

# RUSSELL'S HISTORIOGRAPHICAL EXCURSION: BETWEEN A HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY AND A PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

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This essay analyses Bertrand Russell as a historical writer and theorist of history. His most influential work of history—the *History of Western Philosophy*—is subjected, for the first time, to the standards of Russell's own principles of historiography, as laid out in a series of essays published over his lifetime. Considering the full gamut of reactions to Russell's *History*, the essay investigates whether the numerous criticisms laid against this work may be answered or ameliorated by contextualizing his writing within his own theories regarding the role and scope of the historian. Such an approach, it is argued, is partially successful. While Russell's writings on the discipline of history shed considerable light upon many of his own idiosyncrasies as a historical writer, there are still several strong criticisms of his work that remain unanswered.

## I. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

**B**ertrand Russell, throughout his extraordinarily long life, fulfilled many roles. He was, by turns, a logician, political activist, travelling lecturer, popular author, social commentator, conscientious objector, parliamentarian, and educational pioneer. Upon surveying his prodigious oeuvre, one more, rather understudied role must be added to this august litany: historian. Although Russell referred to himself as a consumer, rather than producer, of historical writings, this is transparently false modesty. Books by Russell that may be classified—in whole or in part—as “historical” include: *German Social Democracy* (1896), *The Policy of the Entente, 1904–1914* (1915), *The Problem of China* (1922), *Freedom and Organization, 1814–1914* (1934), *The Amberley Papers* (1937) and his *Autobiography*, published towards

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Sean Kelly and Michael Rosen at Harvard for their guidance.

the end of his life.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, historical allusions, insights, asides, and judgments are sprinkled liberally throughout his popular works.

Russell's affection for history began in his youth and, along with philosophy and mathematics, was maintained as a core component of his substantial autodidactic education.<sup>3</sup> His historical writings lie at the core of his social activism and are frequently directed to further his ideological ends. Russell views history as personally inspiring, socially useful, even existentially important—hence declaring this discipline to constitute an “essential part of the furniture of an educated mind”.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, methodologically, the reading and writing of history appears to have served as a source of great repose for Russell's continually productive mind. For Russell the philosopher and punctilious logician, great reserves of powers and energy were expended in confronting the problem of what could constitute knowledge, as well as the precise manner in which propositions could legitimately convey meaning. Russell the historian, by contrast, simply presumes a commonsensical, realist position on historical knowledge and is, therefore, able to sally forth in his writings without his customary epistemological qualms. Indeed, one gets the impression that Russell the historian rather enjoyed this expansive freedom from the shackles of logical rigour, as his historical works are uniformly written in a rather breezy, opinionated, and self-assured manner. They convey the impression of a mammoth intelligence blowing off steam.

This essay will analyse the largest, most impactful, and most successful of his historical works, his *History of Western Philosophy*.<sup>5</sup> Grand in historical scope and didactic reach, this work became an instantaneous classic. It sold widely, was swiftly translated into numerous languages, and garnered significant scholarly and popular attention—

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<sup>2</sup> *The Amberley Papers* were co-edited with his third wife, Patricia Russell, and—being a selection of his parents' letters and papers—amount to Russell's most document-oriented work of history.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, RUSSELL, “My Mental Development” (1944), *BW*, p. 13; in SCHILPP, ed., *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell* (1944); **1** in *Papers* 11, p. 9. (There is a searchable edition in the Routledge Classics series in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2009; Introduction by John G. Slater.)

<sup>4</sup> RUSSELL, “History as an Art” (1954), *BW*, p. 536; *PfM*; **22** in *Papers* 28, p. 111.

<sup>5</sup> The *HWP* version referenced in this essay is the last revised edition in Russell's lifetime (*HWP*<sub>3</sub>), published by Allen & Unwin in 1961. It has since been reset in the Routledge Classics series. It is searchable in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004, 1,095 pages, and was released again in 2005, 778 pages.

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both positive and otherwise. The book combines two of Russell's great intellectual loves—philosophy and history—and the enthusiasm for both subjects percolates on every page. Russell's stated aim was precisely the synthesis of these two subjects, an exploration of the extent to which “philosophers are both effects and causes: effects of their social circumstances and of the politics and institutions of their time; causes (if they are fortunate) of beliefs which mould the politics and institutions of later ages.”<sup>6</sup> To that end, the book recounts the biographies and principal positions of major philosophers from ancient Greece to Russell's own day and seeks to embed their ideas—albeit with varying degrees of consistency and plausibility—within the social and historical forces of their time.

This essay will examine the *History* as a product of Russell's own writings on the art and science of history, as well as his conception of the role of the historian. This methodological background was missed by many who critiqued Russell's work in scholarly reviews, and it is hoped this essay will serve as a corrective. We will begin by taking stock of the numerous accusations hurled at Russell's book, primarily by professional philosophers and academics. We will then outline the major elements of Russell's beliefs concerning the correct way in which to engage with history, as well as the role of the historian on both an aesthetic and social level. With this framework in mind, we will seek to provide a rejoinder to some of Russell's critics by noting that several of the apparent shortcomings of the *History* were simply an outgrowth of his own ideas, and that his history of philosophy—while remaining unsatisfactory in certain respects—is generally consistent with his own conceptions of the essence of history and the task of the historian. The objective of this essay is therefore modest; it does not seek to fully exonerate Russell on historical grounds (which would be impossible in any case), but rather to contextualize the *History* within its author's own historical-philosophical framework, thereby orienting the reader towards a more charitable reading of Russell's most impactful foray into history.

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<sup>6</sup> *HWP*<sub>3</sub>, p. 7.

## II. PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP ON RUSSELL'S THEORIES OF HISTORY

Prior to embarking on an analysis of Russell's theories of history and the manner in which they are reflected in the *History*, it is worth outlining previous scholarship on Russell as a historian. There are four significant essays on the subject.

The most significant offering on this topic, both in terms of incisiveness and rigour, was provided by Sidney Hook.<sup>7</sup> A generally admiring yet utterly unsparing analysis of all of Russell's historiographical ideas prior to 1943, Hook's criticisms were substantial enough to warrant a detailed response by Russell himself.<sup>8</sup> Hook's analysis is most useful on two accounts. First, a considerable section of his essay is devoted to an analysis of Russell's unabashed "Great Men" theory of history, in which Hook aptly demonstrates the various internal tensions and contradictions within this conception of history. Second, Hook exposes at length the fact that Russell's historical writings occasionally fail to conform to his own theories and standards of historiography.<sup>9</sup> Hook also correctly points out that Russell's family background and personal disposition were crucial in spurring on his political activism, which in turn provided a foundation for his social and historical writings.

However, other elements of Hook's analysis are less satisfactory. For instance, his characterization<sup>10</sup> of Russell as a "critical Marxist" borders on the absurd. While Russell certainly does exhibit respect for some of the basic elements of Marx's socio-economic theories, there remains numerous important points of divergence between the two thinkers, including Russell's firm commitment to the "Great Men" theory of history, upon which Hook provides an eloquent analysis. Hook's essay was written by 1943, prior to the publication of Russell's *History*, and also prior to two of Russell's major essays on historical writing, "How to Read and Understand History" (which was published in 1943 but is not referred to by Hook) and "History as an Art"

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<sup>7</sup> HOOK, "Bertrand Russell's Philosophy of History" (1944), in SCHILPP, ed.

<sup>8</sup> RUSSELL, "Reply to Criticisms" (1944), in SCHILPP, ed., pp. 681-741; 2 in *Papers* 11.

<sup>9</sup> HOOK, pp. 646, 648, 652, 665. While this inconsistency is undoubtedly present throughout Russell's historical works, I hope to demonstrate that Russell's historiographical theories shed considerable light on the unusual form and content of *HWP*.

<sup>10</sup> HOOK, p. 654.

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(1954). Hook's comments on Russell's philosophy of history cannot take into account the full gamut of his writings on this subject and are, therefore, less applicable to the subject matter of this article.<sup>11</sup>

Peter Stone's essay,<sup>12</sup> although both thorough and enlightening in its analysis of Russell as a historian, contains certain unfortunate flaws. First, Stone's dichotomy between the "scientific" and "literary" approaches to history is too sharp, as is his attempt to characterize Russell as a "literary" historian. As Stone himself inadvertently demonstrates (pp. 376–82), Russell's centralization of factual truth in the historian's enterprise distances him from Trevelyan's literary model. Second, Stone mischaracterizes Russell's idea of history as elucidating one continuous human story (in both "On History" and "A Free Man's Worship") as "mystical" (pp. 379–81). On the contrary, Russell's early historical depictions are firmly rooted in a rationalist metaphysics. Third, Stone's assertion (p. 381) that a historical narrative that allows a person to transcend their particular circumstances must be rooted in fact (a position that supposedly explains Russell's prioritization of factual accuracy) is groundless. Many of the most ideologically powerful historical narratives devised have been based upon myth, not fact. It is for these reasons, among others, that Stone's analysis is not satisfactory.

The essays by Kirk Willis<sup>13</sup> and Kenneth R. Stunkel<sup>14</sup> are less useful, especially as they either ignore or underestimate certain key sources in Russell's writings on the subject of history. Furthermore, both essays portray Russell as a stereotypical Whig historian, whose beliefs in an inexorable, universal historical progress are simplistic and unidimensional. Such a position is untenable for any close reader of Russell's social and historical oeuvre. Russell frequently expressed great pessimism regarding humanity's past and future, and was

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<sup>11</sup> One wonders whether Russell, who responded to HOOK's essay in late 1943, amended the form or content of *HWP* (published in 1945) based on Hook's criticisms. One also wonders whether HOOK would have written a substantially different analysis of Russell's philosophy of history had he first read *HWP*. Such speculations, however, take us too far afield. HOOK's review of *HWP* ("Bertrand Russell among the Sages" [1945]) adds nothing new.

<sup>12</sup> STONE, "Russell's Literary Approach to History" (2019), in WAHL, ed.

<sup>13</sup> WILLIS, "Bertrand Russell on History" (1987).

<sup>14</sup> STUNKEL, "Bertrand Russell's Writings and Reflections on History", (2001). It must be admitted that Stunkel's essay is certainly more substantial and sophisticated than Willis's, yet remains only somewhat useful for our purposes.

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extremely wary of the possibility—especially in the nuclear age—that barbarism and folly may swiftly extinguish all human progress. It is against the encroachment of such barbarism that the *History*, among other later works, was directed. The “Whig” classification, therefore, is at best a rather convenient stereotype, which firmly undermines the analysis of Willis and Stunkel.

Despite their insufficiencies, these four scholars<sup>15</sup> provide the foundation for a deeper and more neatly categorized analysis of Bertrand Russell the historian. This essay will proceed to analyse Russell's historiographical writings and distil seven principal criteria that, according to him, characterize the work of the ideal historian. These criteria, along with Russell's writings on history in general, may serve to both illuminate the form and content of the *History* and defend Russell against the numerous critiques hurled at his most popular and influential work of history.

### III. “HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY”—PRAISE AND CRITIQUE

In many ways, the *History* proved a remarkable success. Like no previous work, it told the story of philosophy in an accessible and felicitous manner and may take much credit for popularizing the subject within the Anglophone world. It garnered praise from many quarters, especially from the popular press and other reviews.<sup>16</sup> Contemporaneous philosophers, such as Isaiah Berlin<sup>17</sup> and Karl Popper,<sup>18</sup> wrote about the book in glowing terms, while A. C. Grayling's more recent *The History of Philosophy* cites Russell's book as both an inspiration for, and an exemplar of, this genre.<sup>19</sup> Other intellectual figures, such as A. L. Rowse, Julian Huxley,<sup>20</sup> and Paul Johnson,<sup>21</sup> similarly praised it to the skies. Even its severe detractors, of whom there is no lack,

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<sup>15</sup> Admittedly, there is another essay on this topic: SLATER's “The Importance of the Study of History”, a chapter in his *Bertrand Russell* (1994). This essay, however, is brief and does not add to this discussion.

<sup>16</sup> BLACKWELL, DE CARVALHO, AND RUJA. “A Secondary Bibliography of *HWP*, Pt. 1: Extracted Reviews in English / Pt. II: Extracted Non-English Reviews” (2019).

<sup>17</sup> BERLIN, “*A History of Western Philosophy*, by Bertrand Russell” (1947), pp. 151–2.

<sup>18</sup> POPPER, “Broadcast Review of *A History of Western Philosophy* (1947)” (1992).

<sup>19</sup> GRAYLING, *The History of Philosophy* (2019), Preface, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> ROWSE and HUXLEY as quoted on the 1996 Routledge Classics cover and the 2004 and 2005 e-Library editions of *HWP*.

<sup>21</sup> JOHNSON, *Intellectuals* (2000), p. 200.

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were uniform in their recognition that the book was written remarkably well, with its luminous prose, sparkling aphorisms, and savage wit doing much to enliven a potentially arid subject.

However, the book was also the subject of a number of scathing critiques,<sup>22</sup> mostly by professional philosophers, all of whom drew attention to various facets of the book that amounted to—from their perspectives—egregious authorial flaws. The criticisms generally fall into the following categories.

First, as many have pointed out, there is a fairly tenuous and inconsistent connection between the book's historical and philosophical sections. Whereas one might expect such a work to carefully synthesize its historical and philosophical elements, Russell's narrative is often haphazard in this regard. The biographical background to each thinker often contains incidental, even salacious details, whereas the more general historical information (such as the rise and fall of various empires across the ages) is often only distantly relevant to philosophical movements at hand. Moreover, there is an important discrepancy among the three divisions of the book. While Ancient Philosophy contains a fairly large amount of general historical background, the Medieval, or Catholic, part is overwhelmed with it. Attention is lavished upon the various politico-religious wars and upheavals throughout the "dark ages", to the extent that the discussions of philosophy read like an incidental excursus. By contrast, the section on Modern Philosophy contains very little historical background, with crucial social upheavals such as the French Revolution and World War I barely mentioned. This work's genre thus remains indecisive: not quite history, not quite philosophy, and certainly not a seamless, or even satisfactory, synthesis.

Such uneven presentation extends to Russell's analysis of individual philosophers. While the selection and emphasis in any history of philosophy are necessarily contentious, one cannot fail to notice the sheer oddity of Russell's selections. Fairly minor philosophers are accorded large amounts of space relative to their philosophical influence (such as Bergson, Byron, and Gregory the Great), whereas some far more

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<sup>22</sup> The list of reviews consulted for this essay include: BERLIN; POPPER; JOAD, "Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*" (1946–47); MERCIER (1947); TONGUE (1947); BROAD (1947); RATNER (1947); and WAHL, "The Reception of Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy*" (2019).

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significant philosophers (such as Marx, Bacon, and Mill) receive comparatively short shrift. More remarkable still, many significant philosophers—such as most French *philosophes*, Pascal, Burke, Paine, Comte, and several important interwar thinkers apart from his own school—are omitted from this ostensibly comprehensive work. Moreover, when writing about philosophers, Russell is apt to discuss some elements of their philosophy in great detail, while ignoring or merely disparaging other facets of their *Weltanschauung*. Aside from his discussions of a few of the most influential philosophers,<sup>23</sup> Russell rarely attempts a well-rounded treatment of his subjects. As one reviewer rather uncharitably put it,<sup>24</sup> this book records little more than what the greats had to say about life, as filtered through Russell's idiosyncratic interests. That the author's own proclivities so heavily skewed the selection process is seen as a black mark upon Russell's historiographical record.

This palpable lack of balance, or impartiality, pervades the work. Russell's biases as a liberal, rationalist, secular humanist are visible in all his descriptions of earlier philosophers. Many of the chapters—especially those focusing upon figures that he considers ideological villains, such as Plato and Hegel—resemble less the work of an historian and more the confrontation of a fellow philosopher, who delights in the occasional scathing attack. Moreover, the criteria by which these past thinkers are judged are manifestly clear throughout: science, reason, and aversion to mythology are considered the principal hallmarks of philosophical excellence, regardless of era or intellectual ambience. Consider the following quotation regarding Socrates, a figure that many consider a luminous example of philosophical honesty and intellectual incandescence:

Unlike some of his predecessors, he was not scientific in his thinking, but was determined to prove the universe agreeable to his ethical standards. This is treachery to truth, and the worst of philosophic sins. As a man,

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<sup>23</sup> Such as his chapters on Plato, Aristotle, and Locke.

<sup>24</sup> JOAD, p. 85. This remark, although containing a grain of truth, is a gross overstatement, as some of Russell's chapters are certainly thorough and rigorous. Joad relates an amusing anecdote of a time where he read a paper criticizing *HWP* to the Aristotelian Society, in the presence of Russell himself, who was invited to respond. Joad describes how Russell's rhetorical ingenuity, showmanship, and sheer overbearing presence rendered him entirely incapable of defending his own opinions in the ensuing public conversation. See JOAD, *A Year More or Less* (1948), pp. 92–8.

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we may believe him admitted to the communion of saints; but as a philosopher he needs a long residence in a scientific purgatory.

(*HWP*<sub>3</sub>, p. 156)

As has been pointed out,<sup>25</sup> such criticisms are manifestly unfair. To demolish large parts of ancient and medieval philosophy through the application of thoroughly modern standards—such as the application of modern scientific or ethical assumptions, or the methodology of Russell’s own logical atomism—is anachronistic, and hence inappropriate in a history of philosophy.

A more serious charge, however, may be laid at Russell’s door regarding such anachronistic biases. Over and above his refusal to engage with less “interesting” parts of the philosophical canon, Russell occasionally appears incapable of extending sympathy—or even basic comprehension—to those parts of philosophy that offend his intellectual sensibilities. This often manifests itself in a rather superficial treatment of certain exceedingly complex and influential systems of metaphysics, such as those of Hegel and medieval Catholicism. More serious, however, is the inability to appreciate the deep-seated deontological nature of many monotheistic religions.<sup>26</sup> That these systems place a strong emphasis upon unequivocal duty and the pursuit of ethical-theological excellence for its own sake appears not to have been comprehended by our author. To perceive such systems as philosophical obtuseness at best, and world-repudiating escapism at worst, exhibits a lamentable degree of ahistorical rationalism. It is precisely this inability to comprehend a broad array of worldviews that has led some critics to wonder aloud at the extent to which Russell is even qualified to offer his disquisitions upon these subjects.<sup>27</sup>

This apparent lack of comprehension also betrays itself in Russell’s more casual descriptions, even of philosophical systems of which he thoroughly approves. For instance, Russell raises his eyebrows at Spinoza’s “astonishing proposition” (*HWP*<sub>3</sub>, p. 555) that the human mind may have an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God. As has been pointed out,<sup>28</sup> such a proposition is only astonishing for someone thoroughly educated in the Christian theological

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<sup>25</sup> TONGUE, p. 82.

<sup>26</sup> I owe this observation to BERLIN, p. 158.

<sup>27</sup> RATNER, pp. 39–40.

<sup>28</sup> RATNER, p. 41.

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tradition, in which God's essence is utterly impenetrable to man's finite and inadequate mind. A good historian of ideas must be capable of entering the minds of his or her subjects and describing the world from "within" such—by now seemingly foreign and antiquated—systems. Such an arrow was apparently absent from Russell's quiver.

Various other critiques have been made. Some have criticized Russell's narrative style, at once carefree and careless, in which opinions, dogmatic assertions, and unjustified conjecture are all mixed in with his more serious and philosophically rigorous discourse. Disentangling these conflicting modes of writing is neither simple nor especially edifying. Others<sup>29</sup> have noted that this tome is deficient from an academic perspective. There is no bibliography, the references are often incomplete or inconsistent, and translators rarely mentioned. Moreover, as with so many of his other historical works, Russell deigned to consult almost none of the excellent secondary literature on the subjects upon which he feels so confident in passing judgment.<sup>30</sup> He seems content to base his depictions upon a few basic historical works, along with the primary sources that he read.<sup>31</sup> One is forced to wonder whether his rather unusual and uncharitable perspectives on, say, Plato and Aristotle could have been tempered through perusing the writings of noted experts on the topic. Finally, some of Russell's opinions have been subjected to the charge of hypocrisy. For instance, Russell appears perfectly content to point out that William James' philosophy forms part of the "subjectivistic madness which is characteristic of most modern philosophy".<sup>32</sup> Yet, in one of the most extraordinary literary passages on his work, Russell appears to endorse a very similar position. When discussing the views of Nietzsche, Russell places him in an imagined dialogue with Buddha, with both of them defending their respective positions on the interrelated subjects of power and morality. Russell, for his part, admits to preferring Buddha's approach, yet maintains that

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<sup>29</sup> E.g., TONGUE, pp. 86–7.

<sup>30</sup> STUNKEL, p. 140.

<sup>31</sup> In truth, Russell's sources were a little broader than this characterization admits. A full bibliography of the sources used in *HWP* was compiled and published as ODGEN AND IRVINE, "A Bibliographical Index of Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*" (1999).

<sup>32</sup> *HWP*<sub>3</sub>, p. 773.

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I do not know how to prove that he is right by any arguments such as can be used in a mathematical or a scientific question. I dislike Nietzsche.... But I think the ultimate argument against his philosophy, as against any unpleasant but internally self-consistent ethic, lies not in an appeal to facts, but in an appeal to the emotions. (HWP<sub>3</sub>, p. 739)

While perhaps not being “mad”, such a statement may easily lead to a form of subjectivism similar to that which Russell denounces elsewhere.

Such a litany of criticism is grievous indeed. Its cumulative effect is to impugn Russell’s capabilities as an historian, philosopher, researcher, and writer, and would seriously undermine the usefulness of the *History*. Having taken all of this into account, I believe it possible to portray Russell’s endeavours in a more favourable light—as a consistent outgrowth of his own conception of the art of writing history and the task of the historian. The next part of this essay will outline Russell’s writings on the subject, underscoring the manner in which his own methodological principles explain these apparent shortcomings. While not exonerating Russell’s work of its historiographical flaws, this study aims to contextualize and illuminate them, showing that, through the writing of the *History*, Russell is—at least in his own eyes—discharging his duties as an historian.

#### IV. RUSSELL’S CONCEPTIONS OF HISTORY

As befitting a confessed avid consumer of the subject, Russell devoted a considerable measure of scholarly ink to the subjects of history, historians, and historiography. He wrote four reasonably systematic essays on this topic: “On History” (1904),<sup>33</sup> “The Materialist Theory of

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<sup>33</sup> *BW*, pp. 522–7; 5 in *Papers* 12. This earliest and most foundational essay that outlines Russell’s thoughts on history was written on the heels of—and in conjunction with—his good friend George Trevelyan’s assault on the scientific view of history, although it remains a matter of contention as to which of the two intellectuals influenced the other. For an overview of the genesis of, and similarities between, the views of Russell and Trevelyan, see STONE.

Additionally, Jane Duran has claimed that the 1904 essay exhibits a strong convergence with Russell’s evaluation of pragmatism, as well as being an early exemplar of Russell’s universalist humanism. I believe her to be correct about the first and too optimistic regarding the second. See DURAN, “Russell on History and Intrinsic Value” (2012).

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History" (1920),<sup>34</sup> "How to Read and Understand History" (1943),<sup>35</sup> and "History as an Art" (1954).<sup>36</sup> Remarkably—seeing as these essays span five decades, a feat few philosophers aside from Russell could claim—his views on the subject remain almost entirely consistent throughout. Perhaps all too aware of the messiness of the subject,<sup>37</sup> Russell studiously avoids delving into the meatier methodological questions involved in the writing of history, such as the nature and reliability of historical propositions or the extent to which verities may be derived from historical documentation. Instead, Russell's reflections in these essays derive in large part from his experience as a consumer of history, along with his personal proclivities in the realms of social reform. The following is an outline of his principal assertions in this field.

Russell conceives of history as both an art and a science.<sup>38</sup> On the one hand, it is scientific in two ways. First, because it seeks to ascertain facts, which is the basic condition and rule of a scientific endeavour, and second, because it seeks to extrapolate from these facts and discover the laws that govern the progress of human events. However, in the fully scientific fields, facts are only important in their ability to support or refute the establishment of general laws. It little interests the researcher that this particular chemical underwent that specific reaction—what interests her is the reaction's implications for some larger theory. While the establishment of such historical laws might constitute a proper and useful ambition for historians (and Russell does not deny, in principle, the possibility of such laws), they have never been discovered, nor is their discovery likely. The events of humankind involve too many small, incalculable variables that preclude the expression of neat uniformities. Because of this, historical facts in and of themselves maintain a broad value, even if they are purely descriptive, local, and unrepeatable. Generalizations concerning history, therefore, are likely to be true only "on the whole and in the main".<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *BW*, pp. 528–31; Pt. 2, Ch. 1 of *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*.

<sup>35</sup> In *Understanding History and Other Essays* (1957).

<sup>36</sup> *BW*, pp. 532–44; **22** in *Papers* 28.

<sup>37</sup> This reason is suggested by STUNKEL, p. 145.

<sup>38</sup> The ideological elements in this following paragraph come mainly from Russell's essay "History as an Art", *BW*, pp. 533–6; **22** in *Papers* 28, pp. 108–11.

<sup>39</sup> RUSSELL, "Materialist Theory of History", *BW*, p. 529; *PTB*, p. 121.

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It is this antipathy towards unwarranted generalization that leads Russell to reject overarching theories of history. In one memorable passage,<sup>40</sup> he inveighs against the grand historical theories of the previous century, describing Hegel's philosophy of history as quite as fantastic as the Egyptian Pyramid mythology, and dismissing Spengler's theories as gloomy hogwash. Interestingly, Marx receives more protracted and sympathetic attention. Russell readily admits that much of history and politics is heavily influenced by economic factors, and the usefulness of Marx's ideas in formulating general hypotheses.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, through underestimating the causal effect of intelligence and neglecting the influence of important individuals upon the trajectory of history, and by needlessly overextending the explanatory power of the class struggle, Marx's theories are too flawed to be accurate.<sup>42</sup> There is another reason, however, that Russell gives for dismissing iron-clad laws of history. Russell, unusually for philosophers, always maintains the philosophical importance of scientific and technological advancements.<sup>43</sup> The modern era, in his view, is qualitatively different from all former epochs, thus any trend that can accurately describe the development of, say, the Roman Empire is unlikely to accurately describe developments within the British Empire. The later world is simply too different. This attitude is reflected in the *History*, where such methodological predilections lead Russell to summarily dismiss any thinker, from Aquinas to Lenin, who proposes a necessary governing structure to history.

However, in the *History*, Russell does sketch a rough outline for the intellectual development of the West, which consists primarily of the unending war of the forces of superstition, fundamentalism, and muddled thinking against the forces of enlightenment, reason, and logical clarity. Moreover, Russell believes that an over-indulgence in mys-

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<sup>40</sup> RUSSELL, "How to Read and Understand History", pp. 15–16.

<sup>41</sup> This is another flaw in STONE's analysis (see n. 11). He portrays Russell as entirely hostile to Marx and his formulations, whereas here Russell does display a noticeable respect for the explanatory reach of Marx's ideas.

<sup>42</sup> While Russell certainly does exhibit respect for some of the basic elements of Marx's socioeconomic theories, there remain numerous, significant points of divergence between the two thinkers, not the least of which is Russell's firm commitment to the "Great Men" theory of history. It is for this reason that HOOK's characterization of Russell as a "critical Marxist" borders on the absurd ("Russell's Philosophy of History", p. 654).

<sup>43</sup> MONK, "Cambridge Philosophers, IX: Russell" (1999), p. 108.

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ticism and introspection—in other words, a lack of curiosity about the outside world—greatly weakens a society, and indeed heralded the downfall of ancient Greece as a world power. This general framework, also present in some of his other historical writings, has led several scholars<sup>44</sup> to assert that Russell was a Whig historian. This is a mistake. First, it ignores Russell's antipathy towards all forms of grand historical narrative. Second, it omits Russell's enduring pessimism about the content and direction of human history. Russell's works affirm his belief that human beings are tragically susceptible to mysticism, darkness, and stupidity, and that the small measure of reason and enlightenment that has been carved out by the very greatest men was stymied and stifled every inch of the way. There is absolutely nothing inevitable, stable, or natural about rational progress: "Throughout recorded history, progress has been the exception, not the rule."<sup>45</sup>

On the contrary, the *History* may well be read as an explicit riposte to the notion that the modern era has witnessed, or is indeed likely to witness, the triumph of rationalism and liberalism. Throughout the Modern section of the book, Russell traces two distinct intellectual traditions—the followers of Rousseau (the Romantic school) and the followers of Locke (the Liberal school).<sup>46</sup> The former give primacy to emotions, human collectives, and concentrated state power, whereas the latter prioritize rationality, individuals, and the diffusion of state power. Russell—who frequently uses such dichotomous generalizations, even while acknowledging their very limited use<sup>47</sup>—expends great effort in showing how modern philosophy has developed through both schools of thought and highlights the intellectual heft available to those anathematic ideologies against which he himself campaigned. Indeed, considering that the work was written during World War II and the establishment of the USSR as a global superpower, one can forgive Russell's implied belief that humanity's progress was under dire threat from numerous directions.

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<sup>44</sup> For instance see: STUNKEL, p. 132, and WILLIS, p. 118.

<sup>45</sup> RUSSELL, "How to Read and Understand History", p. 13.

<sup>46</sup> This is most explicitly expressed in *HWP*<sub>3</sub>, p. 660.

<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, *HWP*<sub>3</sub>, p. 618.

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## V. RUSSELL'S PRINCIPAL HISTORIOGRAPHIC CRITERIA

Over the course of the four essays Russell develops an intriguing but highly idiosyncratic portrait of the ideal historian. It is a portrait that he himself emulates throughout his historical writings and to a large degree succeeds. Before sketching this portrait, it is worth noting that Russell was not an academically trained historian and thus felt free to ignore conventions and standards that typically constrain this professional guild. Russell firmly believes that historians have an important role to play in the progress of humanity. Through the correct fulfilment of their task, historians have the power to enliven the past, contextualize the present, and mould the future. The historian is thus under a certain obligation to make sure that his work serves a beneficent social function, that it not merely informs but also illumines, edifies, and instructs. To this end, Russell offers seven criteria.

(1) First and foremost, the historian must write in a lucid and compelling manner. A dull historian is useless. The true calling of the historian is not the amassing of facts—which may be undertaken by an anonymous researcher—rather it is the weaving of these facts into a narrative that snares the reader's imaginative, emotional, and rational faculties. In this sense, Russell is far more fastidious with philosophers than historians. While he abhors philosophers who enliven their prose through the interweaving of rigorous ideas with flights of fancy, Russell lauds Thucydides and Herodotus for precisely this authorial trait.<sup>48</sup> He praises Plutarch for being an “easy-going gossipy writer, who cannot resist a good story”,<sup>49</sup> a description that may well explain the salacious biographical tangents in the *History*. More generally, this insistence on compelling historical penmanship may explain Russell's propensity for sacrificing the fullness of philosophical analysis in favour of witty asides, pungent aphorisms, and opinionated interpolations.

(2) Historians ought to write in a grand, epic manner. A localized, myopic history is unlikely to prove personally inspiring or socially galvanizing. Far better are those histories that seek to encapsulate an expansive stretch of time and space, exposing the reader to the great men, great forces, and great achievements that have wrenched the

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<sup>48</sup> I owe this insight to MADIGAN, “Six Degrees of Bertrand Russell” (2010), p. 65.

<sup>49</sup> RUSSELL, “How to Read and Understand History”, p. 21.

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narrative of history in one direction or another. This propensity explains Russell's veneration of Edward Gibbon, author of the majestic *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. To Russell's mind, Gibbon's scope was a model for all:

No one has ever presented the pageant of history better than he has done.... [A] colossal undertaking, but he never lost sight of the unity of his theme, or of the proportions to be preserved among its several parts. This required a grasp of a great whole which is beyond the power of most men, and which, for all his shortcomings, puts Gibbon in the first rank among historians. ("How to Read and Understand History", p. 22)

Russell likely had this exemplar in mind when setting out to write the *History*, a book with a suitably sweeping historical scope of two and a half millennia but which is nonetheless unified by the endeavour to confront the perennially perplexing nest of questions that lie at the heart of philosophy. Such a book requires a delicate balancing act—maintaining an engaging style and social relevance, while at the same time sacrificing as little of the broader landscape of detail as possible. This dual ambition, which Russell believes to be the correct template for all historians, may go some way to explaining his editorial choices while writing the *History*. To maintain a suitable diachronic sweep, only those elements of a philosopher's oeuvre or biography that he felt to be of public interest and relevance, which were at the same time pertinent to the main themes of the book, could be included in his narrative.

(3) The historian must endeavour to produce a work that reflects a unified, subjective, distinctive point of view. For Russell, historians are wrong to attempt an impartial, objective representation of the past.<sup>50</sup> Not only is such an endeavour chimerical, it undercuts the true object of good historical writing. The past is dramatic, and thus should be dramatized, in the name of engaging its audience. Heroes ought to be portrayed as heroic, and villains as villainous. Historians ought to celebrate their partisanship, to make it explicit and essential to their writing, thereby inviting the reader to invest themselves emotionally in the historical narrative, whether in agreement or disagreement with the historian's own judgment. Thus the reader finds the *History* to be

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<sup>50</sup> RUSSELL, "History as an Art", *BW*, p. 537; 22 in *Papers* 28: 112–13.



worlds away from the more objective histories of philosophy. Russell fills his work with an amusing and substantial gallery of rogues (principally those whose ideas flirted with mysticism, such as Pythagoras, Plato, and Hegel) as well as a smaller yet consequential pantheon of heroes (such as John the Scot, Spinoza, and Locke). Concomitantly, Russell asserted that histories ought to be written by one person, so that a single temperamental outlook and ideological framework may inform the work as a whole. Those who criticized Russell's partiality towards his subjects in the *History* were likely unaware that, in Russell's view, such partiality is a historiographical ideal. After all, how else can the historian engage the novice?

(4) Good history ought to be presentist and didactic. Historians are educators—they ought to view themselves as responsible for educating the public concerning the triumphs and follies of the past, the better to guide present decisions. While eschewing the formation of definitive laws, historical writers ought to be in the business of imparting lessons, the more explicit the better. (This disposition dovetails well with Russell's belief in his own duty, as a public intellectual, to wade into the political fray and pronounce judgment upon a wide array of events and policies.) The historically educated, in his view, must work to ensure that future actions are free from the follies of the past. This principle also lends insight into the standards that Russell utilizes for selecting those philosophical systems on which he decided to write. As he explains,<sup>51</sup> the historian must have other criteria apart from truth by which to select his documents (otherwise every history would be unimaginably lengthy and boring). Present social utility appears to be high on Russell's personal list. This didactic ideal *might* explain many of the opinionated asides within the *History*, whose purpose is to guide the common reader towards Russell's understanding of what constitutes "good" and "bad" philosophy.

(5) The historian must stress the role of the individual within the historical process.<sup>52</sup> While Russell admitted that the histories of states, organizations, and classes of individuals may be useful, he also believed that historians of his era overemphasized the effects of these entities at the expense of individuals both simple and extraordinary. While taking pains to distance himself from the "cult of hero worship"

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<sup>51</sup> RUSSELL, "On History", *BW*, p. 522; 5 in *Papers* 12, pp. 76–7.

<sup>52</sup> RUSSELL, "How to Read and Understand History", p. 41.

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exemplified by Nietzsche and Carlyle,<sup>53</sup> Russell was nonetheless a firm believer in what has come to be known as the “Great Men” view of historical progress.<sup>54</sup> The contours of history were shaped by a few hundred unique individuals, who cannot be reduced to mere by-products of their social or intellectual surroundings.<sup>55</sup> The world would simply not be what it is today without Napoleon or Shakespeare, and there is no good reason to suppose that, had they not existed, others would have matched their achievements. Such a belief underwrote Russell’s antipathy towards those theorists of history who would entirely erase the achievements of individuals in the wake of more collective historical causes. This focus upon individuals also explains the architecture of the *History*, whose chapters are almost exclusively dedicated to—indeed entitled by the names of—great individual philosophers. Philosophy, under this conception, is a canon of works created by less than a hundred important individuals, all of whom managed to transcend the narrow confines of their intellectual clime. Not for Russell are the modern philosophical radicals, who insist that contemporary philosophy must consign its history—which is replete with the works of “dead white men”—to the ash heap of antiquarian obsolescence. In this sense, Russell may be categorized as a decidedly “conservative” historian, who believes that the philosopher must consider and engage with the great luminaries of philosophy in order to be considered as working within the confines of the discipline.<sup>56</sup> This conception of philosophy is different from the history written by others such as Anthony Flew, whose *An Introduction to Western Philosophy*

<sup>53</sup> RUSSELL, “History as an Art”, *BW*, pp. 540–1; 22 in *Papers* 28, p. 116.

<sup>54</sup> A considerable section of HOOK’s essay (pp. 664–72) is dedicated to an analysis of Russell’s “Great Men” conception of history. Despite broadly agreeing with this conception, Hook aptly demonstrates the various internal tensions and contradictions within this conception of history.

<sup>55</sup> Russell’s most unambiguous passage on this subject reads as follows: “It is customary amongst a certain school of sociologists to minimize the importance of intelligence, and to attribute all great events to large impersonal causes. I believe this to be an entire delusion. I believe that if a hundred of the men of the seventeenth century had been killed in infancy, the modern world would not exist” (*The Scientific Outlook* [1931, revised 1949], p. 35). Interestingly, in his response to HOOK’s criticisms, Russell admits that HOOK’s critique of the “Great Men” theory of history has some merit, and that one hundred is probably too low a number of individuals to whom we may ascribe the scientific revolution. Yet, maintains Russell, the general principle remains sound. See RUSSELL, “Reply to Criticisms”, p. 739.

<sup>56</sup> REE, AYERS, AND WESTOBY, *Philosophy and Its Past* (1978), p. 18.

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(1971) centres around philosophical problems, schools, and trends, as opposed to salient individuals.

Russell's historical individualism—of a piece with his general humanist convictions—entails a further, most consequential belief in the intellectual autonomy and distinctiveness of individual philosophers. In the Introduction to his monograph on Leibniz (*PL*, pp. xix–xx), Russell notes that there are essentially two ways of formulating an intellectual history. The first is manifestly historical: to trace ideas through their historical iterations and establish patterns of influence between thinkers without necessarily paying great attention to the inner workings or plausibility of any specific intellectual framework. While historically thorough, this approach undercuts the importance of individual thinkers, who are framed as the end product of broader intellectual forces. The second way involves examining the history of thought in the spirit of philosophical inquiry, essentially treating each of the great thinkers as producing an autonomous system of thought, which must be examined on its own merits. While not entirely obviating the need for historical analysis, this approach seeks to understand thinkers almost as suspended, disconnected intellectual entities, much as an analytical philosopher might approach classic philosophical problems themselves.

Intriguingly, and despite his protestations to the contrary, Russell's *History* resoundingly favours the second option. He insists upon treating the great philosophers as autonomous, distinct individuals who are assumed to be in possession of critical faculties sufficient to formulate a system that can withstand rational scrutiny. As a consequence, Russell feels entitled to subject every philosopher to the baptism of ice water that is Russell's rationalist, scientifically oriented critique, a method of probing analysis that Berlin termed a "running fire of refutation".<sup>57</sup> While such a critique may stray into the anachronistic,

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<sup>57</sup> BERLIN, p. 155. Russell's confidence in undertaking this kind of rigorous and unsparring analysis of all his eminent predecessors is explained in the final chapter of *HWP* in which Russell introduces "logical analysis", the philosophical school in which, at that point in his career, he considered himself a member. This school pursues a mode of analysis that seeks to "combine empiricism with an interest in the deductive parts of human knowledge", the achievements of which, according to Russell, "are as solid as those of the men of science." It is this firm belief in the superiority of his own methodology, and especially its capacity to expose fallacious thinking of previous eras, that underwrites *HWP*'s "running fire of refutation".

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Russell's actions imply an abiding respect for the intellectual robustness and individuality of his illustrious forebears, as well as a single-minded determination to evaluate the truth of every philosophical position he discusses. Russell's preference for a more ahistorical approach may also explain the apparent disconnect between the historical and philosophical elements of the *History*. While he confirms the importance of historical background in understanding the challenges and conundrums faced by each philosopher, he does not see such background as in any way determining their conclusions. Not even the marginal members of Russell's pantheon can be explained, in full or in large part, through an analysis of circumstantial trends and ideas.

(6) A historian must be self-assured and iconoclastic, ready and willing to destroy the cozy historical myths within which most great figures remain comfortably cocooned. The most common and most pernicious of these, in Russell's view,<sup>58</sup> is the mistaken portrait—forced upon most students—of the “serenity” of history's great figures. Apparently, those who are taught history by severe, prudish, and unobtrusive schoolmasters labour under the illusion that titanic figures such as Plato, Shakespeare, or Galileo lived and wrote in an equally severe, prudish, and unobtrusive manner. The greats were thus forced into a “serene” mould, in which they expressed no offensive or iconoclastic thought. Russell's historian must work to disrupt and discredit such representations. Great historical individuals achieved what they did precisely because they disregarded the social and intellectual conventions of their time, greatly upsetting the stuffy and ossified loci of power. The complexity of individuals, both heroic and villainous, is a foundation of Russell's historiography, which may well account for the rather eccentric biographies he provides for his subjects in the *History*. Every thinker, whether classified as a “hero” or “villain”, is exhibited in all his convoluted and self-undermining glory. The honest historian can do no less.

(7) Aside from all that has been mentioned above, Russell also conceived of a loftier, more existentially urgent role that history plays within society, one which almost certainly influenced his crafting of the *History*. For Russell, mankind is ultimately doomed.<sup>59</sup> As purely

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<sup>58</sup> RUSSELL, “How to Read and Understand History”, pp. 39–40.

<sup>59</sup> Russell states this at length in the introductory paragraphs of his famous essay “A

physical creatures without an immortal soul, we are inexorably condemned to expire and decay. Our species as a whole will likely go extinct long before the sun explodes and the earth is rendered uninhabitable. Our individual existence, even if we are one of those fortunate few who may spend our days attending to more than our own subsistence, will likely produce little of lasting value. Yet somehow, our species as a whole has forged for itself a magnificent story—a landscape of peaks and troughs, of ennoblement and debasement, that bestows significance upon even its most unremarkable participants. History permits us to contextualize our own pitiful lives within a grander narrative and enjoins us to play some role within the gradual uptick of human fortunes. An intellectual history of western civilization, of the sort that Russell crafted, allows as broad an audience as possible to situate itself within the story. The reader, with Russell as guide, may witness the triumphs and foibles of the great human minds, comprehend the agonizing trajectory of humankind towards a better understanding of the world, and thus resolve to maximize his or her own role within this redemptive drama. For it is only through this collective story that humans may transcend, however briefly, their awful earth-bound fate. In a memorable passage, Russell spells out the tremendous existential importance of participating in this unfolding drama of understanding the world:

The slave is doomed to worship Time and Fate and Death, because they are greater than anything he finds in himself, and because all his thoughts are of things which they devour. But, great as they are, to think of them greatly, to feel their passionless splendour, is greater still. And such thought makes us free men....<sup>60</sup>

The *History* was written to remind its readers of how far we have come as a species, how far there is left to travel, and how much more improvement must be made in order to construct a world that may edify the brief sojourn of its inhabitants. It is, therefore, a work unlike any other history of philosophy, for it perceives its mission as urgent, existential, and redemptive.<sup>61</sup> This contextualization, this historically

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Free Man's Worship" (*BW*, pp. 66ff.; 4 in *Papers* 12, pp. 66ff.).

<sup>60</sup> RUSSELL, "A Free Man's Worship", *BW*, p. 71; 4 in *Papers* 12, p. 71.

<sup>61</sup> Hook claimed that Russell's social and historical works tended to oscillate between a kind of stoic, fatalistic attitude towards the (ultimately doomed) future of mankind

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oriented realization of both our collective mortality and the moral urgency of philosophical progress, serves to uplift and unite all who are cognizant of this reality. For Russell, it was crucial to make the point that not all worldviews are equal, that—during a time when both the Nazis and the Soviets had ascended to global power—some philosophies can have truly pernicious outcomes, and that philosophical error must be exposed by the unsparing light of rational inquiry. Put otherwise, the *History* was written in the desperate hope that it could play a role in staving off unnecessary, man-made catastrophes that threatened to undo millennia of progress.<sup>62</sup> Could there have been a more urgent task for the decade of the 1940s?

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Russell the philosophical historian emerges neither as quite the saint that some thought him to be, nor the irredeemable sinner that others accused him of being. On the one hand, many of the criticisms levelled at his historiography may be countered by pointing out the role that his own ideologically oriented preconceptions of history and historiography played in the formation of the *History*. The book's apparent partisanship, informal manner, over-ambitious scope, and idiosyncratic selection of subjects are all consistent with Russell's ideals of the historian's task. His historical understanding of the genesis or formation of philosophy, along with his insistence upon portraying each philosopher as an intellectually and ideologically distinct personality, explains his combative authorial style. Additionally, his reliance upon simplistic dichotomies and archetypes—such as the depiction of modern philosophy as a battle between the followers of Locke and

and a firm belief in the necessity of direct and uncompromising action in the direction of peace and justice. See HOOK, p. 675. If this is indeed the case, then *HWP* may be understood as an implicit yet emphatic example of the latter attitude.

<sup>62</sup> Russell believed that his own philosophy, which he termed (in the final chapter of *HWP*) “logical analysis”, to be important in this struggle. Russell understood this form of philosophizing—analysis stripped of presuppositions and sentimentality—to be the royal road to understanding the great truths of the world, without recourse to the sort of obfuscations and metaphysics that he considered to be the basis of tyrannical political systems. This, in his estimation, ranked as a genuine contribution toward “a lessening of fanaticism with an increasing capacity of sympathy and mutual understanding” (*HWP*<sub>3</sub>, p. 789). But this very brief exposition of his own school of thought hardly justifies or explains the massive endeavour of writing this large book.

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Rousseau—may be informed by Russell’s understanding of the historian as educator and moulder of political discourse, as well as by his keen grasp of the world’s contemporary political predicament.

On the other hand, this exploration of Russell’s opinions on history and historiography hardly exonerates him of the manifest flaws of the *History*. His inability to enter the minds of his subjects and explore foreign worldviews “from within” indubitably hampers his analyses and judgments. His factual errors and philosophical misrepresentations, when they occur, cannot be explained away by authorial exuberance or social responsibility. His failure to undertake thorough secondary research for this book, as well as his propensity to blithely ignore the existence of philosophers who apparently did not interest him, permanently undercut any claims this book might have to thoroughness or nuanced judgments. Some of the criticisms levelled at Russell’s *History* have not been explained or contextualized by the framework offered in this essay, for the simple reason that no such exculpations exist. Several criticisms stand as valid and accurate. Russell’s historical methodology, despite all attempted justifications, remains vulnerable to serious objection.

Finally, one must consider that it is difficult to argue with success. Russell’s *History* largely achieved its presumed aims. It has sold widely, edified and amused its general audience, and proved enduringly impactful. One may argue that the book, through its somewhat cavalier attitude towards truth and impartiality, has done no great service to philosophy. But one cannot deny that the book has rendered a great service to the study of intellectual history, to the widespread understanding of the manifold ways in which great minds have sought to understand the world about them. This alone suffices to ensure its lasting value.

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