



COMMENT

Apprentice to the Trade: Reflections on the Craft of Writing History

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Abstract

Robert Colls was Professor of English History at the University of Leicester before moving to the International Centre for Sports History and Culture at De Montfort University, also in Leicester, where he is Professor Emeritus. He is the author of many highly regarded works examining English identity, culture and class. His most recent book is *George Orwell: Life and Legacy* (Oxford, 2026). Colls's writing has consistently stood out for being both scholarly and accessible, engaging general audiences as well as professional historians. The Editors of *Transactions* asked him to reflect on the craft of historical research and – especially – writing, and this piece is the end result. Further reflections on this theme would be very welcome. Colleagues interested in contributing to the Common Room should contact the Editors in advance.

Keywords: narrativity; historical methods; history as craft; historical writing; autobiography

Robert Colls

Years ago, when I was young and we still had a shipbuilding industry, my father would introduce me to his workmates and they would hold my arm, grip my hand, and tell me they were a 'driller by trade', or a 'fitter by trade', or a 'shipwright by trade', and so on. There were plenty of trades to go round – from caulkers and carpenters to riggers and riveters – but *by trade* meant they had all served their time as apprentices. This normally took seven years, according to custom and practice, and signalled the point at which they could be trusted with the pace and quality of the work, and even, on occasion, with the lives of the squad. I have written this piece at the invitation of the editors to reflect on my own apprenticeship to the trade, our trade, where the health risks are fewer, but the product is custom-built and the craft is mutual just the same. It addresses my formative years before stretching a little beyond that to mention some of the later pressures to write in prescribed ways, away from the job in hand. I finish off with some unsolicited reflections.

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Gwyn

I was first drawn to the power of words through the Welsh historian Gwyn A. Williams (1925–95). I'd written to him in sweaty longhand from a Voluntary Service Overseas posting, and on my return home, the Social Science Research Council did the rest with a three-year grant to do a D.Phil. at York under his supervision. Gwyn announced my arrival to a class of first years – all sitting round the walls of his office – as if I had walked all the way from Blue Nile Province to Vanbrugh College just to meet them. For a moment, I was his hero. For a lifetime, in a way, he was mine.

At first it was the sheer force of language. I'd sat through a good few sermons in my time and knew what a Thesaurus sounded like. But not like this. Words were in his gift. At the lectern, he was a Baptist preacher (and would have been in another century). In the seminar, between *Gitanes*, he was mortal again, pushing us to see. You do see, don't you? In the supervision ... well let's forget that because there were barely two: one lasted twenty minutes and I left clutching his copy of the *Guide to the Public Record Office*, which I still have. 'Immerse yourself, bach', he advised. The other tutorial didn't happen at all because I peered round the door only to be told he was having a nervous breakdown.

Fair enough. We all get them. It didn't matter anyway. What Gwyn offered was not by appointment. He said he was a Communist and could do Marxism with the best of them, but not for long. After a brief peroration on the swirling dialectical forces of history, we were back on the streets, running with the rioters, marching with the ironworkers, fighting on the barricades. Clenched fist. *No pasaran!*

Gwyn was only 5'5" but in full spate he was a mass movement in himself, surging into one of those 'genetic moments' which, in his world at least, changed everything forever. Whether it was Paris or Madrid, Turin or Merthyr Tydfil, he had the talent, rare among academics, to make history go live. His chapters for *Artisans and Sans Culottes*, his little book on the French Revolution, read like scenes from an opera: 'Men & Slaves'. 'Sans Culottes'. 'Terroristes'. 'Anarchistes'. 'Felons'.¹

After a spectacular falling-out (at one of his soirées), we had a spectacular falling-in (mainly by post) where he would send me densely typed letters which were astonishingly detailed and disconcertingly eloquent. Alert to the history, he was equally alert to the prose, to the symmetry, to the effect, to the craft. Yes, he liked my depiction of a coal-owner as a 'man of means, any means', but no, he didn't like Lloyd George 'welshing' on a promise, or body-snatchers committing a 'grave' offence. Looking back on these letters now, it's his total command of the typescript that shows, along with a passion for getting it right without getting me wrong. Here he is catching up on some stuff I'd sent him. He'd left York for Cardiff, back to kinfolk and crusaders. A career in Welsh television awaited. Even a letter to me started with a short bow to the balcony: 'Dear Bob. I'm very sorry for this delay. I was able to finish off Bob Cranky properly before the move. Not only was the move a peculiarly unerring species of chaos: I pulled my back and had to lie on a board for weeks staring at the bloody ceiling ...'² Rather like George Orwell recalling Aneurin Bevan holding up an entire *Tribune* editorial board to

¹Gwyn A. Williams, *Artisans and Sans Culottes: Popular Movements in France and Britain during the French Revolution* (1968); *Goya and the Impossible Revolution* (1984); *The Merthyr Rising* (1979); *Proletarian Order: Antonio Gramsci, Factory Councils and the Origins of Italian Communism 1911–1921* (1975).

²Letter, Gwyn Williams to Robert Colls, from 93 Pencisely Rd, Llandaff, Cardiff, 2 Sept. 1974.

discuss a fine grammatical point, here was Gwyn holding up an entire five-page letter to discuss a bit of poetry:

'King Calvin' seems too much to me, especially in view of Calvin's own republicanism: it is not quite the same thing as King Coal. I myself doubt whether even in deepest Beulah land, Jehovah became a Benthamite; but you are of course free to argue that he did ... OK I'll accept King Calvin, uncultivated sod as I am, I had never heard of your quotation (Muir: whoever he is). OK, also, make God a Benthamite if you like.³

Muir! Whoever he is.⁴ I still laugh at this. He didn't get the man, but he got the language. At the same time, he was getting to me with his work on Antonio Gramsci and on what he (Gwyn) called 'marginal peoples', like the Welsh, whom he could fire up and make big.⁵ Along with Jack Common and Sid Chaplin, two Tyneside writers, Gwyn was showing me how to see my own folk.⁶ Didn't the kingdom of Northumbria precede the kingdom of England? Wasn't it a Northumbrian who wrote the first history of the English people? And when it came to early Christianity, or Coal, surely Durham and Northumberland stood supreme? Or so I reasoned.

At York, he ran a postgraduate social history seminar which he re-named 'The Zetetic Society' after the early nineteenth-century freethinking associations. Complete with a crate of beer from out of the boot of his (red, social democratic) Saab, we were invited to bring our scribbling into the open: Roger Wells on rural rioting, Leslie Miller on Mary Wollstonecraft, Mick Drury on 'Problems of Anatomical Supply', Gwyn running Merthyr riot. It was here that my 'Bob Cranky' made his madcap debut early in 1973.⁷

After Gwyn's departure for Cardiff the following year, the letters dwindled until he forgot all about me, and Jim Walvin and Ted Royle took over instead. Jim's first move was to calm my language and expunge my Gwyn-like *emphatics*. Ted cautioned against 'paradigms, problematics and hegemonics' – 'a disease', he cautioned, 'caught from other practitioners in the field'.⁸ Newly appointed, Jim not only had tenure, he had his own style and, for all I know, the key to the senior common room drinks cabinet.

³*Ibid.*

⁴Edwin Muir (1887–1959), Scottish poet and translator. The royal title in question came from his poem 'The Incarnate One': 'A word made word in flourish and arrogant crook | See there King Calvin with his iron pen | And God three angry letters in a book | And there the logical hook ...'

⁵Made great in his *When Was Wales? A History of the Welsh* (1985).

⁶I stumbled across Jack Common's *Kiddar's Luck* (1951) one dull afternoon in Newcastle Central Library and never looked back. Sid Chaplin's short story *The Thin Seam* (1950), took to the stage as *Close the Coalhouse Door* in 1969, with script by Alan Plater and music from Alex Glasgow. For primal influences, see my 'Cookson, Chaplin and Common: Three Northern Writers in 1951', in *The Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland 1800–1990*, ed. K. D. M. Snell (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 164–200. Gwyn was absurdly deferential to my immature view of this wonderful play. 'I had not fully plumbed your attitude to *Close the Coalhouse Door*. Speaking largely from memory, I was quite pro ... but on reflection, I can see how you might respond in the way you have ... THEREFORE, adjust sufficiently to get the thing through a metropolitan publisher, but NOT AN INCH MORE. Write me after 13 December, hwyl, Gwyn': letter: 1 Dec. 1974.

⁷Published as Robert Colls, *The Collier's Rant. Song and Culture in the Industrial Village* (1977).

⁸Letter, Edward Royle to Robert Colls, 13 Sept. 1979.

Ted was quieter, more strategic, more Methodist. But both men were on my side, got the scripts back from Cardiff, told me how to prepare and hurried me along to the viva brought to a swift end by Royden Harrison in about ten minutes flat. After which we whittled the hour away talking about whether miners were archetypal proletarians.⁹

Charlie

Even at this doctoral stage in my apprenticeship, I still saw history as something I read, and others wrote. The first writing breakthrough had come at school, but A level essays were almost entirely about straight lines and sharp corners rather than language and style. Except to say, that at South Shields Grammar Tech we had an exceptional history teacher called Charles ('Charlie') Constable who had us out at the front reading our essays while he tutted and groaned from the desk.¹⁰ At three o'clock, he would gather his gown and go for a smoke. At four o'clock, he'd offer a Rowntree's fruit pastille from out of the tube (but not the blackcurrant one) for the best essay of the afternoon.

Reading aloud in heightened English did not come naturally, but over a long career Charlie sent a steady stream of working-class boys out of Shields into Oxford. He had us reading Collingwood's *The New Leviathan* when most of were still struggling with Neil Sedaka.¹¹ There is a class system in higher education, and Charlie knew what he was doing. In John Erickson (1929–2002), and John Gray (1948–), he had his most complete conquests of the system, and it was in Oxford scholarships sessions such as these that I felt the first intimations of style. It must be said, however, that three essays a week left very little time for that, although quick turnaround was a lesson in brevity.

So, there I was, learning my craft on the job up the hill just as my father and his father and brother were practising theirs down it, on the river. It's difficult to describe the process by which reading is turned into writing and writing into what Zadie Smith calls the 'impersonal essay', other than to say that she has the magic and I had the graft.¹²

Sussex

I went to Sussex University straight from school. Sussex was the brainchild of academics with influence on the University Grants Committee, and in Asa Briggs (1921–2016), they had a champion who wanted to create the finest education money could buy only it didn't have to. Briggs, the university's first professor of history and Vice Chancellor from 1967, described the venture as 'drawing a new map of learning' – understood to lie mainly in the teaching power of the tutorial and the creative opportunities inherent in mixing traditional disciplines in variously evolving 'schools' of study.¹³ I read History in the School of Social Studies (later Social Science) and all in all I think the map, the idea, the experiment – call it what you will – worked, albeit in

⁹The doctorate found its published version in *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield 1790–1850* (Manchester, 1987).

¹⁰Charles Constable (1904–97), Senior History Master, Westoe Secondary and South Shields Grammar Technical School for Boys, 1930–70.

¹¹R. G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan or Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism* (Oxford, 1942).

¹²Zadie Smith explains all in 'On the Impersonal Essay', *New Yorker*, 29 Sept. 2025.

¹³David Daiches (ed.), *The Idea of a New University. An Experiment in Sussex* (1964).

ways that took me too long to appreciate. Briggs never taught me directly, but that was the point: the tutor might be the tutor, but the whole university was the education.¹⁴

How we mixed was everything. Along with a lively campus life – from Jimi Hendrix at the Union to Malcolm Muggeridge at the Christian Community – we had ‘core’ seminars in history mixed with ‘contextual’ seminars taken from the other schools of study, English & American, European, Biological and so on, as well as junior common rooms where we met people doing different subjects altogether. Marie Jahoda, for example, who knew a thing or two about social history, and the Nazis, taught me social psychology. Tutorials were tighter, generally two students to a tutor, and a lot of time went into discussing what we thought, or what we thought we thought, or what we ... you get the picture.

All this might be seen as learning in flux, and there wasn’t always time to take it in, or on. It did, however, create a remarkably open tone. After this, no history fazed me. After this, I wasn’t bound by period. I could start and finish wherever the subject took me. When cultural history came to prominence, I immediately understood what it meant. Or thought I did (see above).

Which is to say, history at Sussex was generally taught as if the whole world was at large and things were at stake – just outside the window, perhaps – and I think it’s fair to say that this very Briggsian openness was envied elsewhere. My wife went to Manchester, altogether different in size and scale, to spend her days moving in crowded halls. By contrast, Sussex was small and friendly, Legoland in a park, and I felt free to call on tutors for coffee and a chat. Beryl Williams was so good I thought I might learn Russian on her behalf. Eileen Yeo was inspirational whatever the language. On request, the university chaplain, Daniel Jenkins, taught me for free, completely off-piste and happy to do so.

I stopped going to lectures in the first year (big mistake), but seminars were obligatory. Sometimes you couldn’t shut us up. At other times, it was a question of trying to address quivering forms of existence otherwise known as ‘issues’. We were beginning to talk about something called lived experience, but stories from life we had not. In spite of all the effort that went into history at Sussex, I can’t recall anyone recounting a single moment, or encounter, or crisis, or crossroads, or confession or obsession or victory or defeat or for that matter an education that counted in history or indeed in what we were getting ready to call the ‘production of knowledge’.

I think the reluctance to tell stories blunted the role of personal responsibility or moral ambition as part of the human predicament. Such was the influence of the social sciences at Sussex, even the soccer club promised ‘a modern approach to the science of soccer’. Not that I noticed. Although we started off studying the relationship between Capitalism and Protestantism, most of us would have been hard pressed to speak for more than five minutes on Henry VIII or Thomas Cromwell.¹⁵ Trying to explain John

¹⁴‘always trying to mix information and people in a cultural *gestalt*’: Eileen Janes Yeo, ‘Asa Briggs (1921–2016)’, *History Workshop Journal*, 84 (2017), 306–12, at 308. For an early example of Briggs’s taste for mixing fields, see his pioneering essay ‘The Background of the Parliamentary Reform Movement in Three English Cities’, *Cambridge Historical Journal*, 10 (1952), 293–317. For an assessment of the scale of his achievements, not least Sussex, see Adam Sisman, *The Indefatigable Asa Briggs* (2025).

¹⁵Closely and comparatively studied, principally, through two textual analyses: Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904) and R. H. Tawney’s *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926).

Wesley to a class who hasn't heard of the Reformation is, I can vouch, very hard going. A student once asked me why I digressed so much. I said it was because he didn't know anything. A slight exaggeration, but one that could get me the sack these days.

Like the man said, I digress. In other words, although Sussex taught history as if it mattered, history in the School of Social Studies exposed us to slabs of social science that seemed to be written in journals by nobody in particular about nowhere in particular.¹⁶ 'Value neutral', I think, was the term. Some tutors chanced the idea that the time would come when Social Science would replace History as capital letter disciplines, but nobody really believed that, except the Marxists, who believed it differently.

Without the story – or the 'narrative' – any explanation of change either disappears or dissolves into nouns. 'Narrativity' doesn't have to be chronological. The Story of Robin Hood does not have to start with his birth and end with his death. It could go the other way, but either way, temporality is implicit. It must be, otherwise what is history for? And so, under pressure from sociological analysis, too many history seminars were beginning to talk more about 'Industrialism' than the changing life and times of Lancashire female operatives, say, or 'Nationalism' rather than Garibaldi's red shirt victories, say, or 'Capitalism' rather than George and Robert Stephenson's mighty projects that changed the lie of the land forever.

Into the 1970s, the nouns only increased in number, whole processions of them, marching from Industrialism to Post-Industrialism, Nationalism to Post-Nationalism, Modernism to Post Modernism, Colonialism to Post-Colonialism, and all the rest. As a rule, despite a strong social scientific tradition in empirical research – 'Industrial Relations' springs to mind – the new social science was less about the multifarious ways in which things may reasonably be said to have happened, if they happened, and more about one damn social structure after another.

The history of an event is not the event itself. We all understand that. History, therefore, like art, is mimesis, and must take a form, and behind the form there must be a theory, or an idea, otherwise we'd all get lost in the detail.¹⁷ But processions of nouns are not history. They are only representations of it.

Theorising

Where the rise of theory came from is too big a question for this article, but it was connected to the spread of American social science in the 1950s and the rise of continental Marxism in universities (themselves growing) in the 1960s. We are told the *New Left Review* took an 'intimidating' turn to theory in 1962.¹⁸ Translations of Gramsci were important in all this and Gwyn, among others, played his part.¹⁹

Most historians walked on the other side of the sociological street. Others, like Peter Mandler perhaps, kept looking for 'the construction of meaning' and thought Social

¹⁶'This kind of theory is both a set of ideas or propositions and a way or mode of expressing those ideas': Gavin Kitching, *The Trouble with Theory* (2008), 19–42, at 19.

¹⁷Thanks to Nigel Wood for reference to Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York, 1961), 3.

¹⁸Stefan Collini, 'New Left Review at 50', *Guardian*, 13 Feb. 2010.

¹⁹Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971) and Williams, *Proletarian Order*. See Marzia Maccaferri, 'How Gramsci Went Global', *Tribune*, 30 Oct. 2021.

Science had the rigour, and the tools, to help do that.²⁰ Although Marxism (loosely translated) led the theoretical new wave, some of old wave history's best defenders and practitioners were Marxists nevertheless.²¹ 'Theory' captured our attention as a way of shifting the focus to outcast and exploited groups.

Whether theory was history is another question. Left theoretical thinking began talking about 'position papers', which set out the chosen theoretical way to do the right sort of history should you ever get round to it. There were potential advantages in this. It could clarify key fields. It could help disciplines talk to each other. It was supposed to save time. But there were crushing disadvantages too, not least in a growing obsession with structures and systems over peoples and places.

I didn't see this at the time. We felt we had much to learn from edgy forays into language and education, or family and kinship, or street corner societies, juvenile delinquents and so on. No wonder their book covers were better. It is true that Gwyn's Gramscian Marxism was more intrusive – you might say 'hegemonic' – but it was interesting just like Marxism was interesting and anyway, looking back, I seem to have avoided the worst. Walvin and Royle helped steer me clear here, as did an early encounter with *Past & Present*. My first book, *The Collier's Rant*, is surprisingly free from jargon and even took a swipe at 'false consciousness' as unhelpful to the project (which was popular song). And I was teaching by now, and university adult students, or Leicestershire/Derbyshire miners on day-release, were not going to waste their time on articles they could hardly read let alone procure. *History Workshop Journal* was founded in 1976 with students like these in mind. Its first editorial set out to rescue historical research from the condescension of theory:

In higher degree work an increasing amount of historical research is framed in the light of sociological theory and devoted to an empirical exemplification of its truths. In the inter-disciplinary seminar, the sociologist will take up position as the theoretically fluent 'anchorman', discreetly assigning the fumbling of his empirically minded colleagues into their appropriate terminological slot ... [and so] restore meaning to history ...

To the restless and discontented [this] offered release from the musty files of the underground search rooms. Instead of inching their way forward by painful degrees they were positively enjoined to take daring, high-fly leaps both in time and space; to dress up their findings in the language of social significance, modernise their footnotage and bring their work into line with the main thrust of theoretical debate.²²

Deconstructing

The new call was less to write histories as plural exercises in truth, but to 'deconstruct' social structures where it was the underlying economic sub-structure (*Unterbau*)

²⁰Meaning is fluid ... evidence is partial': Peter Mandler, 'The Problem with Cultural History', *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2004), 95.

²¹For example, see E. P. Thompson, 'The Peculiarities of the English', *Socialist Register*, 2 (1965), 311–62.

²²Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones, Editorial 'Sociology and History', *History Workshop Journal*, 1 (1976), 6–7.

that underpinned everything else in the realm of human thought and feeling (*Oberbau*).²³

All this might be seen as a sensible first step in the study of, let us say, for sake of consistency, religious change in sixteenth-century Europe. But what about next steps? What, for example, if you were a sixteenth-century Protestant who thought, as most of them did, that they were shaped, above all else, by religion, or by God? Socially constructed or not, their deepest thoughts and feelings must rank as evidence of a kind. Or what if you were a student of, let us say cinema, who recognised that *Oberbau* was itself economic, and *Unterbau* was itself cultural? What about ideology? It must matter, otherwise what was the point of being a Marxist in the first place?²⁴

Theorists would soon be talking about cultural or linguistic or emotional ‘turns’ away from the economic.²⁵ Even so, as Stuart Hall put it – and I heard him speak on this to a packed house of the British Sociological Association – it was still ‘necessary’ (a key word in these debates) to retain a Marxist structural ‘framework’ inside a theory where ideas ‘formed the background to every social process’.

Which of course they do, but to what extent? How much leverage are we prepared to give ‘background’ ideas when it came to front-rank processes? Hall might have meant ‘background’ as a compelling force, or he might have meant ‘background’ as nice scenery, but nobody in that BSA audience was going to ask.

Certainly not me. I must own up. My own foray into deconstructive studies came in 1986 with *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920* – a foray into a neglected subject that wreaked of deconstruction. We began the book declaring that ‘we do not see “Englishness” as an obvious or in any way, a natural propensity of the people who do live, or have lived in the territory that has come to be England’, but we might have spent a little more time trying to understand why most English people thought exactly the opposite.²⁶ But at least the writing was clear, the contributions were original, and we did manage to please Bernard Crick (‘of political as well as intellectual importance’) and Simon Heffer (‘a disturbing experience when analysed rigorously’) both at the same time. In the second edition, published a generation later, we were far better able to explain the intellectual context to ourselves, including the story of the London publisher who, in 1985, having asked (on the phone) what we were up to, and having been told, by Philip, that we wanted to ‘deconstruct’ England, asked, rather plaintively: ‘Well what do you want to go and

²³Outlined by Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859).

²⁴Stuart Hall, ‘The Hinterland of Science: Ideology and ‘The Sociology of Knowledge’, in *On Ideology: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, 10 (1977), 9–32. He began by admitting that ‘ideology’ was a term which did not ‘trip lightly off an English tongue’, but ended by extolling his readers to forget their tongues for legs in order to explore the “relative autonomy” (of ideology) where, to borrow a recent metaphor of Althusser’s, the “pup” of semiology continues to “slip between the legs” of a Marxist theory of ideology’ (p. 30).

²⁵Of economic substructure and cultural superstructure, Rajat Kanta Ray was clear that the ‘history of emotions has to begin by sweeping away these quaint Marxist conceits’: *Exploring Emotional History: Gender, Mentality and Literature in the Indian Awakening* (Delhi, 2001), 6.

²⁶Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (eds), *Englishness. Politics and Culture 1880-1920* (1986). Bloomsbury published a second edition in 2014.

do that for?' There's no talk of 'deconstructing' the North East in my later, enjoyable collaborations with Bill Lancaster (*Geordies*, 1992, and *Newcastle upon Tyne*, 2001). I think we felt, quite rightly, that the region was being actively deconstructed already by rougher hands than ours.

I refer to all this not so much to argue whether the history the de-constructors supposed was better or worse but to identify the attempts to displace narrative change for structural deconstruction as low points in historical writing. Here is Homi K. Bhabha telling historians how to deconstruct. He is writing about *Nation and Narration*. It's not that given the time I couldn't understand what Bhabha was saying. It was that I judged the effort not worth the outcome. Early on, page 3:

To study the nation through its narrative address does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; it also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself. If the problematic 'closure' of textuality questions the 'totalization' of national culture, then its positive value lies in displaying the wide dissemination through which we construct the field of meanings and symbols associated with national life. This is a project that has a certain currency within those forms of critique associated with 'cultural studies' ... The address to nation as narration stresses the insistence of political power and cultural authority in what Derrida describes as the 'irreducible excess of the syntactic over the semantic'.²⁷

This is not history, and it's not supposed to be. But why write it unless history is the audience? In the back of my copy of the book, I put, as I always put, the times I had to reach for my Chambers. The list is long. All very educational, no doubt, for me at any rate, but Pierre Bourdieu, who knew these channels better than anybody, also knew that the problem lay not in the words themselves but in the language of an intellectual elite who had stopped writing for anybody but themselves. He could not explain his way out of the language without using the language: 'Entry into a scholastic universe presupposes a suspension of the presuppositions of common sense and a para-doxal commitment to a more or less radically new set of presuppositions linked to the discovery of skills and demands neither known nor understood by ordinary experience.'²⁸ I used to go to history conferences where people read out from papers like this. Did they do it to be understood? Is this how they ordered their campus cappuccino? Or did they do it as an act of contrition to a dominant discourse? God knows how much reputational damage was heaped on universities by those who spoke it on behalf of those who paid for it.

'Critical Race Theory', or CRT, was another exercise in deconstruction. Rejecting the Civil Rights narrative of a constitutional state which eventually extended democratic rights to people of colour, under democratic pressure from people of colour, CRT came out of 1970s American legal scholarship to declare that the job in hand was not to track the story – from Selma to Montgomery, say – but to deconstruct the United States, and indeed to deconstruct the West in general, as a racist society. As Pluckrose and Lindsay

²⁷Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), 'Narrating the Nation', *Nation and Narration* (New York, 1990), 3–4.

²⁸Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Stanford, 2000), quoted in Michael Billig, *Learn to Write Badly. How to Succeed in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 2013), 42.

explain: ‘Underlying all of these tenets is the postmodern conception of society as constructed by discourses into systems of power and privilege ... [and] these tenets also clearly advocate the application of interpretation and theoretical constructs rather than the presentation of observable evidence.’²⁹

Deconstruction seemed to be everywhere, even in our bones. Although it wasn’t clear which self was offering the advice – his deconstructed self or his reconstructed self – Stuart Hall thought we ought to start deconstructing ourselves forthwith.³⁰ In its time, this might be seen as a radical incursion into bourgeois capitalist ‘hegemony’ (if there is such a thing) but we might venture that since then it has itself become hegemonic. What will we be left with when our cultures are habitually, organisationally, endlessly deconstructed? Who picks up the pieces? What when the Hobbesian state – which needs its history to understand itself – has been hollowed out? What would a deconstructed Ministry of Defence look like? Or a deconstructed Ministry of Truth? Sounds like surrender to me.³¹

Listening

I did manage to tag some free historical writing along the way. John Keegan’s *The Face of Battle* (1976) took me straight to the action – so often forgotten in the structuration – and reminded me of the need to tackle human experience head on, in this case, the fighting men at Agincourt (1415), at Waterloo (1815), and at the battle of the Somme (1916).³² Then there were those writer-historians, including Alison Light, gathered round Raphael Samuel’s History Workshop movement, who started telling stories again.³³ For a while, E. J. Hobsbawm’s early labour histories³⁴ gave me confidence to pursue the subject as a subject, although if you are E. J. Hobsbawm it’s easier to write the histories if you think you know the line of travel.³⁵

Eileen Yeo’s Chartism special subject at Sussex had no time for lines of travel (‘Bosh!’ she said) and concentrated our minds instead on the full bandwidth of the source. In the same vein, Stephen Yeo’s Labour Movements course started at the point where we were able to see working-class achievements for what they were, not lesser forms of organisation, but effective in themselves.³⁶ For him, ‘socialism’, or free association

²⁹Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay’s *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender and Identity* (2021) deals only with the cynical theories.

³⁰‘The fully unified and coherent identity is a fantasy’: Hall in *Modernity and its Futures*, ed. Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew (Cambridge, 1992), 277.

³¹See Paul Kingsnorth, *Against the Machine: On the Unmaking of Humanity* (2025).

³²On the same terrain, see Rudyard Kipling’s introduction to his brilliant regimental history, *The Irish Guards in the Great War: First Battalion* (London, 1923), 21–8.

³³See for instance Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Miners, Quarrymen and Saltworkers* (1977), and Alison Light, *Forever England. Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (New York, 1991), and *Common People: The History of an English Family* (2014).

³⁴E. J. Hobsbawm, *Essays in Labour History* (1960) and *Labouring Men* (1964); E. J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (Harmondsworth, 1969).

³⁵For Hobsbawm the Communist and the titan: *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991* (1994). See Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* (2019).

³⁶Stephen Yeo’s original Cooperative history trilogy was published by Edward Everett Root as *A Useable Past* (Brighton, 2017): *Victorian Agitator*, I; *A New Life*, II; and *Class Conflict and Cooperation*, III.

– cooperatives or mutuals, trade unions or friendly societies, Chartist societies or Methodist classes – was more something to look for than to wait for. Agency had been there all the time.

E. P. Thompson called all this ‘listening’ to the source, and his *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) was exemplary in that regard.³⁷ His use of Home Office Papers H.O. series 40 and 42, for instance, opened rich new seams, as did his trawl through pamphlets and newspapers. *The Making* launched a thousand Ph.D.s. If Thompson was some kind of Marxist, he was his own kind of Marxist.

Ten years after *The Making*, he marked the ‘total incompatibility’ of English empirical traditions with French theoretical traditions. The theoreticians, it seems, did not know what they were talking about:

It is not a question of disagreement about this or that, but one of total incompatibility in the way in which a historian and ... a ‘theorist’ situates himself ... We have authorities on ‘productive relations’ who have never looked inside a feudal tenure, or a bill of exchange, or a woollen Piece Hall, or a struggle around piece rates; and we have authorities on ‘the labour process’ who have never found relevant to their exalted theory Christopher Hill’s work on the ‘uses of Sabbatarianism’, nor mine on ‘time and work-discipline’, nor Eric Hobsbawm’s on ‘the tramping artisan’ ...³⁸

People in the past may have been delusional or deplorable but the key point for the historian, as Thompson made plain, was that ‘they lived through these times ... and we did not’.³⁹

If you want to know the historian’s craft, this is it. The people who lived it knew it best, and it is our job to get inside what they knew. In a famous work, E. H. Carr advised his readers to study the historian before they studied the history. Nietzsche advised similar – that there were no facts, only interpretations.⁴⁰ But these are only half truths. The 1834 the Poor Law Commissioners reported on the condition of the labouring poor. Whether we take only Mr Courthope’s ‘excellent answers’ about a poor family trying to live in Ticehurst, Sussex, in 1833, or whether we take the whole thirteen-volume 8,000 pages of evidence and opinion, the Report cannot be ducked regardless of the historian or the interpretation. We cannot go over it and we cannot go under it. We

³⁷I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the “obsolete” hand-loom weaver, the “utopian” artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity’: E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968), 13. Thompson’s original targets included ‘Modernization’ and ‘Industrialization’, before turning on influential French Marxists.

³⁸E. P. Thompson, ‘The Poverty of Theory’, in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (1978), 347. Although he concentrated his fire on Louis Althusser, he did not consider the (rather different) theorising of his English comrades almost certainly because they managed to write empirically as well. For sharp comment on this, see Harold Perkin, “The Condescension of Posterity”: The Recent Historiography of the English Working Class’, *Social Science History*, 3 (1978), 87–101.

³⁹Thompson, *The Making*, 13. Terry Deary’s *Horrible History* series, aimed at children, thinks that people in the past were horrible. Or at any rate stupid.

⁴⁰E. H. Carr’s *What Is History?* was published in 1961 by Macmillan and reprinted in 1967 by Penguin; Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York, 1954), 458.

must go through it. Just as the Poor Law Commissioners listened to Mr Courthope, we must listen to them.⁴¹

Facts may not be simple, but they are a given, and the historian must attend, first because the sources are true to their own times and unwitting as to ours, and second because it's not unusual to find people in the past understanding their predicament better. Listening comes before writing.⁴² And it's not just a question of facts. Karl Ove Knausgård's biographical epic came much later in the day, but it reminded me of the power of repetition and routine in everyday life, just as Clifford Geertz's concepts of 'deep play' and 'thick description' showed me how empirical methods could be creative too. All these ideas turned out to be influential in my *This Sporting Life*.⁴³

Writing

Sathnam Sanghera remarked that 'writing is like being in a brain-storming session where every other person is you'.⁴⁴ These writers helped free me from myself.

I first came upon Orwell's *Essays and Letters* in 1973 when I bought the four-volume Penguin edited by Ian Angus and Sonia Orwell. Reading that showed me how impulsive and exhausting Gwyn could be – always trying for effect. George, on the other hand, took his time to build the case. His *Politics and the English Language* (1946) still does service in newsrooms across the world. Orwell advises us to screen our writing. Don't be vague. Don't be abstract. Don't be pretentious. Don't be fancy. Don't tack. Avoid clichés. Never use a long word when a short one will do. Cut if you can. It is nearly always best to avoid the passive tense otherwise one loses one's impetus. Break these rules if they lead to something worse.

For Orwell, the worst writing was not so much you using the language, as the language using you. But in the event, by and large, history has stuck with its *belles lettres* tradition, managing to remain flexible for every line of enquiry.⁴⁵ Theory always seemed to come from on high as if it knew the answers already. History, on the other hand, can go where it likes, can have a thousand footnotes, or none, can take risks or stick to the tried and tested, be biographical or third-person or something in between.

⁴¹See Stephen Yeo, 'Whose Story?', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 21 (1986), 295–320.

⁴²On E. P. Thompson, 'His feel for language was unsurpassed ... more than any other historian of his generation he brought the text into his text': James Epstein, *In Practice: Studies in the Language and Culture of Popular Politics in Modern Britain* (Stanford, 2003), 7. Building on Asa Briggs's earlier pioneering essay 'The Language of Class in Early Nineteenth Century England' (1960), Gareth Stedman Jones made further inroads in his *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983). Paul Thompson's oral history movement showed how contemporaries were not as backward as progressives supposed.

⁴³*This Sporting Life. Sport and Liberty in England* (Oxford, 2020). K. O. Knausgård, *My Struggle* (2009–2011), 6 vols.; Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973).

⁴⁴Sathnam Sanghera in conversation with the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society, June 2025. He is the author of *Empireland* (2021).

⁴⁵'from epic and myths of origin to various social sciences and touching also biography, drama, political and moral polemic, ethnography, novels, inquests and judicial investigations': John Burrow, *A History of Histories. Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century* (2009), xiii. Burrow taught me social and political thought at Sussex, but I can't remember the name of the course. I do remember, however, that he introduced me to intellectual history as something more rewarding than philosophy and more interesting than sociology.

Above all, there is no literature without readers, and – this is my first point – the writing must be as clear as we can make it.

By the time I started university teaching in 1979, A. J. P. Taylor's sort of history was, perhaps, less fashionable than it had been, but students enjoyed his clarity. Even if they didn't always agree, they understood. A straight-talking journalist as well as an accomplished scholar, Taylor knew enough to be able to finish a sentence, in fact finish a whole book, on a figure of speech. In this the final paragraph of his 1965 masterpiece, *English History 1914–45*, consider how much ground he covers. Note: he lived through these times and we did not:

Future historians may see the war as a last struggle for the European balance of power or for the maintenance of Empire. This was not how it appeared to those who lived through it ... The British were the only people who went through both World wars from beginning to end. Yet they remained a peaceful and civilized people, tolerant, patient, and generous. Traditional values lost much of their force. Other values took their place. Imperial greatness was on the way out; the welfare state was on the way in. The British empire declined; the condition of the people improved. Few now sang 'Land of Hope and Glory'. Few even sang 'England Arise'. England had risen all the same.⁴⁶

Ross McKibbin's social themes dwell closer to the theoretical breeding grounds than Taylor's, but time and place were roughly the same, and he managed to stay just as clear with a style so good it is almost no-style. McKibbin is writing about culture, but he doesn't want to be professor of everything. There are some things he is interested in, and some he isn't:

The second exclusion ... is 'high culture'; a culture contemporaries increasingly called, not always pejoratively, 'highbrow'. I have done this for several reasons: because I am more interested in 'middlebrow' and 'lowbrow' cultures, and historians should be allowed to write on those subjects which engage them; because there is a large and sophisticated literature on 'high culture' which I could not hope to equal nor to which I could add much of interest; and because the great mass of the English people was unmoved, or unmoved directly, by the country's intellectual elites. Exclusions do imply certain things shall be lost; but this book is about the mass of the English people, and high culture was not their culture.⁴⁷

In trying to be clear, I came to recognise the wisdom of restraint, of not trying to deal with everything in one go. My *Identity of England* (2002) tried to cover 1,500 years of Englishness. Hard yards. After it, my *Northumbria* (2005), *Orwell* (2014) and *Sporting Life* (2020) books were all directed at the same subject, but from different angles (not Saxons), in what has been kindly pointed out to me as a sort of English triptych.⁴⁸

Although the moment of high theory/low clarity is now over, it lingers on. A recent cultural history conference mentioned 'substructure' and 'superstructure' only once

⁴⁶ A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914–1945* (Oxford, 1965), 600.

⁴⁷ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), vi.

⁴⁸ Thanks to Mike Cronin.

in eight hours, but still they weren't speaking clearly, either because they weren't thinking clearly or because, presumably, in their view, they were. For me, the old guy at the back, clarity only came fitfully, like the sun on an October Fenland afternoon.

Second, we must keep our whole subject in mind. Clarity such as Taylor's and McKibbin's is usually achieved from the outside looking-in, or looking-down, but it can work the other way as well. N. A. M. Rodger had the gift of writing inside-out with the perfect subject for doing so because it's much simpler to write about the sociology of a ship than the sociology of, let us say, a culture. Rodger's *The Wooden World: Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (1986) captured the Navy like the Navy liked to capture enemy vessels – whole. He rakes the decks with all you need to know: Complement; Sea Time; Ship's Companies; Desertion; Length of Service; Age; Wives; Remittances; Venereal Disease; Manpower; Seamanship. Because we are given the whole picture, we can feel the beating sails:

At Quiberon Bay Hawke committed his ships to a stern chase to leeward in a rising gale. Ahead of them in the gathering darkness of a winter afternoon lay a dangerous coast of which they knew very little. Even without battle damage, their chances of anchoring, or of beating offshore in the teeth of the gale, were slender. Hawke's entire plan depended on following the French closely into a safe anchorage and completely defeating them in the process. He risked everything on the seamanship of his captains, on the gunnery of their ships and not least on the French knowing their own coast well enough to lead him to safety.⁴⁹

Third, after clarity, and whole subject, histories should have a clear sense of purpose, or argument, where we are made aware of the case early. Ta-Nehisi Coates's 'The Case for Reparations' begins with the Bible, foundational narrative in black American history, before taking us straight to the case of Clyde Ross, of Mississippi, who, like his family before him, lacked the protection of the law. Like a good civil rights lawyer, Coates knows what he wants to say from the start and draws on the evidence to say it. On the other hand, James Epstein's monumental case against slavery across two societies was painstakingly built up, case on case, file on file, Trinidad to London, among the papers of the Admiralty, the Board of Trade, King's Bench, Privy Council, Colonial Office, Public Record and War Office. We might call Coates and Epstein de-constructors, but re-constructors would be better. Of course, this leaves open the question of how do you know the best evidence for the case you have yet to make or, as Nashville's Professor Rodgers put it, how do you know 'when to hold'em ... and when to fold'em ...'⁵⁰ Other than a lively mind and making a record of everything you think you might need, there is no simple answer to this but it is, after all, your chance to get among the primary sources, to be original, and to be the historian you want to be.

After clarity, whole picture, and making the case, the historian needs, fourth, a writer's capacity to stop and look. Lorna Sage's philandering grandfather was a Church

⁴⁹N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (1988), 50.

⁵⁰Kenny Rodgers, song: 'The Gambler' (1978); Ta-Nehisi Coates, 'The Case for Reparations', *The Atlantic*, June 2014; James Epstein, *Scandal of Colonial Rule: Power and Subversion in the British Atlantic during the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, 2012).

of Wales clergyman, and she was a child of the manse. Both seemed to know from early on that she was ‘a sort of hobble’ to his infidelities. Bad blood runs in this family.

Grandfather’s skirts would flap in the wind along the churchyard path, and I would hang on. He often found things to do in the vestry, excuses for getting out of the vicarage (kicking the swollen door, cursing) and so long as he took me, he couldn’t get up to much. I was a sort of hobble; he was my minder, and I was his. He’d have liked to get further away, but petrol was rationed. The church was at least safe. My grandmother never went near it – except feet first in her coffin, but that was years later when she was buried in the same grave with him. Rotting together for eternity, one flesh at the last after a lifetime’s mutual loathing.⁵¹

Sage had the power of *aperçu* which she trained on the churchyard path. At a different register, but just as telling, Patrick Joyce noted that there had been a time when a copy of Millet’s *The Angelus* hung on every French and Irish peasant cottage wall (and in fact it hung in my grandparents’ aged miners’ home). ‘People recognized themselves in the dignity the painting conferred’, Joyce observed – which is insight one way for the art, and insight the other way for the people.⁵²

After clarity, whole picture, case, and insight or *aperçu*, the historian must remember, fifth, that there is always a story to be told, and that will entail explaining change. Wrightson and Levine promise to recount nothing less than ‘the making of Britain’s first industrialized society’. In a village. Their language is more sociological because their approach is, but the ‘making’ is foremost. Swift or slow? Long or short? Piecemeal or catastrophic? When?

Social change in Whickham was in some respects swift and catastrophic – an aspect of history vividly symbolized in the devastated fields and commons repeatedly described from the 1620s to the 1780s. In other respects, however, it was slow, uneven, piecemeal, incremental ... however extraordinary and exceptional its nature, however intimately localized in its specific details, Whickham’s history was most emphatically part of a larger process of national significance.⁵³

Finally, I prefer histories that start with a snap and get rhythm. From what I’ve read this week, Will Lloyd’s review of a biography of Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor starts with a snap by saying that ‘Prince Andrew must be dead already’, which came as bit of a RIGHT ROYAL SHOCK, if not a right Royal snigger. Same day, reading Percival Everett’s novel *James* (a retelling of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*), he starts with Jim the slave, on the porch, pretending to be stupid and asleep while ‘Those little bastards were hiding out there in the long grass.’⁵⁴

⁵¹Lorna Sage, *Bad Blood* (2001), 3.

⁵²Patrick Joyce, *Remembering Peasants* (2024). See my ‘Post-modern Pat: The Work of Patrick Joyce’, *Cultural and Social History*, 13 (2016), 135–48.

⁵³David Levine and Keith Wrightson, *The Making of an Industrial Society: Whickham 1560–1765* (Oxford, 1991), 429.

⁵⁴Will Lloyd, ‘The Wonderful World of Prince Andrew’, *New Statesman*, 4 Sept. 2025; Percival Everett, *James* (New York, 2024), 1.

If there was ever a better way to introduce Huck and Tom up to their tricks, by way of Jim, new hero of American letters, I don't know it.

As for rhythm, words have sounds as well as shapes. Gwyn used words to snap meanings shut, but Clive James used them to get rhythm. More jazz ensemble than snap trap, waiting for the twenty to one One train on platform One, this is Clive's schtick on solo trumpet. Like George Orwell, he understood that every joke is a tiny revolution:

... what used to be simply called Anglia Railways is now even more briefly but far less simply called One. This leaves the way for the railway station announcer to inform potential passengers that one One train will leave from platform two and the other One train will leave from platform three ... If the first One train leaves at twenty to one, it's the twenty to one One train, and if the other leaves at ten to one, it's ten to one on that it's the one One train one actually wanted but couldn't understand the announcement ...⁵⁵

Journeyman

When *Past & Present* was giving me a hard time, it was Gwyn who shored me up: 'Is there any possibility of seeing your article? Has it gone in? Have *P&P* answered? They usually take about three years'. Donald Winch, another Sussex tutor and a very different kind of journeyman (and wit: 'I am sure you are right on everything')⁵⁶ also kept me going. As senior tutor for the pioneering core module Concepts, Methods and Values in the Social Sciences, he could not let me go without a reminder that historians who use concepts their subjects did not use, as I had done, are obliged to explain.⁵⁷

Looking back, my advice to any young researcher would be to get published in a good journal as quickly as possible. It doesn't particularly matter which one as long as its editors show genuine interest. We all need good editors. I didn't know anything about *Past & Present*. I only sent it there because I'd heard of it.⁵⁸ From its editors I learned how to *op cit.*, *ibid.*, italicise, bracket, initial, full stop, roman, *pp.* and *passim* with the best of them. Before I had got down to writing the doctorate, they had forced me to align values with sources, sources with other sources, language with people. They took me to task on concepts. Was 'social control' useful? Did it match the evidence? Would 'class control' be better? And here I am now, shaken after nearly fifty years by footnote 3 to the follow-up debate which is all of twenty-four lines long and addresses some of the same questions I am asking here.⁵⁹ Who says there is progress in history?

⁵⁵Clive James, 'Fidgets on the March', *A Point of View* (2011), 20.

⁵⁶Donald Winch to Robert Colls, 27 Apr. 1977.

⁵⁷The offending term was 'bourgeois', my use of which, according to Winch, was 'at best an anachronism, at worst, a kind of presumptive teleology': *ibid.*

⁵⁸My attempt finally appeared as "'Oh Happy English Children": Coal, Class and Education', *Past & Present*, 73 (1976), 75–99.

⁵⁹Sociological concepts are important to social history but the concept of social control, when applied to specific historical situations and not theoretical modes, can only serve an approximate interpretation': *ibid.* The question of language and meaning rumbled on: 'Debate: with A. J. Heesom and Brendan Duffy, and A Rejoinder: from Robert Colls': *Past & Present*, 90 (1981), 136–65.

Above all, I learned from all sides how to take a complete hammering – from *Past & Present*'s fierce editorial standards to Gwyn's unruly loyalty ('Get down to it and adjust but WITHOUT ABOLISHING YOURSELF'), to Winch's generous spirit ('What a cheek! Anyone might think I was still your tutor!'), I was learning the craft.⁶⁰

Keith Thomas once said that it was never a good idea for historians to reveal their methods because most of them didn't have any.⁶¹ True! So often you can hear the index cards fall, but here's mine anyway.

Once the notes are organised, I can just about write as fast as I can think, in sentences, so the writing comes right off the notes, out of my head, down the arm and through the pen, very fast. Visceral before it is anything else, every word is written out before it is transferred to keyboard and in that sense, it is a craft-skill. The research stage that preceded it is similar – pencilled notes on A4s reduced to ink notes on 6 × 4s according to the sort of argument I think I am trying to make, rendered into prose, chunk at a time. Secondary reading comes and goes as necessary. Personal computers have made the writing easier. They also tend to verbosity (as you might have noticed). Martin Amis remarked that prose can take any number of drafts, not all of them better than the last.

I know about Endnote and Obsidian but have no idea how they might help other than to configure constellations of references which I would probably not trust until I'd seen them. Same with AI. It might do the typing, but can I trust the thinking? Digital research technique runs the risk of de-mutualising the trade; everyone in their own garret. It also runs the risk of dumping. A recent report from Cambridge University Press argued that record numbers of computer-generated research articles were overwhelming the system, and not in the interests of the Press, or their subject.⁶²

This is not to say that the trade can't be re-mutualised. Ships used to be built of wood. Now they are arc welded. Somebody, somewhere, had to learn new ways of shipbuilding.

History is us. It is who we are, talking to who we were, in chorus. At a time when history's public prominence has never been so great, the last two Presidents of the Royal Historical Society, Emma Griffin and Lucy Noakes, have pondered its decline in universities.⁶³ Against this, Dominic Sandbrook and Tom Holland's *The Rest is History* (over 600 episodes) is the history publishing phenomenon of my lifetime, with 15 million subscribers.

Like the shipwright, historians are at their best when they build from the inside. People always tried to make sense of who they were, and so should we.

⁶⁰On anti-abolitionism, Gwyn Williams to Robert Colls, 1 Dec. 1974; on what a cheek, Donald Winch to Robert Colls, 4 Sept. 2012.

⁶¹Keith Thomas, 'Diary: Working Methods', *London Review of Books*, 10 June 2010.

⁶²Mandy Hill, Managing Director of CUP: *Retraction Watch*, 21 Oct. 2025. The Press publishes 20,000 articles per year.

⁶³The Royal Historical Society might ponder Professor Given-Wilson's charge that university historians offer 'too many over-theorized, jargon-laden research monographs on recondite subjects': *Literary Review*, June 2025.