating process. However, this solution to the 'problem of historical knowledge' has displaced the problem rather than solving it, since we have not indicated the means by which that process should be investigated. We have said that it is the source-generating process which makes it possible for the historian's questions to connect with the real past. Yet we have also said that no historian can investigate the whole of that process. Given any particular source – let us say, Newton's *Principia* – there are many different ways of construing its generation. One historian may see the work as the product of Newton's autonomous ego; another, as the expression of Newton's unconscious psychic contradictions; a third, as the result of the political and religious struggles of the 1680s. Each such choice could conform perfectly well to the methodological prescriptions we have advanced. What if any principle of selectivity could there be among those various approaches?

This brings us to a final point: what role does the present play in understanding the past? We have been concerned to stress the present as a source of anachronistic misunderstandings of the past. And yet, as we have also stressed, the historian's point of vantage on the past must necessarily be in the present. Will it not always be the case that the historian's themes are drawn from the interests – in both senses of that word – of the present? Certainly, Butterfield's injunction to 'study the past for its own sake' seems meaningless to us. The historian is necessarily faced with a choice as to which aspects of the past to study, which people in the past to bring alive, what dimension in the past to 'go out and meet'. It is only after that choice has been made, and a preliminary object-of-study constituted, that our injunction to investigate the source-generating process comes into play. And there too we are immediately confronted with another choice, of which approach to adopt. Moreover, the making of these choices will be based upon assumptions of the present. Thus, while we believe that our formulation helps to rule out certain kinds of anachronistic fallacy, that formulation neither narrows the range of historiographic activity nor obliterates the role of the present in constituting historical knowledge. Instead, the approach we have put forward in this paper serves to underline the fact that all historiography rests upon acts of choice. No historiography can ever be a neutral enterprise: an enquiry into any given aspect of the past necessarily derives from some evaluation in the present. And in the end, or rather in the beginning, all such choices are not simply historiographic, but political.