

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

sented stories as "true" collections of letters, or fragments from diaries.

Early English novelists, notably Defoe (1660?-1731), learned to write by producing scores of journalistic pamphlets. Later writers, such as Samuel Richardson (1689-1761), presented their works of fiction, following the old pamphleteering tradition, as if they were "real." Thus Richardson's novel *Pamela* (1740) is presented as a collection of long-lost letters. Novelists also continued, in various ways, to practice journalism. Defoe and Henry Fielding (1707-1754) edited their own journals; Richardson headed the Stationers' Company, a London guild of newspaper, book, and magazine publishers.

*Thucydides*

"The First Revisionist Historian" by Donald Kagan, in *Commentary* (May 1988), 165 East 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

"My work is not an essay in a contest meant to win the applause of the moment," Thucydides (c. 460-404 B.C.) wrote in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, "but a possession forever."

Kagan, a professor of history and classics at Yale, argues that Thucydides's account of the struggle between Athens and Sparta for control of Greece was the first—and greatest—revisionist history.

Thucydides "all but obliterated [conflicting] arguments" of the period. For example, the "fact" that the Peloponnesian War was fought continuously from 431 to 404 B.C. seems to be purely Thucydides's invention. Some contemporaries considered the war to be *two* wars, separated by a six-year truce beginning with the Peace of Nicias (421 B.C.). Without elaboration, Thucydides dismisses as "quite wrong" anyone who believed that this "insecure truce" between the two Greek powers was peace.

As for the origins of the war, Thucydides scarcely mentions the Megarian decree (issued by Athens' leader, Pericles, in 432 B.C.), which barred Megara, an ally of Sparta, from trading in the Athens marketplace and all harbors of the Athenian empire. Many Greeks, from Aristophanes in Thucydides's time to Plutarch 500 years later, saw this decree as the cause of the war. Thucydides, however, simply claims that the rise in Athenian power brought "fear to the Spartans," thus leading to conflict.

Why was Thucydides so vague about the war's origins? Kagan notes that Thucydides rarely criticizes Pericles. While Aristotle described Pericles as a demagogue who engendered corruption, and Plato saw him as "the first who . . . made [the people] idle and cowardly," Thucydides's portrait of Pericles is spotless, even though Pericles' war strategy brought on bankruptcy, a rebellion, and a plague that killed a third of the Athenian population. In 430 B.C. Pericles was removed from office by popular consensus. But Thucydides says "that Pericles was right in every respect."

Why? Consider Thucydides's biography. Seven years into the war, he became an Athenian army general. (Pericles had died five years earlier.) But during his term of office, Thucydides lost an important Athenian colony to Sparta. Like Pericles, he was removed from office. Kagan contends that the *History*, written during his 20-year exile, was Thucydides's *apologia pro vita sua*. By upholding Pericles' judgment against that of the masses, Thucydides indirectly absolved himself.