Quotations on History

compiled by

Robert Blackey

Truth is the only merit that gives dignity and worth to history.
Lord Acton (English historian)

The historian must not try to know what is truth, if he values his honesty: for if he cares for his truths, he is certain to falsify his facts.
Henry Adams

History is not what you thought. It is what you can remember. All other history defeats itself.
Anonymous

"...History, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in. Can you?"
"Yes, I am fond of history."
"I wish I were too. I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all--it is very tiresome."
Jane Austen (*Northanger Abbey*, ch. 14)

History is the memory of things said and done.
Carl Becker (presidential address, American Historical Association, 1931)

The facts of history do not exist for any historian til he creates them.
Carl Becker

History does not repeat itself. The historians repeat one another.
Max Beerbohm

History: An account mostly false, of events unimportant, which are brought about by rulers mostly knaves, and soldiers mostly fools.
Ambrose Bierce (US writer)

A good writer of history is a guy who is suspicious.
Jim Bishop

History is just one long string of atrocities. You could say history is atrocious. The best way to find out what they did is to find out where they hid the bodies.
David Bradley (*The Chaneysville Incident*, 1981)

Happiness, whether in business or private life, leaves very little trace in history.
Fernand Braudel (French historian)

The chief practical use of history is to deliver us from plausible historical analogies.
James Bryce

The ultimate reason for studying history is to become conscious of the possibilities of human existence.
Rudolf Bultman

History...is the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another.
Jacob Burckhardt (Swiss historian, 1818-97)

It is the historian's function, not to make us clever for the next time, but to make us wise forever.
Jacob Burckhardt

Since God himself cannot change the past, He is obliged to tolerate the existence of historians.
Samuel Butler

The history of the world is but the biography of great men.
Thomas Carlyle (*Heroes and Hero-Worship*, 1841)

History is a great dust-heap.
Thomas Carlyle

To enable man to understand the society of the past and to increase his mastery over the society of the present is the dual function of history.
Edward H. Carr (*What is History?*, 1962)

History thrives on generalizations.
Edward H. Carr

The study of history is the study of causes.
Edward H. Carr

...historians ought to be precise, truthful, and quite unprejudiced, and neither interest nor fear, hatred nor affection, should cause them to swerve from a path of truth, whose mother is history.
Miguel de Cervantes (*Don Quixote*)

Everything is the sum of its past and nothing is comprehensible except through its history.
Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

[History is] a useless heap of facts.
Lord Chesterfield

Such a lot of things seem to me such rot. History, for example. Why it's quit different out of different books.
Agatha Christie (*The Moving Finger*)

History is the witness of the times, the light of truth, the life of memory, the teacher of life, the messenger of antiquity.
Cicero (143-106 BCE)

Those who have no knowledge of what has gone before them must forever remain children.
Cicero

History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illumines reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life, and brings us tidings of antiquity.

Cicero

The value of history...is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is.

R.G. Collingwood

Nothing capable of being memorized is history.

R.G. Collingwood

All history is contemporary history.

Benedetto Croce (1941)

What man is, only history tells.

Wilhelm Dilthey

The chief lesson to be derived from the study of the past, is that it holds no simple lesson, and...the historian's main responsibility is to prevent anyone from claiming that it does."

Martin Duberman

The past always looks better than it was; it's only pleasant because it isn't here.

Finley Peter Dunne

An individual experience...is always limited and commonly distorted by prejudice and self-interest: what men and women need is an enlarged experience against which to measure the effect of those disadvantages....History provides the laboratory in which human experience is analyzed, distilled and bottled for use. The so-called lessons of history do not teach you to do this or that now; they teach you to think more deeply, more completely and on the basis of an enormously enlarged experience, about what it may be possible or desirable to do now....Instead of telling us that certain conditions can be shown, from past experience, to lead to certain consequences, history forever demonstrates the unexpectedness of the event and so instills a proper skepticism in the face of all those vast and universal claims. A knowledge of the past should arm a man against surrendering to the panaceas peddled by too many mythmakers.

G.R. Elton (*Return to Essentials: Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study*, 1992)

History records the names of royal bastards, but cannot tell us the origin of wheat.

Jean Henri Fabre

History cannot be reduced to simply bringing texts and ancient documents to the light of day. Whether one wishes or not, it is a thoughtful recital that each generation consecrates to its past, re-thought each time in a new way, reformulated by the resurgence of new events and problems.

Arlette Farge (French historian, 1986)

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

William Faulkner (US novelist)

If History teaches any lessons at all, it is that there are no historical lessons.

Lucien Febvre

[History is] not objects, mere shells of the past, hieroglyphic whorls. It [is] perceived relationships, patterns formed by passion and power.
Thomas Flanagan (*Year of the French*)

Our ignorance of history makes us libel our own times. People have always been like this.
Gustave Flaubert (French novelist)

History is more or less bunk.
Henry Ford (*Chicago Tribune*, May 25, 1916)

The writing of history reflects the interests, predilections, and even prejudices of a given generation.
John Hope Franklin

History maketh a young man old without either wrinkles or gray hairs, privileging him the experience of age without either the inconveniences or infirmities thereof.
Thomas Fuller

I think it would be a good idea.
Mahatma Gandhi (in response to being asked what he thought of Western civilization)

History never looks like history when you are living through it. It always looks confusing and messy, and it always looks uncomfortable.
John W. Gardner

True history, by ensuring, not mobility, but continuity, is indispensable for the preservation of civilization.
Pieter Geyl (Dutch historian)

History cuts down to the deepest issues of life.
Pieter Geyl

History is indeed an argument without end.
Pieter Geyl

History....is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind.
Edward Gibbon (*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1776-78)

Only a person who is cognizant of the past can be a truly ‘practical’ man.
Wood Gray (US historian)

The history of the world is the unfolding of human freedom.
Hegel (German philosopher)

[History is] a trash bag of random coincidences torn open in the wind.
Joseph Heller (*Good as Gold*)

History is not only the most important subject, it’s the only subject. If you don’t know it, you don’t know anything.
Charlton Heston (*Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 1979)

History is not a narrative of events. The historian's difficult task is to explain what happened.
Christopher Hill (English historian)

History has to be written because history is the selection of those threads of causes or antecedents that we are interested in.
Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

In reality, what more agreeable entertainment to the mind, than to be transported into the remotest ages of the world....What amusement, either of the sense or imagination, can be compared to it.
David Hume (English philospoher)

That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons history has to teach.
Aldous Huxley (English writer)

History is essential to wisdom and statesmanship. It teaches the young the virtues of freedom. By apprising them of the past it will enable them to judge the future; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise and knowing it, to defeat its views.
Thomas Jefferson

History is like being on an oceanliner, churning up the past behind while you push ahead, not really knowing what will be there.
Paul Johnson

History is made out of the failure and heroism of each insignificant moment.
Franz Kafka

...give man a view of the thoughts and actions of his predecessors through the ages, and of mankind around him. They tell him about his roots and his origins and his neighbors. They impel him to ask the basic questions. What is the meaning of life? Where have I come from? Where am I going? What do I believe? Why?
Charles R. Keller (US historian)

Our custom of taking records and preserving them is the main barrier that separates us from the scattered-brained races of monkey. For it is this extension of memory that permits us to draw upon experience and which allows us to establish a common pool of wisdom....Knowledge which not merely sees us through the trivial decisions of the moment, but also stands by in the far more important times of personal or public crisis.
Sherman Kent (*Writing History*, 1941)

Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.
Soren Kierkegaard

The task of the historian is to keep the remembered past alive, to put questions to the past from the present, and to see ourselves and our own time in the mirror of the past.
Max Lerner (US journalist)

History doesn't judge, it is simply there to be acknowledged and improved upon.
Flora Lewis (*The New York Times*, December 20, 1983)

We cannot escape history...we will be remembered in spite of ourselves...the fiery trial through which we pass will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation.
Abraham Lincoln (Second Annual Message to Congress, 1862)

In studying man's past we are also, inevitably, studying ourselves. In doing so, our empathetic capacity is our most valuable, and most humane, tool of understanding.
Peter Loewenberg (*Decoding the Past*, 1983)

If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

History as she is harped. Rite words in rote order.
Marshall McLuhan (*Understanding the Medium*)

The essential matter of history is not what happened but what people thought or said about it.
F.W. Maitland (English historian)

History is a people's memory, and without a memory man is demoted to the lower animals.
Malcolm X

History repeats itself; the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.
Karl Marx

The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles.
Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels (*The Communist Manifesto*, 1848)

History is the best way to learn disrespect for the present.
Jules Michelet (French historian)

The historian's first duties are sacrilege and the mocking of false gods. They are his indispensable instruments for establishing truth.
Jules Michelet

History is not a trick the living play on the dead or even a trick the dead play on the living, but rather a mutual transaction among the now-living and the once-living.
Howard S. Miller (Missouri Historical Society, March 15, 1980)

History is the shank of the social sciences.
C. Wright Mills

There is no such thing as human history. Nothing can be more profoundly, sadly true. The annals of mankind have never been written, never can be written....We have a leaf or two torn from the great book of human fate as it flutters in the storm-winds ever sweeping across the earth. We decipher

them as best we can with purblind eyes, and endeavor to learn their mystery as we float along to the abyss; but it is all confused babble, hieroglyphics of which the key is lost.

John Lothrop Motley (New York Historical Society, December 16, 1868)

Everyone should be forced to read history since it is the only study which corrects the contemporary complaint of an undue sense of urgency.

Malcolm Muggeridge

The history of an age is not the history of a solution of a number of problems, but the history of the struggle between several possible solutions, and of the way in which men working towards certain solutions are constantly deflected from their paths by other men working for other solutions.

Peter Munz

History gives us an intuitive understanding of how things do NOT happen.

Sir Lewis Namier (English historian)

History is a pack of lies agreed upon.

Napoleon

The only completely unbiased historian is...the Recording Angel; and doubtless he has convictions (which to Satan, as Mark Twain irreverently suggested, would seem prejudiced).

Allan Nevins (*The Gateway to History*, 1938)

The study of history is said to enlarge and enlighten the mind. Why? Because...it gives a power of judging of passing events, and of all events, and a conscious superiority over them, which before it did not possess.

John Henry Cardinal Newman (*On the Scope and Nature of University Education*)

The past is the present....It's the future too. We all try to lie out of that but life won't let us.

Eugene O'Neill (US playwright)

Whoever controls the past controls the future.

George Orwell (English writer)

History is a community's memory, and a community without history is like a man without his memory.

C. Northcote Parkinson (*Saturday Review*, July 24, 1971)

History is the crystallization of popular belief.

Donn Piatt

The materials of history can never all be collected, for they can never be known. Problems cannot all be solved, for, as they are solved, new aspects are perpetually revealed. The historian opens the way; he does not close it.

Henri Pirenne (French historian)

Those who tell the stories also rule the society.

Plato

History reveals what may be prudent.
J.H. Plumb (English historian)

History offers the best training for those who are to take part in public affairs.
Polybius (125 BCE)

The duty of every man who knows the history of men is to share that history, for every human experience can be useful to all mankind.
Rabbi of Gur (Poland)

The talent of historians lies in their creating a true ensemble out of facts which are but half-true.
Ernest Renan

History repeats itself, says the proverb, but that is precisely what it never really does. It is the historians (of a sort) who repeat themselves.
Clement F. Rogers (English Theologian, 1866-1946)

When a society or a civilization perishes, one condition can always be found: they forget where they came from.
Carl Sandburg (US poet and author)

A country without a memory is a country of madmen.
George Santayana (US philosopher)

When experience (which is history) is not retained...infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.
George Santayana

The historian is a prophet looking backwards.
August Wilhelm von Schlegel

History haunts even generations who refuse to learn history. Rhythms, patterns, continuities, drift out of time long forgotten to mold the present and to color the shape of things to come. Science and technology revolutionize our lives, but memory, tradition and myth frame our response. Expelled from individual consciousness by the rush of change, history finds its revenge by stamping the collective unconscious with habits, values, expectations, dreams.
Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (*The New York Times Magazine*, July 27, 1986)

We cannot leave history behind us as we make it. It still stays with us to warn and to inspire.
James T. Shotwell (US historian)

History is the study of human beings involved in extraordinary drama, and its dramatic qualities are related to the moral values inherent in all life. History is in large part the story of men and women who have suffered and sacrificed to create the world in which we live....History is concerned with the actions of individuals and social groups, and since such action almost invariably has been undertaken in the name of certain values and ideas, the historian must make judgments on the actors and their actions.
Page Smith (*The Historian and History*, 1966)

Ignorance is the first requisite of the historian, ignorance which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits.

Lytton Strachey (19th-century English writer)

With the historian it is an article of faith that knowledge of the past is a key to understanding the present.

Kenneth Stampp

We will define history as a mental construct of the past based on evidence which has been carefully subjected to the tests of validity and then critically and systematically ordered and interpreted to present a story of [humans'] interaction with other [humans] in a society.

Lester Stephens (*Probing the Past*)

History can help us shake off the shackles of ethnocentricism and the debilitating bias of cultural and racial purity....History helps us to illuminate the human condition.

Lester Stephens

So long as we have this itch for explanation must we not always carry around with us this cumbersome but precious bag of clues called History?

Graham Swift (*Waterland*, 1984)

We are one-tenth living tissue, nine-tenths water; life is one-tenth Here and Now, nine-tenths a history lesson.

Graham Swift (*Waterland*, 1984)

The great lesson of history is that there are no lessons of history.

A.J. P. Taylor (English historian)

Facts are an historian's stock in trade....I love the facts of history, but not for their own sake. I love them as clues of something beyond them--as clues to the nature and meaning of the mysterious universe in which every human being awakes to consciousness.

Arnold Toynbee (English historian)

The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, generation vanishing after another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone.

George M. Trevelyan (English historian)

It is the fact about the past that is poetic; just because it really happened, it gathers round it all the inscrutable mystery of life and death and time. Let the science and research of the historian find the fact, and let his imagination and art make clear its significance.

George M. Trevelyan (*History of England*)

History is the unfolding of miscalculations.

Barbara Tuchman (US historian)

The history of the world is the record of man in quest of his daily bread and butter.

Hendrik Van Roon (*The Story of Mankind*, 1921)

History is only a pack of tricks we play on the dead.
Voltaire

Ancient histories are but fables that have been agreed upon.
Voltaire

History makes one shudder and laugh by turns.
Horace Walpole

History is lived forward but is written in retrospect. We know the end before we consider the beginning and we can never wholly recapture what it was to know the beginning only.
C.V. Wedgwood (*William the Silent*)

The function of history...is to describe and make understandable the forces which have shaped the destiny of man and brought him to the present time equipped as he now is with these ideas and institutions.
Walter Prescott Webb

Human history is in essence a history of ideas.
H.G. Wells (*Outline of History*, 1920)

History is one just as chemistry is one, a story that has to be told as a whole before it can be dealt with in part.
H.G. Wells

It is sometimes very hard to tell the difference between history and the smell of a skunk.
Rebecca West (English novelist)

The central methodological problem for the historian...is to know how to interrogate witnesses, how to test evidence, how to assess the reliability and the relevance of testimony.
Robin Winks

History is a means of access to ourselves.
Lynn White, Jr.

Politics, in the course of becoming history, is the story of a handful of men reaching for the levers of power.
Theodore White (*In Search of History*)

The great achievements of the past were the adventures of the past. Only the adventurous can understand the greatness of the past.
Alfred North Whitehead

The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order.
Alfred North Whitehead

He to whom the present is the only thing that is present knows nothing of the age in which he lives.
Oscar Wilde (British writer)

The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.
Oscar Wilde

The worst possible enemy to society is that man...is cut loose in his standards of judgment from the past; and universities which train men to use their minds without carefully establishing the connection of their thought with that of the past, are instruments of social destruction.
Woodrow Wilson (US president and historian)

History...is not [merely] the past. It is an intellectual process...[the function of which is] to cleanse the story of mankind from the deceiving visions of [a] purposeful past.
C. Vann Woodward (US historian)

The best that history has to give us is the enthusiasm which it arouses.
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

The writing of history is a method of getting rid of the past.
Goethe

We all of us live upon the past, and through the past we are destroyed.
Goethe

The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.
Oscar Wilde

Without a vivid link to the past, the present is chaos and the future unreadable.
Jason Epstein (*Book Business*, 2001)

History is like a bloodstain that keeps on showing on the wall no matter how many new owners take possession, no matter how many times we paint over it.
Peter Carey (*30 Days in Sydney*, 2001)