

THE HISTORIAN'S CRAFT: A book review

This book review will discuss a book that introduces the reader to a lot of concepts that were known including, place in time, men, observations, criticism, analysis, and causation.

THE HISTORIANS CRAFT

The Historians Craft By Marc Bloch is a book that introduces the reader to a lot of concepts, that were know but put in a different way, about history's, place in time, men, observations, criticism, analysis, and causation. However Bloch's arguments and explanations are written for experienced historians because he gives no introductions to the examples of people and places that he selected. I believe that the average person would not get through this book because the reader would not have a clue as to what Bloch is saying when he mentions the Rhine, Marie Antoinette, Odessa, Philip The Bold etc... The reader would literally need an encyclopaedia to understand the names and places as they read to have some perspective as to what Bloch is talking about. Therefore because of the unusualness of this book I have chosen to write this review in the same way that the book was written. That is to say this review was written using topics to show my understanding of what Bloch was saying with as little introduction to the topics as bloch did in the same fashion.

Bloch mentions how important it is to understand the past in order to understand the present, which I agree with totally. For example in order to understand thegrievances of Quebecois towards the English you have to know how these grievances came about, which would help explain the present day movement to separate Quebec from Canada. Another example in understanding the past would be to search for the apparent grievances of World War II. Here you would have to look at the past especially World War I to understand this specific situation. Some examples could lead you further into ancient civilization or simpler topics could lead you to modern archives. Archives of a certain period as Bloch mentions could be misleading because historians have to consider the climate of the era in which the work was written and by whom it was written. Diaries of German people are going to have very different opinions than diaries of Jewish people, in 1943. Furthermore the point of view of someone who was Jewish living in Germany maybe very

different in 1939 than in 1943 after the final solution took place. So as you can see facts withintwo groups can vary, even within a single group, in less than five years. Furthermore facts that are given might be false because propoganda also plays an important role in history reaching its venus in World War II. Propaganda and different points of view explains Bloch's mention of how "different people came to know what they know in the present".

The wording in archival writings of a particular era may mean something different in another era or might entail a different experience thus confusing historians that look back on these documents. For example Blitzkrieg may mean lightning warfare in both WWI and WWII but lightning warfare may mean men running from one trench to the other in WWI where as in WWII it might mean plains tanks and mechanized warfare savagely bombing cities to ruins and causing mass murders. Bloch mentions the importance of the past, which I agree with, because anything that happens in the present was caused by something that occurred in the past. I would be willing to take it a step further by saying that most of the answers to our problems not only come from the past but can be solved by the past as well. A good example for this is Hitler, had he read Napoleon's book he might have prepared his troops for a winter campaign. Essentially as Bloch says "misunderstanding the present is the direct result of ignorance of the past". Furthermore Bloch contradictorily says that the task of the historians understands the living, which is supported by his saying that "Historical phenomenon could never be understood apart from its place in time". This suggest that Bloch is really saying, that we could never understand the present without fully understanding the past when in fact we could never understand the past and could only understand the present that we live in.

Observation, being in the middle of this contradiction, of the present by historians therefore becomes entirely crucial to the recording of history. History is based on observation whether through one's own eyes or through someone else's writing. In fact bloch points out that no historian is able of observing the facts in which he examines with which I totally agree. I agree because any historian wishing to understand a present concept will be forced to research in the past for documents, which were written by some one else.

Therefore as Bloch states most of what we see is through the eyes of others. This is especially true of the generations that have been brought up with computers and television, which see and experience the world for them. These generations are starting to suffer the effects of these technologies in terms of health and socialization. The younger generation has learned to, replace the experience of going to the library with the internet system, replaced going to the zoo by watching a

documentary on T.V., replaced experiencing live shows by a video cassette. This generation is more dependant on the technological aspect of life rather than a human aspect which adds a paradox twist to Bloch's early 20th century saying "most of what we see is through the eyes of others". Bloch adds another element and says that historians rely more and more on eyewitnesses, which further supports the theory that we see through the eyes of others. But what about the witnesses' interpretation of the event? Eyewitnesses have created a new problem for Historians because they have a tendency to answer questions with a lack of accuracy, which lead historians to cross-examine them. Cross examination also lead historians to realize that twenty people observing the same event may have twenty different conclusions. I agree with this suggestion and will use a simple question that keeps surfacing and will continue to do so for years to come which is the assassination of JFK. The open space where Kennedy was actually shot was a cross section of two streets with a large parking, large buildings, and a park located on each side of the site. This is to say that two hundred witnesses at the event were probably standing at different places and saw different things as the whole event unravelled making it absolutely normal for the witnesses to come out with different conclusions. I agree with Bloch that witnesses can express different opinions but I also believe that these inaccuracies by eyewitnesses are caused and decided by where, when and how the event took place. Our observation of writings from the past can be just as ambiguous as the different interpretations of witnesses because we come across lots of biases as Bloch points out. The text that a historian would observe can be interpreted wrongly or as Bloch points out "the text will speak properly only when asked the right questions". I agree with this statement because in the present day we often use the saying "read between the lines". Poetry as well can be interpreted very differently even though Bloch says that we are better skilled at examining languages due to technological advances and experience acquired through the years. I believe that sometimes text written only hundred years ago may have passages that only people of that day would understand. For example a letter written from one friend to another that use expressions that only the two friends may understand. Therefore a historian's interpretation of the letter one hundred years later may be completely wrong because there is no reference to expressions that was said between these two specific people.

Interpretation can also have false meanings because in human nature everybody has some sort of prejudice against something or some one. In history these prejudices are very likely to show up in the writing of history. We must also remember that secrecy, as with the example of JFK, also plays a role in writing history and interpreting it. If the present generation cannot find out who killed JFK, and according to Bloch the best interpretations are seen through our own eyes, then how are future generations going to find out the truth; if we can't? Bloch insisted that past generations return us to the past. Then how are the future generations going to make sense of our present day history if we can't make sense of it and get the right answers ourselves? The answer would lie in historical criticism.

Bloch mentions a hand full of scholars, which suggest that bias as well as personal ambitions may be present in these scholar's conclusions, practises historical criticism. I believe that anyone can prove anything through research and cross-examination. Therefore the inevitable happens and different scholars with different conclusion on the same topic argue by trying to prove that they are right and the other scholar is wrong. Bloch mentions that a scholar cannot make an assertion unless it can be verified. For example two scholars can make two different assertions with the same fact and both of them can be right. This example in numerical form can be looked at this way; blank + blank = 4, one scholars says $3 + 1$ and the other says $2 + 2$, who is right?

Scholars, apart from arguing amongst themselves, also have to deal with errors, according to Bloch, such as Dates that can be forged, misrepresentation, forgery, unintentional errors, rumours that were spread because they were useful to be believed and so on. Therefore scholars are faced with scepticism even in archival research. A scholar will only be able to criticize and analyse what is well documented such as, for example, the Egyptians. The Egyptians were obsessed with keeping records on just about anything and went as far as trying to preserve their dead by rapping them up in cloth. These attempts by Egyptians to preserve their civilization succeeded because we know so much about their ancient civilization in 1995. A more modern example is the well-documented films and life of Charlie Chaplin. A few years before his death Charlie Chaplin ordered his secretary to destroy all of his experiments and unused bits of films, an entire vault's worth. The secretary was unable to destroy the work and kept the vault in tact. Two years after Charlie Chaplin's death she opened the vault and let film PhD's have a field day.

Historical analysis according to Bloch understands one factor so that you could understand other factors of the same sort. In this sense you could compare Napoleon and Hitler, arguing that winter's harshness lead to their defeat. Bloch does specifically say "other factors of the same sort" which, for this example, would imply that Hitler's situation as similar as it was, was very different from Napoleon's but ended up with the same faith. That is to say we cannot compare Hitler and Napoleon because they are from different eras, which encompass very different technologies. Hitler's technological situation and mechanical oriented warfare definitely helped in terms of protection from the cold and with the speed of his attack as compared to Napoleon's age and times. Historical analysis can also be looked at in terms of, as Bloch mentions, belief practices, emotions, nomenclature that people undergo. Beliefs of a certain period may be unique to a race and time in history as was the holocaust in World War II. Similarly emotions were used to influence the German people especially those of Adolph Hitler. I believe that belief practices and emotions from WWII to the present are often caused by propaganda from either side.

Nomenclature is essentially a system of names or labels. In this instance I believe that we often forget different qualities and aspects when we label things or people. We can say that Hitler was a murderer and a nut but we must not forget Hitler's ingenious rise to power and his carefully staged invasion of Europe. The same way that we could say that The United States was the arsenal of democracy during WWII but they also proved to be the arsenal of death to innocent civilians at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I believe that nomenclature has done more damage over the years than good. It has labelled people that are going to have to wear a label for the rest of time, it seems. Bloch also mentions that changes in things will not mean changes in names of which a good example are Japanese or Germans. Although the situations have changed drastically, Japanese are still labelled with Pearl Harbour and Germans are still labelled with the Holocaust.

Finally Bloch touches on the causation of history which I believe he summarizes in one line, "Reality offers us a near infinite number of lines of forces which all converge together upon the same phenomenon". A good example for such phenomenon is Van Johnson. Van Johnson got his big break in film acting in 1941 after Pearl Harbour was attacked. He was a second rate actor at MGM that had his break because most of the other leading roles were drafted in the U.S. marines and air corps and he was called up to fill in for them. This far fetched example, suggest that had WWII not happened, Van Johnson would have never had the break that he needed. The Van Johnson example helps explain "the infinite lines of forces" that Bloch is talking about. In short I believe that what Bloch was really trying to say with "infinite lines of forces" was "one thing leads to another" which is true in life in general.

In conclusion although this book is regarded as a classic I believe that all Bloch has done is explained History from a different perspective. Further more I believe that Bloch does not make any ground breaking discoveries about the way we view history. I don't believe that this book is a classic. I can say that a book such as this adds new meaning to difficult reading basically because there are no sources or references what so ever. This is awkward and contradicts what Students are thought to do in a place such as University, where sources and notes are a crucial part of writing.

by Pierre Hobson