

What is History? -- Some Quotations

(Hist 2c Handout--Prof. Marcuse, UCSB)

1. This I regard as history's highest function, to let no worthy action be uncommemorated, and to hold out the reprobation of posterity as a terror to evil words and deeds.
Tacitus (ca. 56 - ca. 117), Roman senator and historian
2. Whoever wishes to foresee the future must consult the past; for human events ever resemble those of preceding times. This arises from the fact that they are produced by men who ever have been, and ever shall be, animated by the same passions, and thus they necessarily have the same results.
Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), Italian diplomat and philosopher
3. History is philosophy teaching by example and also by warning.
Lord Henry St. John Bolingbroke (1678-1751), British politician
4. History consists of a series of accumulated imaginative inventions.
Voltaire (1694-1778), French Enlightenment philosopher
5. In history, a great volume is unrolled for our instruction, drawing the materials of future wisdom from the past errors and infirmities of mankind.
Edmund Burke (1729-1797), Anglo-Irish statesman
6. History is a myth that men agree to believe.
Napoleon (1769-1821), French military & political leader
7. The history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom.
Georg Hegel (1770-1831), German philosopher
8. History is the essence of innumerable biographies.
Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), Scottish essayist
9. History is the self-consciousness of humanity.
Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-1884), German historian
10. Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. Karl Marx (1818-1883), German political philosopher
11. If the past has been an obstacle and a burden, knowledge of the past is the safest and the surest emancipation.
Lord John Dalberg-Acton (1834-1902), British historian
12. History, as the study of the past, makes the coherence of what happened comprehensible by reducing events to a dramatic pattern and seeming them in a simple form.
Johan Huizinga (1872-1945), Dutch historian
13. The supreme purpose of history is a better world.
Herbert Hoover (1874-1964), US president
14. A country without a memory is a country of madmen.
George Santayana (1863-1952), (Spanish-)U.S. philosopher and writer
15. We investigate the past not to deduce practical political lessons, but to find out what really happened.
Thomas Frederick Tout (1855-1929), British historian
16. History is too much about wars; biography too much about great men.
Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) in *A Room of One's Own* (1929)
17. In mass societies, myth takes the place of history.
William Bossenbrook (1897-ca. 1970), US historian
18. History is not a catalogue but ... a convincing version of events.
A.J.P. Taylor (1906-1990), British historian
19. [History is] not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgments.
Geoffrey Barraclough (1908-1984), British historian
20. History isn't really about the past--settling old scores. It's about defining the present and who we are.
Ken Burns (1953-), US documentary filmmaker
21. History is, indeed, an argument without end.
Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (1917-2007), US historian