

Telling Histories

More professional historians are at work today than ever before, observes Harvard historian Simon Schama in the *New York Times Magazine* (Sept. 8, 1991), and yet American youths do not seem to be learning much about the past. Historians, he argues, must rediscover their muse.

The tension between popular historians and the arbiters of professional decorum is itself ancient history. Many of the most enduring historians—Voltaire, Gibbon, Macaulay, Carlyle and Trevelyan—wrote not just outside the academy but in self-conscious defiance of it . . .

For all these writers, history was not a remote and funereal place. It was a world that spoke loudly and urgently to our own concerns. How can their sense of the dramatic immediacy [of the past] be revived? In the first place, history needs to be liberated from its captivity in the school curriculum, where it is held hostage by that great amorphous, utilitarian discipline called social studies. History needs to declare itself unapologetically for what it is: the study of the past in all its splendid messiness. It should revel in the past-

ness of the past, the strange music of its diction . . .

G. M. Trevelyan put it best: "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, vanishing after another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall be gone like ghosts at cockcrow." . . .

History is an indispensable form of human self-knowledge . . . History's mission . . . is to

illuminate the human condition from the witness of memory. Yet the truths likely to be yielded by such histories will always be closer to those disclosed in great novels or poems than the abstract general laws sought by social scientists.

To this end, the . . . pressing task [is to restore] history to the forms by which it can catch the public imagination. That form, as Ken Burns's stunning PBS series on the Civil War demonstrated, ought to be narrative; not to discard argument and analysis, but to lend it proper dramatic and poetic power.



Appomattox Court House in April 1865, meant, ironically, a resurgence of southern aristocrats' authority in Union-occu-

pied regions. They soon did their best to put the poor whites, as well as the newly freed slaves, back in their places.

Seduction or Date Rape?

"Rape in Feminist Eyes" by Norman Podhoretz, in *Commentary* (Oct. 1991), 165 E. 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

In the space of a few years, "date rape" has emerged as a major national concern, discussed in campus seminars and on TV talk shows. This, says Podhoretz, *Commentary's* editor-in-chief, is a great victory for a feminist campaign to redefine seduction as

rape and thus to brand nearly all men as rapists.

For millennia, he points out, there was no question about the definition of rape. It occurred when a man used violence or the threat of it to force a woman into sex.

Rape has always been viewed as one of the most abhorrent of crimes. The new category of date or acquaintance rape expands the definition to cover a multitude of situations in which, as the editors of *Acquaintance Rape: The Hidden Crime* (1991) put it, "verbal or psychological coercion" is used to "overpower" the woman. Overcoming a woman's resistance with words, Podhoretz observes, "has in the past been universally known as seduction."

But to many feminists, he says, "a woman's no always means no, her maybe always means no, and even . . . her yes often means no." Harvard Law School's Susan Estrich says: "Many feminists would argue that so long as women are powerless relative to men, viewing 'yes' as a sign of true consent is misguided."

Why have the front lines of the war between the sexes been stretched so far? Podhoretz believes that feminism emerged in reaction to the sexual revolution of the 1960s, in which women shed many traditional feminine prerogatives along with their inhibitions. "Wanting to say no again but having signed on to an ideology that deprived them of any reason or right to say it, women were desperately looking for a way back that would not seem regressive

or reactionary." They found it in the movement for women's liberation and the belated discovery that the sexual revolution had been just "another in the long history of male conspiracies to degrade and dominate women." From there it was but a short step to "the conclusion that sex itself—heterosexual sex, that is—was the mother (or rather the father) of all these conspiracies." Shunning men altogether being too radical a solution for most feminists, they adopted the seemingly more moderate objective of working toward "a wholesale change" in the relation between the sexes. In the new sexual dispensation, women would call the shots. Hence, "any instance of heterosexual coupling that starts with male initiative and involves even the slightest degree of female resistance at any stage along the way" was deemed illegitimate.

But the "date-rape" campaign, in Podhoretz's view, faces a formidable enemy: Mother Nature. Most young men and most young women still will play "their naturally ordained parts in the unending and inescapable war between the sexes, suffering the usual wounds, exulting in the usual victories, and even eventually arriving at that armistice known as marriage."

PRESS & MEDIA

News We Can't Use

Journalists often bemoan the fact that Americans do not seem as interested in the news as they once were. Probably only about one-quarter of those under 35, according to a 1990 survey, read yesterday's paper. Sommerville, a University of Florida historian, is unmoved. The whole idea of "news" that must be ingested daily, he argues, is deeply flawed.

The "news," Sommerville points out, is only "what has happened since yesterday's paper or broadcast." Yet when information is sold on a daily basis, each day's report must be made to seem vitally impor-

"Why the News Makes Us Dumb" by John Sommerville, in *First Things* (Oct. 1991), Inst. on Religion and Public Life, 156 Fifth Ave., Ste. 400, New York, N.Y. 10010.

tant—even when, as is often the case, it is ephemeral. Today's news is made to seem significant mainly by reducing the importance of yesterday's—the historical context of events.

USA Today, with its bite-sized stories, colorful charts, and obsession with celebrities and factoids, has often been condemned for trivializing journalism. In reality, he argues, it just accelerates existing trends. *USA Today* shows that news is "a concentration on the ephemeral—the flotsam and foam on the surface of history."

There is no room in news reports for