THE MIDDLE AGES IN THE MODERN WORLD

Twenty-first Century Perspectives

Edited by
BETTINA BILDHAUER AND CHRIS JONES

PROCEEDINGS OF THE BRITISH ACADEMY • 208

Published for THE BRITISH ACADEMY
by OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS 2017

3

Writing the Nation: Historians and National Identities from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Centuries[1]

PATRICK GEARY

In the early 1860s, Rudolf Baxmann, an Evangelical pastor and theologian, spent two years in Lisbon as deputy minister in the Prussian embassy. During his stay in Portugal he had abundant time to learn Portuguese and to become familiar with the cultural life of the country and especially the historical writing then being produced in and about Portugal. Upon his return to Berlin, Baxmann delivered a lecture entitled 'On the Present State of Historical Research in Portugal' which subsequently was published in the *Historische Zeitschrift*, then as now the leading historical journal in Germany. Portugal was, as he rightly said, a *terra incognita* for German scholarship at the time. Few German historians had taken a serious interest in Portugal and its history, and he wanted to draw his compatriots' attention to important historical research being conducted, specifically by Alexandre Herculano (1810–77), whom Baxmann praised as the 'master of the young generation of scholars'. Baxmann, a liberal Protestant theologian, was particularly impressed with Herculano's *History of the Origin and Establishment of the Inquisition in Portugal* and its strong criticism of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, but he was more generally impressed with the manner in which Herculano researched and wrote history. He praised him both for his 'adherence to German standards of historical source criticism and his skepticism about the "poetic clothing" which had been used to hide historical fact'. And yet, even while Herculano rejected myths 'motivated by a false national hubris',[2] Baxmann recognised that he was also a leading figure of the Portuguese romantic movement, the author of historical novels such that he suggested that Herculano 'simultaneously held in himself both Lamartine's poetic verve and Guizot's spirit of historical research'. He went on to describe the

[1] A preliminary version of this article was presented in Porto, Portugal, at the conference *50 Anos de Historiografia: Balanço e Prospectiva*, May 2012.
[2] Rudolf Baxmann, 'Über den gegenwärtigen Stand der Geschichtsschreibung in Portugal', *Historische Zeitschrift* 9: 1 (1863), 105–26, at 117–18.

Proceedings of the British Academy, **208**, 73–86.

position that Herculano held in Portugal and Brazil: 'He is popular with people of the Portuguese language on both sides of the Atlantic, such that ships are named after him and in Rio de Janeiro his portrait in a scholarly society was solemnly dedicated with a panegyric.'[3]

Although largely forgotten outside of Portugal today (he merits a single sentence in Donald Kelley's comprehensive *Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga*),[4] Herculano was indeed a major founding figure in the history of Portugal, although he drew his methodological inspiration more from contemporary French historians than directly from Germany. Until the end of his life he remained a towering intellectual figure, a hero of the liberal, anti-clerical intelligentsia in Portugal as well as in Brazil, and upon his death he was buried in a magnificent tomb funded by public subscription in the Jerónimos Monastery at Belém.[5]

It has been a long time since historians have been so popular that ships would be named after them, or indeed that their tomb would be erected by public subscription in a national monument such as the Mosteiro dos Jerónimos. But while Herculano may have achieved a unique position among nineteenth-century Portuguese historians, he was by no means unique. Across Europe, historians, and not simply journalists or popularisers masquerading as historians, achieved an extraordinary position of public adulation. Moreover, many of these historians concentrated their writing on the Middle Ages. Why this was so, and why this is no longer so, is a fundamental if seldom asked question in historical scholarship. In brief, I want to address the generation of historians who approached the history of the nation as a particular type of biographical literature, to examine the professionalising that ultimately discredited this form of national history, to examine some of the alternative histories that developed in its place, and to conclude with the question: how if at all can one write the nation today?

The easy answer to why not only Herculano, but also figures such as François Guizot (1787–1874) and Jules Michelet (1798–1874) in France, Cesare Balbo (1789–1853) in Italy, Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–59) in England, or, a generation later, Felix Dahn (1834–1912) in Germany, achieved national followings far beyond the imaginations of our own generation of historians, is that they were at the heart of the nationalist enterprise. Through their writing they created the deep past of their respective nations for receptive and enthusiastic national audiences. But one must go beyond the mere ideologies of these historians to

[3] Baxmann, 'Über den gegenwärtigen Stand', pp. 115–16.

[4] Donald R. Kelley, *Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 276.

[5] For a biography of Herculano in English, see Harry Bernstein, *Alexandre Herculano (1810–1877): Portugal's Prime Historian and Historical Novelist* (Lisbon: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian; Paris: Centro Culturel Português, 1983).

understand their appeal. As important as the content of their histories was its form. As Anne-Marie Thiesse has argued, these historians were all deeply influenced by the novels of Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832).[6] Although a writer of what we would call fiction, Scott should probably be seen as the most significant influence on history writing of the nineteenth century. Adapting the new literary form of the romance novel, Scott's novels created something radically new. They created a continuous narrative, a *Bildungsroman*, but in this twist on the usual *Bildungsroman* plot that narrates the education, development, and maturing of a young protagonist, the protagonist was the nation itself. This history, as Thiesse goes on to explain, is fundamentally different from previous narratives that were constructed largely around dynasties and thus royal families. The narratives of romantic historians, while based on the extensive exploitation of primary sources, both archival and narrative, are structured around the trials and tribulations of a much wider spectrum of society than older histories that focused on kings and princes. The story that these national historians told then was how the nation, composed of the best of all of its social strata, comes into existence. This process was often seen to take place in the course of the Middle Ages, the youth and adolescence, one might say, of the European nations. These historians were largely (although not always) liberal and progressive in their politics and in their understanding of the national enterprise which had to overcome not simply external enemies but the forces of reaction, both religious and dynastic. As the enormously popular and influential French historian Jules Michelet put it, describing his own historical productivity, 'My hero is the people.'[7]

Walter Scott had created fictional characters placed in specific historical contexts, often medieval, and interacting with actual historical personalities in a manner that wove history and literature into a seamless whole, creating not only a romance of personal values and emotions but at the same time a narrative of the maturation of the nation.[8] In his *Ivanhoe*, published in 1819, the metanarrative is that of the reconciliation of Saxons and Normans in the century following the Norman Conquest and thus the formation of a united people. Historians sought much the same metanarrative in their medieval histories. Moreover, some of these great nineteenth-century historians did more than simply adopt the novelistic form to their scholarship: they were also novelists themselves, and these novels were more often than not set in the Middle Ages. Herculano was the author of two novels that bracket the medieval history of Portugal: *Eurico, o presbítero*, published in 1844, a novel about the fall of the Visigoths and the origins of the independent Christian kingdoms

[6] Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales. Europe XVIIIe–XXe siècle*, 2nd edn (Paris: Seuil, 2001), pp. 136–7.

[7] Kelley, *Fortunes of History*, p. 165.

[8] On Walter Scott's influence on European history, see Ann Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

in the peninsula, and his 1848 *Monge de Cister*, set in the fifteenth century, in which the rising bourgeoisie are able to force the election of a king over the entrenched interests of the old nobility. Both were deeply influenced by Scott.

In Italy, Cesare Balbo, a leading figure in the Italian Risorgimento, also tried his hand at writing medieval historical fiction,in the tradition of Scott before turning to historical writing with his *Storia d'Italia sotto ai barbari*, published in 1830.[9] His first effort was a historical romance built around the twelfth-century conflict between Frederic Barbarossa and the Lombard League. In his story, the hero, Manfredi di Biandrate, who as a youth had saved the Emperor's life and been made a knight by the grateful Frederic, left the Emperor's service in favour of the Lombard League, becoming its illustrious commander.[10]

The French historian and statesman François Guizot drew his literary inspiration primarily from Shakespeare, not Scott, although the two were in his mind closely related. Guizot translated into French many of Shakespeare's plays, but in his own 1821 *Étude sur Shakspeare* he credited Sir Walter Scott with the revival of the Shakespearian tradition in England.[11] Since the mid-eighteenth century, he contended, Shakespeare had been honoured but not imitated. It was only with Sir Walter Scott's novels that one could speak of a movement to take Shakespeare as a model: in other words, the romantic novels set in a distant past by Scott were but a return to Shakespeare.

In Britain, Thomas Babington Macaulay too was strongly influenced by Scott. As the son of a Scottish highlander he was deeply attracted to the romance of Scott's ballads. According to his nephew and biographer George Trevelyan, at the age of 8 he was so moved by Scott's historical romantic poetry that he attempted to write a poem on the battle of Cheviot Hills, a semi-legendary clash in 1388 between Earl Percy of Northumberland and the Scottish Earl of Douglas, which was seen in Scotland as an epic defence against English invasion.[12] Although, as Catherine Hall emphasises, he claimed to admire no historians except Herodotus, Thucydides and Tacitus,[13] certainly he later took pride in modelling his historical writing on

[9] On Cesare Balbo as historian, see Ian Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 120–5.

[10] Ercole Ricotti, *Della vita e degli scritti del conte Cesare Balbo* (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1856), p. 34; Asker Pelgrom, 'The Lombard League Traditions in Northern Italy', in Linda Eriksonas and Leos Müller (eds), *Statehood before and beyond Ethnicity: Minor States in Northern and Eastern Europe, 1600–2000* (Brussels: Presses Interuniversitaires Européennes, 2005), pp. 179–218, on Balbo p. 190.

[11] François Guizot, *Étude sur Shakspeare* (1821), http://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/%C3%89tude_sur_Shakespeare. The essay was translated as *Shakespeare and His Times* in 1852 (London: Richard Bentley, 1982).

[12] George Otto Trevelyan, *Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green, 1876), p. 30.

[13] On Macaulay as historian, see Catherine Hall, *Macaulay and Son: Architects of Imperial Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), ch. 6, 'The History Man: Making up a Nation', pp. 259–329, esp. p. 260.

the novelist: 'The past is in my mind soon constructed into a romance . . . The conversations which I compose between great people of the time are long, and sufficiently animated: in the style, if not with the merits, of Sir Walter Scott's.'[14]

Another great admirer of Scott was Jules Michelet, who, as we have already noted, wrote history in which 'my hero is the people' and whose prominence in France rivalled that of Herculano in Portugal. Remembering the abdication of Napoleon in 1815 when he was 17, Michelet later described this as the moment when a new world opened up, bringing to France, Goethe, Scott, and Byron.[15] Michelet's historical vision of the French nation was that of a biography in which France was an immortal person with a soul that gradually grew from its beginnings as Celtic through its gradual amalgam of Roman and German systems in its struggle from servitude to liberty. The Middle Ages were central in this vision. In his massive nineteen-volume *Histoire de France*, completed in 1867, the first eight volumes treat France until the end of the fifteenth century. However, at the same time, as Donald Kelley has argued, Michelet's deeply personal, melodramatic approach to history was essentially autobiographical. The history of France was at once his own history: in his own eyes he had become the French nation, and his story was the story of France. As he wrote in the preface to his 1846 *Le Peuple*, a history of the eighteenth century, 'This book is more than a book, it is myself, and it is also you.'[16]

In some ways the most remarkable of these historians, but one who also marks a major change in the relationship between history writing and the evocation of the nation, was the German Felix Dahn, who, although professor of law first in Würzburg then in Königsberg and finally in Breslau, dedicated most of his energies to the study of history.[17] Germany, of course, as the work of Caspar Hirschi and Len Scales reminds us, had already by the nineteenth century a long history of cultural identity that preceded any efforts at the construction of a German state.[18] Dahn, however, unlike the earlier generations of German historians as well as many others we have considered who were overwhelmingly liberal, was a dedicated German nationalist and member of the Alldeutschen Verbandes or Pan-German League, an extremist, ultra-nationalist organisation with strong anti-Slavic and anti-Semitic ideology. Like Herculano and Balbo, he was an author of both

[14] Trevelyan, *Life and Letters*, pp. 103–4.

[15] Kelley, *Fortunes of History*, p. 161.

[16] Kelley, *Fortunes of History*, p. 168; Jules Michelet, *The People*, trans. G. H. Smith (New York: Appleton, 1847), 'Dedication to M. Edgar Quinet', p. 9.

[17] On Dahn see Wood, *The Modern Origins*, pp. 191–8.

[18] Caspar Hirschi, *Wettkampf der Nationen: Konstruktionen einer deutschen Ehrgemeinschaft an der Wende vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005); and more recently, *The Origins of Nationalism: An Alternative History from Ancient Rome to Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Len Scales, *The Shaping of German Identity: Authority and Crisis, 1245–1414* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

historical and fictional works, and like Guizot and Macaulay, he was deeply influenced by the tradition of historical romance. However, unlike these earlier historians whose literary efforts were quickly forgotten in favour of their historical works, Dahn's success as a novelist largely eclipsed his reputation as a historian.

His historical writing focused on late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, the *Völkerwanderungzeit* or migration period. His major historical work was a twelve-volume history, *Die Könige der Germanen*, which he produced between 1861 and 1909. This was a detailed, extremely cautious study of kingship among Germanic peoples that provides a close examination of the primary sources with virtually no ideological intrusions or speculations. As Ian Wood has perceptively pointed out, this work 'stands out for its determination to stick to the information on what the English would call constitutional history, contained in the written sources'.[19] This massive study is careful, judicious, and extremely dry. It lacks all of the colour, romanticism, and novelistic qualities of the earlier generation of national historians. In particular, as Wood has noticed, the detailed examination of Germanic kingship that Dahn provides across his twelve volumes contains virtually no claims to the unique character or contribution of Germanic culture or heroic values to European history. As Wood wrote, 'Occasionally he pauses to say that there must be a Germanic aspect to what he is dealing with, but since he cannot find it in the sources he has to leave it out.'[20]

But everything that Dahn the historian felt professionally obligated to leave out he incorporated into his enormous production of historical romances. All of these novels deal with people and events of the migration period: *Die Bataver*; *Chlodovech*; *Attila*; *Felicitas*; *Stilicho*; *Die schlimmen Nonnen von Poitiers*; *Fredigundis*; *Bissula*; and most importantly *Ein Kampf um Rom*, a novel that continues to draw a wide audience even today in German as well as in English. *A Struggle for Rome*, described by one blogger as a book that 'will appeal to those among my readers who still enjoy books like *Ivanhoe* and *The Three Musketeers*',[21] in a sense provides all of the romantic Germanic ideology that Dahn fervently believed but for which he found no trace in historical evidence and thus excluded from his historical scholarship. The novel treats the fall of the Ostogothic Kingdom in Italy following the death of Theoderic the Great and contrasts Germanic honour, virtue and fidelity with vicious, manipulative Romans and corrupt and duplicitous Byzantines manipulated by the evil Empress Theodora. The enormous success of *A Struggle for Rome*, published in 1876, shortly after the achievement of German

[19] Ian Wood, 'The Uses and Abuses of the Barbarian Invasions in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in Patrick J. Geary and Gábor Klaniczay (eds), *Manufacturing Middle Ages: Entangled History of Medievalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 51–70.

[20] Ian Wood, 'Literary Composition and the Early Medieval Historian in the Nineteenth Century', *The Making of Medieval History*, www.makingmedievalhistory.com/ianwoodyork.htm (accessed 21 April 2015).

[21] http://lostfort.blogspot.com/2010/03/felix-dahn-struggle-for-rome.html (accessed 21 April 2015).

unity, became the most important and enduring vision of the migration period in Germany for generations.[22] The vision, however – a deeply conservative one – was in contrast to that of his romantic predecessors. As Stefan Neuhaus, in his study of literature and national unity in Germany over the past two centuries, points out, 'Walter Scott moves the lives and needs of the individual to the center, while Dahn replaces these with an ideology of national chauvinism.'[23] This narrowing of focus is even more evident in his historical work, with its constricted focus on the 'Kings of the Germans', and represents a retreat from the new, broader history of the nation espoused by such historians as Herculano toward a newer type of royal constitutional history.[24]

Between Herculano, the mediocre novelist but great historian, and Dahn, the cautious, narrow historian but enormously popular novelist, something fundamental had changed in the way that history was being written and in its ability to influence wider society. Under the pressure of the expectations of scientific history as developed in the German seminar, the possibility of writing history as the *Bildungsroman* of the nation was becoming increasingly unacceptable in academic scholarship. The integration of novelistic form into historical discourse was increasingly seen as a sign of weakness, not of strength.

The scientific historical tradition emphasising research in primary sources, chiefly archival, and its deep scepticism of speculation that originated with Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), had, by the late nineteenth century, become far narrower and more conservative than Ranke himself would have recognised or approved. Ranke was after all an admirer of Sir Walter Scott, although he faulted him for using historical facts to meet the ends of the novelist. But Ranke's successors interpreted the scope of history even more narrowly than had their teacher and guide. History increasingly meant constitutional and political history. Cultural history, whether that of the Romantics or the new cultural history represented by Karl Lamprecht (1856–1915), became the focus of concerted attacks by the neo-Rankians as insufficiently scientific.[25]

The increasing professionalisation of history, the narrowing of its focus to constitutional issues and the growing historicism which questioned the relationship between the medieval Empire and those of contemporary Prussia and Austria removed professional history writing from a mass following. If the medieval Empire was not the childhood and youth of the modern German Empire, then one could hardly posit it as the central moment of a national *Bildungsroman*.

[22] Wood, *The Modern Origins*, p. 190.
[23] Stefan Neuhaus, *Literatur und nationale Einheit* (Tübingen: Francke, 2002), pp. 241–2.
[24] Felix Dahn, *Die Könige der Germanen: Das Wesen des ältesten Königthums der germanischen Stämme und seine Geschichte bis auf die Feudalzeit*, 12 vols (Munich: Fleischmann, 1861–1909).
[25] On Lamprecht see Roger Chickering, *Karl Lamprecht: A German Academic Life (1856–1915)* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993).

Perhaps most importantly, this retreat of professional history into the world of technical constitutional political history has implications not only for Germany but for historical writing across Europe and North America. As professional history in the Rankian mould became the standard, not only in Germany but throughout the world, professional history lost its hold on the popular imagination, no longer calling the nation into existence in all its complexity but rather dealing with narrowly defined issues of politics and institutions. The great figures in the historical discourse prior to the First World War were primarily professors, and their audiences other professors. This was true in Germany, but also in France, where Gabriel Monod (1844–1912) sought to introduce German historicist methods into French history, while Fustel de Coulanges (1830–1889) eschewed both German scientific history and romantic Scottesque new history in favour of a return to the great seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French scholars.[26]

The new directions of German historical method had less influence in England where the great national historians of the later century, as Donald Kelley has written, such as the medievalists William Stubbs (1825–1901) and Edward Augustus Freeman (1823–92) and modernists such as Macaulay and John Richard Green (1837–83), sought to continue the grand master narrative tradition.[27] Among these Freeman followed German scholarship, and William Stubbs, the best historian among them, recognised that compared with the Germans, British historians before him had contributed little to historical knowledge. However, it was Freeman's close friend and populariser, John Richard Green, who had the greatest popular following with his *History of England*, although, in the words of Donald Kelley, he 'hated libraries and never bothered to learn German'.[28]

Freeman and especially the populariser Green were committed to a vision of national history that was deeply racist and essentialising.[29] For Freeman, the

[26] On Fustel and Monod see François Hartog, *Le XIXe siècle et l'histoire: Le cas Fustel de Coulanges* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2001); and Patrick Geary, 'Gabriel Monod, Fustel de Coulanges et les aventures de Sichaire: La naissance de l'histoire scientifique au XIXe siècle', in Dominique Barthélemy, François Bougard and Régine Le Jan (eds), *La Vengeance, 400–1200* (Rome: École française de Rome, 2006), pp. 87–99, translated as 'Gabriel Monod, Fustel de Coulanges and Sichar's Adventures: The Birth of Scientific History in the Nineteenth Century', in Patrick J. Geary, *Writing History: Identity, Conflict and Memory in the Middle Ages*, ed. Florin Curta and Cristina Spinei (Editura Academiei Române, Editura Istros a Muzeului Brăilei, Bucureşti-Brăila, 2012), pp. 135–46.

[27] Kelley, *Fortunes of History*, p. 229. An exception was John Horace Round (1854–1928) whose historical and genealogical studies never attempted a synthesis of medieval English history.

[28] Kelley, *Fortunes of History*, p. 229.

[29] Donald R. Kelley, 'The Anglo-Saxon Inheritance', in *Fortunes of History*, pp. 93–102; Louise D'Arcens and Chris Jones, 'Excavating the Borders of Literary Anglo-Saxonism in Nineteenth-Century Britain and Australia', *Representations* 121 (2013), 85–106; Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Stuart Anderson, *Race and Rapprochement: Anglo-Saxonism and Anglo-American Relations 1895–1904* (East Brunswick, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981); Patrick Geary, 'Teutonische Rassenideologie im Amerika des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts', in Heinrich Beck, Dieter

Teutons were the last and most developed of the Aryan peoples and were destined as rulers and teachers of the world. However, while the continental Germans had suffered from an infusion of Roman blood, in England, in spite of the Norman invasion, the Teutonic tradition remained strong. Of course, such an argument denied any biological continuity with the pre-existing Romano-Celtic population of Britain. As Green emphasised in his *A Short History of the English People*, the historical 'bestseller' in England and America, which popularised Freeman's work, the Anglo-Saxon conquest meant the total extinction of the indigenous population along with its Romanised institutions:

> The conquest of Gaul by the Frank, or of Italy by the Lombard, proved little more than a forcible settlement of the one conqueror or the other among tributary subjects who were destined in a long course of ages to absorb their conquerors . . . But the English conquest was a sheer dispossession and slaughter of the people whom the English conquered . . . of all the German conquests this proved the most thorough and complete.[30]

Green's sweeping, essentialising history that exalted Teutonic freedom at the expense of Celtic (read Irish) inferiority met massive popular enthusiasm both in England and in the United States. In both countries, concerns about emigration from Ireland and Southern and Eastern Europe generated apprehensions on the part of the nativist population quite similar to those expressed in Europe today toward Near Eastern, North African, and South Asian emigrants or toward Hispanic emigrants into the United States.[31] More judicious historians such as Frederic William Maitland by contrast eschewed such approaches and focused instead, as did the German historians he admired, on legal and constitutional developments in English history from the late ninth century to the modern period. This alternative narrative, which placed at the centre the growth of the English Common Law rather than either kings or nations, has proven an enduring achievement but not a massive success with a wider reading public. As far as I know, there are no ships named Maitland, apart from an Australian patrol boat named after a city in New South Wales.

Geuenich and Heiko Steuer (eds), *Zur Geschichte der Gleichung 'germanisch – deutsch': Sprache und Namen, Geschichte und Institutionen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), pp. 343–56. Translated as 'Teutonic Racial Ideology in America in the Nineteenth Century', in Geary, *Writing History*, pp. 71–82.

[30] John Richard Green, *A Short History of the English People* (London, 1875), pp. 9–10.

[31] On Anglo-Saxonism see Paul A. Kramer, 'Empires, Exceptions, and Anglo-Saxons: Race and Rule between the British and United States Empires, 1880–1910', *The Journal of American History* 88: 4 (March 2002), 1315–53. On nativism and racial Anglo-Saxonism in Britain directed against the Irish, see Lewis Perry Curtis Jr., *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England* (Bridgeport, CT: Conference on British Studies at the University of Bridgeport, 1968). On American nativism in the nineteenth century, see, among others, the classic study by John Highan, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860–1925*, with a new epilogue (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); and Peter Schrag, *Not Fit for Our Society: Immigration and Nativism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

By the First World War, writing the nation's history, not only in Britain but across Europe, meant writing the history of the state with a primary focus on its legal and constitutional elements. Such a focus was summed up in the motto of the Historical Seminar established by Herbert Baxter Adams in 1880 at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland which introduced scientific history to the United States: 'History is Past Politics and Politics Present History.'[32]

The primary exception to this narrow approach to history as politics was the new field of economic history, although perhaps only in Belgium did economic history become, in the work of Henri Pirenne, a major axis for the elaboration of a new type of national history.[33] Pirenne, one of the towering figures of early twentieth-century history, remains best known in his native Belgium for his *Histoire de Belgique*, which appeared in seven volumes between 1900 and 1932.[34] This was a very different national history from those of the nineteenth century, both in its content and its approach. Today, Pirenne's *Histoire de Belgique* is seen as a deeply problematic heritage, a fantastic act of nationalist imagination that attempted to claim a united past for this region, and this great national history of the early twentieth century has been called the 'partie morte' of Pirenne's historical oeuvre.[35] It is nevertheless worth considering for an understanding of how a different, and for a time massively important, vision of a nation's past could be created on bases very different from those of the previous century.

As Pirenne wrote in the preface to the first volume of his history:

> One would search in vain for a geographical, racial, or political unity. Belgium is a country without natural frontiers, where one speaks two languages, and which, since the treaty of Verdun, depends from the left bank of the Scheldt on France and on Germany from the right bank of this river.[36]

[32] Actually, the motto was adopted by Adams from none other than Edward Augustus Freeman. See Raymond J. Cunningham, 'Is History Past Politics? Herbert Baxter Adams as Precursor of the "New History"', *The History Teacher* 9: 2 (February 1976), 244–57, at 247.

[33] On Pirenne, see, among others, Bryce Lyon, *Henri Pirenne: A Biographical and Intellectual Study* (Ghent: Story-Scientia, 1974).

[34] Henri Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique*, 7 vols (Brussels: Lamertin, 1900–1932).

[35] Jean Stengers, *Histoire du sentiment national en Belgique des origines à 1918*, vol. I, *Les Racines de la Belgique* (Brussels: Éditions Racine, 2000), p. 59. Pirenne's vision of the deep roots of a unified Belgium have also been criticised by Dutch scholars for ignoring the unity of the Dutch-speaking Netherlands. See especially Pieter Geyl, *Debates with Historians* (Groningen: Wolters, 1955).

[36] 'On y chercherait vainement soit l'unité géographique, soit l'unité de race, soit l'unité politique. La Belgique forme, en effet, une contrée sans frontières naturelles, où l'on parle deux langues et qui, depuis le traité de Verdun, relève de la France à gauche de l'Escaut et de l'Allemagne à droite de ce fleuve.' He continues: 'À partir du Xe siècle, cette terre de contrastes se découpe en une foule de principautés bizarrement dessinées et bilingues pour la plupart. Enfin, pour comble de confusion, les circonscriptions ecclésiastiques s'y croisent comme au hasard avec les circonscriptions politiques et rattachent le pays, sans tenir compte de la nature de ses habitants, ici, à l'archevêché germanique de Cologne, là, à la métropole romane de Reims.' Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique*, vol. I, p. vii.

Indeed, much later in his work, in the fifth volume published in 1920, he insisted that national feeling guaranteed Belgium's unity: 'We have a fatherland, not because nature has assigned us one but because we have wished it.'[37] Nevertheless he believed that he could discern, behind the particularist histories of counties, duchies and episcopal principalities, 'the outline and the general structure of a common history'.[38] Belgium's unity, he argued, arose not from a common race as in Germany, nor from the centralising work of a hereditary monarchy as in England or France, but from a unity of social life. In essence, as an economic historian, he argued that the basins of the Scheldt River and of the Meuse provided the context in which a commerce in ideas occurred between the Latin and Germanic worlds, and which provided the ports that were the markets of the products of North and South. In his vision, the particularities of these regions of exchanges led them to progressively break the bonds that connected them with Germany and with France and to coalesce, a process that he believed was particularly achieved under the dukes of Burgundy in the fifteenth century.

This novel view of the formation of a nation then led him to de-emphasise political history but also traditional cultural history since, as he suggested, the civilisation of the region is identical in large part to that of France and Germany to such an extent that a cultural history of Belgium could easily be simply a summary of European history. Instead, he focused on the development of urban centres in the three bilingual principalities of Liege, Brabant, and Flanders with their mercantile Francophone elites. It was, in the end, in Pirenne's estimation, economic development and urban life that formed the distinctive characteristics of Belgium since at least the Middle Ages, resulting almost inescapably in the creation of a Belgian state in 1830.

This son of a textile industrialist thus gave voice to a vision of a bourgeois nation, a vision that required enormous erudition but equally the ability to ignore massive evidence of deep and abiding divisions between populations, rural and urban, Flemish and Francophone, that would ultimately demonstrate just how artificial this nation actually was. If it was true that the Belgians had a nation, 'parce que nous l'avons voulue', today it is equally true that a great number no longer wish it.

Pirenne's attempt to create a new kind of master narrative of the nation as a community of commerce was to my knowledge unique. Elsewhere, professional history, with its increasing concentration on constitutional and political issues, removed professionals from the construct of the nation in the course of the twentieth century, with an emphasis rather on the construction of the state. This did not,

[37] 'Nous avons une patrie, non point parce que la nature nous l'a assignée, mais parce que nous l'avons voulue.' Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique*, vol. V (1920), p. xii.

[38] 'Les grandes lignes et comme la contexture générale d'une histoire commune'. Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique*, vol. I (1908), p. viii.

however, mean that enthusiasm for such history decreased on the part of European populations. It meant instead that this need would be largely supplied by continuing the traditions and debates of the nineteenth century, an activity carried on in part by non-professional historians.

An enlightening example of this was in Spain, where two exiles from Franco's fascist regime elaborated competing visions of Spanish identity and history. Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz y Menduiña's essentialist vision of a Spain created by the Visigoths who set the course for the subsequent history of Castile and Leon, first elaborated in his 1942 *En torno a los origines del feudalismo*, was less an original thesis than an essentialist, one might say primordialist, argument of the type developed in nineteenth-century German history but now applied to the Iberian peninsula.[39] This vision of Hispanic identity, which fitted well into Falangist ideology with its emphasis on Visigothic 'Germanic' heritage, was strongly contested by Américo Castro, another Republican exile who saw Hispanic identity formed from the confrontation and interrelations of Christians, Muslims, and Jews.[40] For Castro, this combination in the Middle Ages had brought Spain to the heights of its glory, only to be destroyed by the *limpieza de sangre* laws, persecution, and expulsion.[41] Tellingly, Castro was primarily a scholar of Golden Age literature rather than of archival history, and his broader vision of the development of Spanish national history, which actually shows interesting parallels to that of Alexandre Herculano a century before, was attacked by Sánchez-Albornoz and by historians in Spain as the unscientific imaginings of someone out of his element, a return to the romantic amateur historians of the nineteenth century.

The entire debate about Spanish identity, largely carried on in the 1940s and 1950s, suggested less the vibrancy of national history debates in Europe than the backwardness of Spanish history in general. Elsewhere in the decades following the Second World War the grand national or nationalist narrative had largely ceased to preoccupy professional historians. From a rejection of history as *Bildungsroman* at the end of the nineteenth century to the rejection of history as the development of the state at the end of the 1950s, the sense of narrative history itself came under attack in favour of analytic history, the *longue durée*, or even, in the words of the French historian Le Roy Ladurie, *histoire immobile*.[42] With an increasing understanding of the difference between *Geschichte*, meaning the past, and *historie*, history, as the intellectual operation that interprets the past, the latter

[39] Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, *En torno a los orígenes del feudalismo* (Mendoza: Universidad Nacional de Cuyo, 1942).

[40] Américo Castro, *España en su historia: cristianos, moros y judios* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losanda, 1948).

[41] Kevin Ingram, 'Historiography, Historicity and the Conversos', in Kevin Ingram (ed.), *The Conversos and Moriscos in Late Medieval Spain and Beyond*, vol. I (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 342–4.

[42] Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, 'L'histoire immobile', *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 29 (1974), 673–92.

has become increasingly identified with analysis, criticism, fragmentation, and scepticism, scepticism especially about the possibility of comprehending the past or rendering it intelligible.[43] As the French historian François Furet formulated it in the 1970s, history had moved from 'histoire-récit à l'histoire-problème', that is, a rejection of the notion that historical writing can simply narrate the past to the understanding of history as an intellectual process that constructs it.[44] One can trace the genesis of this concept to Max Weber (1864–1920), although the full impact of the Weberian understanding of scholarship (*Wissenschaft*) as research, as a process rather than as a body of knowledge, only came to dominate historical reflection among professional historians in the 1970s and beyond.

From such a perspective, writing the history of a nation becomes impossible. As Pierre Nora, speaking of the impossibility of writing history as a collective memory of France, explains:

> History, especially the history of national development, has constituted the oldest of our collective traditions: our quintessential *milieu de mémoire*. From the chroniclers of the Middle Ages to today's practitioners of 'total' history, the entire tradition has developed as the controlled exercise and automatic deepening of memory, the reconstitution of a past without lacunae or faults . . . Every great historical revision has sought to enlarge the basis for collective memory.[45]

But as history becomes self-critical and begins to examine the basis of historical writing, something fundamentally different transpires. Again Nora, '[Historiography] operates primarily by introducing doubt, by running a knife between the tree of memory and the bark of history'.[46] In the process, history abandons its claim to bear a coherent meaning or to carry an identity with the nation, which is now replaced by society: multiple, contradictory, and incoherent. What remains for historians is the creation of a *milieu de mémoire*, but the analysis of *lieux de mémoire* constructed and critically analysed ghosts of a now shattered and impossible national memory.

But if Nora's *lieux de mémoire* are all that is left historians, given the impossibility of writing national history as it was done in the past, these epistemological and philosophical concerns have remained largely the preoccupation of professional historians. Particularly since the last decade of the twentieth century, the collapse of the Soviet Union in the East and the anxieties of globalisation and mass

[43] See Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[44] François Furet, 'De l'histoire-récit à l'histoire-problème', in Furet, *L'Atelier de l'histoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1982), pp. 73–90. See also Otto Gerhard Oexle, 'Max Weber – Geschichte als Problemgeschichte', in Oexle (ed.), *Das Problem der Problemgeschichte 1880–1932* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2001), pp. 9–37, esp. p. 12.

[45] Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations* 26, special issue: *Memory and Counter-Memory* (Spring 1989), 7–24, at 9.

[46] Nora, 'Between Memory and History', pp. 10–11.

emigration in the West have inspired popular interest in national histories at a very moment when historians no longer believe that such an enterprise is possible.[47] As a result, the field is left to journalists, amateurs, and politicians who look back to nineteenth-century historians for what twenty-first-century historians refuse to provide them.[48] National history as the *Bildungsroman* of a people may have been replaced by critical research into society in academe, but we historians who pursue such agendas are largely ignored by the wider society.

Should we be content with this view that sees what we do as essentially irrelevant to our contemporaries? What sort of history should we pursue, and how should it relate to the issues and problems of our times? One might imagine a variety of answers to these questions. One approach is to concentrate on debates of the past, historicising the historical polemics of the state and empire as well as the role of history in national education. Other historians attempt to move beyond the nation state to look at the construction of Europe, possibly conceived as a new super-nation, or else qualified and relativised by comparative and transnational approaches. Still others look well below the state or national scale, reassessing local history, which may or may not be what my colleague Carlo Ginzburg has termed *microstoria*, as well as the history of science and the environment.[49] Finally, many continue to explore issues raised by Nora and others concerning history and memory. Few professional historians aspire to the adulation (and criticism) that Alexandre Herculano enjoyed: we are unlikely to have ships named after us or to repose in the Mosteiro dos Jerónimos. But what will be our legacy, if not to our nation, which historians continually invent, then to the future that we prepare?

[47] I develop this further in *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[48] As when, for example, Ralph Büllmann draws on the stereotypes of the Völkerwanderung to understand the 2015 mass migration from the Near East and North Africa into Europe in the Economics section of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 25 October 2015, pp. 28–9.

[49] Carlo Ginzburg, 'Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It', trans. John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi, *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1993), 10–35.