

History Notes . . .

In order to restore Clio to her once high estate as not least of the Muses, her devotees must do something besides print documents, dig out facts and marshal them in sober prose; they must write in three dimensions, as it were, drawing not only on records but on their own experience and background knowledge, to re-create the past. A historian should yield himself to his subject, become immersed in the place and period of his choice, standing apart from it now and then for a fresh view as a navigator, after taking soundings off a strange coast, retires to peruse his charts and then emerges to give the necessary orders to continue the voyage safely. And I would add that it is even more important now to write history in three dimensions, because the background, the common knowledge that one could assume in 1901, has slipped away, driven out by the internal-combustion engine, nuclear fission and Dr. Freud.

A historian must constantly keep in mind his expected public. On the one hand, he must soak himself in his subject and the period to which it belongs; on the other, he must continually be asking himself: How shall I tell this so that my readers will understand and enjoy it? This constant ambiguity, this dialogue as it were between the scholar and his audience, is one of the most fascinating aspects of writing history. But the historian must never forget that his duty is to tell the truth, as God gives him to see the truth; and that good workmanship is the basis of good history, as it is of almost everything else that human beings do.

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