

**MARGARET
MACMILLAN
HISTORY'S
PEOPLE
PERSONALITIES AND THE PAST**

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PROFILE BOOKS

This edition published in Great Britain in 2016 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London
WC1X 9HD
www.profilebooks.com

First published in Canada and the USA in 2015
by House of Anansi Press Inc.

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays, Bungay, Suffolk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 512 4
eISBN 978 1 78283 189 1



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INTRODUCTION

HISTORY, I SOMETIMES THINK, is like a rambling, messy and eccentric house. It has been built, added to and renovated repeatedly over the centuries. Its foundations are buried in that conveniently vague place “the mists of time” but some of the spade work was surely done in the Near East by the anonymous author or authors of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in Europe’s classical world by Herodotus, Thucydides, Tacitus and Livy, or in China by Sima Qian, the great historian of the Han dynasty, while Homer, Virgil, or the Arab traveller Ibn Battuta have added their decorative flourishes. Monkish scribes, Chinese scholars, Arab chroniclers, all painstakingly have placed their bricks and stones. The Renaissance produced some elaborate rooms devoted to understanding princes and popes while the Reformation and Counter-Reformation created some sober undecorated spaces with strongly moral tales. In the nineteenth century the inhabitants added orderly libraries and well-organized files while the twentieth century brought tiled laboratories where the past could be dissected and analysed. There is one wing, the post modernist one, where there appears to be no order at all and no clear style; every room, say those who live there, is as valuable or as meaningful as any other.

It is impossible to discern a single use or a dominant style in history's house. Nor can anyone tell where it begins or ends for it is eternally under construction, and there is always a new corridor to discover or neglected rooms which might be worth cleaning up and letting in the light. Strange noises come from the basement or the attics. Some rooms are like those in Blue Beard's Castle striking dread into anyone who draws near the door much less opens it. Other rooms still open to gardens where it looks like a new spring is coming.

Historians, if I can continue the metaphor just a little bit more, are the house's caretakers. Some of us, like the mediaeval chroniclers, believe in visiting one room after another in the order in which they were built while others prefer to settle on a particular part of the house and get to know it in the round. One group of caretakers thinks it is important to focus on what they deem to be the house's most powerful and influential inhabitants. Yet another insists that we cannot understand the house without gathering as much information as we can on the millions whose toil ensured its construction and upkeep as well as the food and clothing for its inhabitants. Each age brings its own preoccupations which produce an ever-shifting perspective on the past and so we ask different questions when we interrogate the past. Not surprisingly, environmental history or the history of economic booms and busts are increasingly popular subjects today.

Differences among historians sometimes spill over into civil wars which can make us forget that we are all engaged in the same endeavour to unearth and analyse the past. Yet history needs us all, from the material to the intellectual historians. The products of agriculture or of manufacturing

can tell as much about past societies as the ideas which animated them. Cultural and social historians help us to understand the values, assumptions and social organization of long gone peoples while political or economic historians bring out the forces that shape societies or have brought change. We also need to compare, to study other histories than the ones we know best. And we should use the insights of other disciplines. Archaeology comes to mind at once but anthropology, sociology, biology, all can and have enriched history.

So does biography although the relationship between historians and biographers is often an uneasy one, marked by mutual suspicions. Historians complain that biographers do not properly understand or short change the context while biographers feel that historians miss out the individuals who help to make history. That tension in turn feeds into the long-standing debate in history over whether events are moved by individuals or the great objective forces such as economic and social changes or technological and scientific advances.

My own view is that there is no right or wrong answer. Individuals are enmeshed in their times. We are all products of our own histories but those in turn are themselves shaped by class, place, ideas, values, institutions and the wider history unfolding around us. Yet, having said that, we have to face the possibility that sometimes a single individual can alter the course of events. If Napoleon had never existed, was there anyone else in France at the time with his combination of talents, intelligence and ruthlessness who could have seized power and taken France to the dominance of Europe? Without Karl Marx to sum up socialist thinking and create of it a powerful and persuasive

theory would so much of the twentieth century have been shaped by that particular ideology? Marx himself was aware of the need to find a balance between individuals and their times. As he wrote in 1852: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living."

For all of us, and not just historians, there is something exhilarating in becoming aware of other human beings from very different worlds to our own. They will never know us but we can think about them and an individual life can be a way into another time. From villains to saints, with all the great variety humanity is capable of in-between, we can wonder why the figures of the past behaved as they did and what that meant. "The poetry of history", the great British historian G. M. Trevelyan wrote, 'lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, once, on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing into another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone, like ghosts at cockcrow.'

When I started to plan this book, I made a list of personality traits which I felt were important in shaping human affairs. Love, fear, hatred, jealousy, ambition, altruism, loyalty, integrity: we can all add still others to the list. My problem was to narrow those down to a manageable few. In the end too I tried to find a balance between those qualities of personality which could be rightly said to change worlds and those which make it possible for us

to have contact with the past. I also wanted to be able to find the people who could best illustrate what I meant. I decided first to look at those leaders who were effective, who managed to persuade sufficient numbers of their contemporaries to support them, and who achieved great ends. I then turned to those who also possessed many of the qualities that make good leaders but who, in the end, threw their position or their people away because they had become convinced that they were invariably right. Perhaps I have been slightly provocative in lumping together Woodrow Wilson, Margaret Thatcher, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin but each in his or her own way fell prey to what the ancient Greeks described as hubris. The third characteristic I chose—that of daring—is again something that leaders often have but I wanted to focus in on the moments when a willingness to take risks had momentous consequences, whether it was Samuel de Champlain venturing across the Atlantic to the New World in the seventeenth century or President Richard Nixon going to Beijing in 1972. Then, in the last two chapters, I considered those who asked the questions and took the notes that make the understanding of others and history itself possible.

This book is the result of my own experiences over many years of reading and writing and, always, enjoying history. I have taken the opportunity offered here to discuss the people from the past I have found most interesting. My choices are highly personal but I hope they will serve to raise some of the important issues we must all think about as we look at the past. History matters and we must do it well. When it is false or one-sided it can be used to mobilize people for evil ends. At its best history can explain others and help us to better understand ourselves and our world. It can also remind

us that what we think is normal or the only way of doing things is not necessarily so. There have been other worlds with other values than our own and we need to be reminded of that, if only to give us some sense of humility. In the end I love history because it is such a marvellous combination of enlightening and fun.

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PERSUASION AND THE ART OF LEADERSHIP

OVER THE PAST DECADES, historians have broadened their scope from political, economic, or intellectual history to include the study of emotions, attitudes, tastes, or prejudices. (And in what I find a rather tiresome trend, historians have also been looking increasingly at themselves; how they “created” the past.) And in the house of history are those who think in centuries and those who focus on a single moment. Some historians prefer to deal with the great changes, sometimes over millennia, that have taken place in human society. They look at the shift from hunting to agriculture, for example, or the growth of cities; or they count such things as population growth and migrations or economic output. The great French historian Fernand Braudel argued that the true object of historical research was to look beneath the surface of events and discover the longer-term patterns — what he called the *longue durée*. He saw human history as a great slow-moving river, affected in its course more by geography, the environment, or social and economic factors than by such transient or short-lived events — he called them “froth” — as politics or wars. While biography cannot

explain all, it is perhaps no coincidence that Braudel spent the Second World War in a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany. From that perspective the *longue durée* must have offered hope that Nazism would disappear like a bad dream as history moved slowly on.

We cannot dismiss the short term so easily. Ideas and sudden shifts in politics, intellectual fashions, or in ideology or religion matter too. Think of the startling growth in the past two decades in fundamentalism in religions as different as Christianity, Hinduism, or Islam. Historians rightly look at key moments which signalled or set in motion great changes, such as the storming of the Bastille, which marked the French Revolution, or the assassination of the archduke in Sarajevo, which led to the outbreak of the First World War. And historians can take an apparently insignificant incident and use it to illuminate an age, as Natalie Zemon Davis did with sixteenth-century France in her telling of the return of Martin Guerre (who came back to claim his wife and property from an imposter).

Nor can we dismiss the role of individuals, whether thinkers, artists, entrepreneurs, or political leaders. If Albert Einstein had not grasped the nature of the atom early in the twentieth century, could the Allies have developed the atomic bomb during the Second World War? Another question, of course, is what Germany might have done if the Nazis had not driven Einstein and many of his fellow physicists into exile so that they offered their services to the Allies. Without the bomb it is almost certain that the Allied war against Japan would have dragged on for another year or more. And what if the world had never developed nuclear weapons at all? In the nineteenth century, with Europe undergoing the massive changes brought by the Industrial Revolution, Karl Marx