

CHAPTER FIVE

Using the sources

Having tracked the source material down, how should the historian set about using it? This chapter looks at different approaches that historians adopt: some start out with a specific set of questions, some follow whatever line of enquiry the sources themselves throw up. The chapter draws a distinction between the source critic, who analyses source material in great detail, and the historian, who does this too but puts the sources in the context of a wider knowledge of the period to which they relate. Sources have to be analysed for forgery, the author's bias has to be detected and taken account of, and historians need to know how to spot when material has been removed from the record or covered up. Sometimes, however, the most revealing approach is when the historian reads between the lines to draw out the hidden assumptions and beliefs the author was hardly aware of showing.

If the historian's business is to construct interpretations of the past from its surviving remains, then the implications of the vast and varied array of documentary sources described in the previous chapter are daunting. Who can hope to become an authority on even one country during a narrowly defined time-span when so much spadework has to be done before the task of synthesis can be attempted? If by 'authority' we mean total mastery of the sources, the short answer is: only the historian of remote and thinly documented **epochs**. It is, for example, not beyond the capacity of a dedicated scholar to master all the written materials that survive from the early Norman period in England. The **vicissitudes** of time have drastically reduced their number, and those that survive – especially record sources – tend

epochs

Periods, eras.

vicissitudes

Changes in fortune.

High Middle Ages

Term usually applied to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, often taken to mark the climax of medieval society and culture.

towards the terse and economical. For any later period, however, the ideal is unattainable. From the **High Middle Ages** onwards more and more was committed to paper or parchment, with ever-increasing prospects of survival to our own day. Since the beginning of the twentieth century the rate of increase has surged ahead at breakneck speed. Between 1913 and 1938 the number of dispatches and papers received annually by the British Foreign Office increased from some 68,000 to 224,000.¹ Additions to the National Archives at present fill approximately 1 mile of shelving a year. Amid this documentary surfeit, where does the historian begin?

I

Different approaches to using source material

Ultimately the principles governing the direction of original research can be reduced to two. According to the first, the historian takes one source or group of sources that falls within his or her general area of interest – say the records of a particular court or a body of diplomatic correspondence – and extracts whatever is of value, allowing the content of the source to determine the nature of the enquiry. Recalling his first experience of the French Revolutionary archives, Richard Cobb describes the delights offered by a source-oriented approach:

More and more I enjoyed the excitement of research and the acquisition of material, often on quite peripheral subjects, as ends in themselves. I allowed myself to be deflected down unexpected channels, by the chance discovery of a bulky *dossier* – it might be the love letters of a *guillotiné*, or intercepted correspondence from London, or the account-books and samples of a commercial traveller in cotton, or the fate of the English colony in Paris, or eyewitness accounts of the September Massacres or of one of the *journées*.²

guillotiné

Someone who was executed by guillotine during the French Revolution.

journées

Literally 'days'. The term was applied to moments of particular drama during the French Revolution.

The second, or problem-oriented, approach is the exact opposite. A specific historical question is formulated, usually prompted by a reading of the secondary authorities, and the relevant primary sources are then studied; the bearing that these sources may have on other issues is ignored, the researcher proceeding as directly as possible to the point where he or she can present some conclusions. Each method encounters snags. The source-oriented approach, although appropriate for a newly discovered source,

may yield only an incoherent jumble of data. The problem-oriented approach sounds like common sense and probably corresponds to most people's idea of research. But it is often difficult to tell in advance what sources *are* relevant. As will be shown later, the most improbable sources are sometimes found to be illuminating, while the obvious ones may lead the historian into too close an identification with the concerns of the organization that produced them. Moreover, for any topic in Western nineteenth or twentieth-century history, however circumscribed by time or place, the sources are so unwieldy that further selection can hardly be avoided, and with it the risk of leaving vital evidence untouched.

In practice neither of these approaches is usually pursued to the complete exclusion of the other, but the balance struck between them varies a good deal. Some historians begin their careers with a narrowly defined project based on a limited range of sources; others are let loose on a major archive with only the vaguest of briefs. The former is on the whole the more common, because of the pressure to produce quick results that is imposed by the **Ph.D.** degree – the formal apprenticeship served by most academic historians. A great deal of research – probably the larger part – consists not in ferreting out new sources but in turning to well-known materials with new questions in mind. Yet too single-minded a preoccupation with a narrow set of issues may lead to evidence being taken out of context and misinterpreted – ‘source-mining’ as one critic has called it.³ It is vital, therefore, that the relationship between the historian and his or her sources is one of give and take. Many historians have had the experience of setting out with one set of questions, only to find that the sources which they had supposed would furnish the answers instead directed their research on to quite a different path. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie first turned to the land-tax registers of rural Languedoc with a view to documenting the birth of capitalism in that region; he found himself instead investigating its social structure in the broadest sense, and in particular the impact of **demographic** change:

Mine was the classic misadventure; I had wanted to master a source in order to confirm my youthful convictions, but it was finally the source that mastered me by imposing its own rhythms, its own chronology, and its own particular truth.⁴

Ph.D.

Doctor of Philosophy. This is usually obtained after three years of detailed archival study resulting in the production of a thesis – a carefully argued case presented in the form of a short book.

demographic

Concerning changes in population.

At the very least there must be a readiness to modify the original objective in the light of the questions that arise directly from the sources. Without this flexibility historians risk imposing on their evidence and failing to tap its full potential. The true master of the craft is someone whose sense of what questions can profitably be asked has been sharpened by a lifetime's exposure to the sources in all their variety. Mastery of all the sources must remain the ideal, however improbable its complete accomplishment may be.

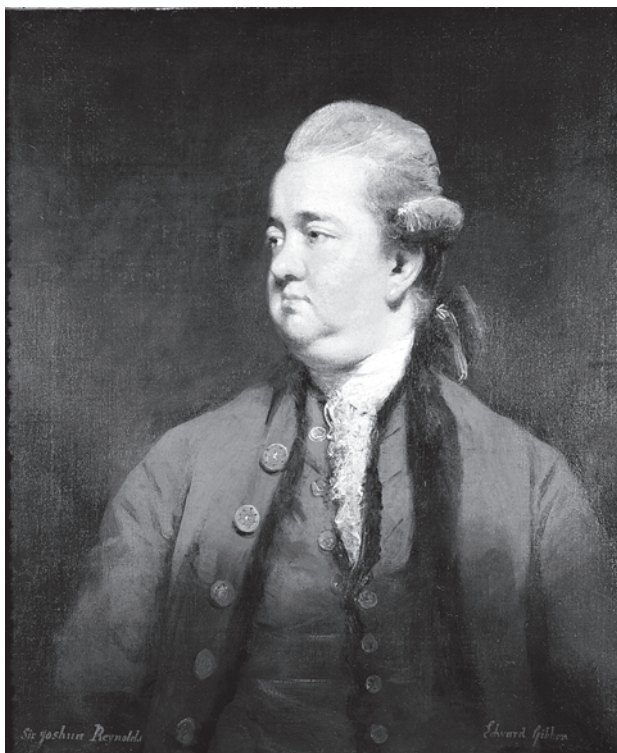
Analysing sources

The reason why the ideal remains for the most part unattainable is not only that the sources are so numerous but also that each of them requires so much careful appraisal. For the primary sources are not an open book, offering instant answers. They may not be what they seem to be; they may signify very much more than is immediately apparent; they may be couched in obscure and antiquated forms that are meaningless to the untutored eye. Before the historian can properly assess the significance of a document, he or she needs to find out how, when and why it came into being. This requires the application of both supporting knowledge and sceptical intelligence. 'Records', it has been said, 'like the little children of long ago, only speak when they are spoken to, and they will not talk to strangers.'⁵ Nor, it might be added, will they be very forthcoming to anyone in a tearing hurry. Even for the experienced historian with green fingers, research in the primary sources is time-consuming; for the novice it can be painfully slow.

Historians have long been aware of the value of primary sources – and not merely the more accessible sources of a narrative kind. A surprising number of medieval chroniclers showed a keen interest in the great state documents of the day and reproduced them in their writings. William Camden, the leading English historian in Shakespeare's generation, was granted access to the State Papers in order to write a history of Elizabeth I's reign. But scholarly source criticism is a much more recent development. It was largely beyond the historians of the Renaissance, for all their sophistication. Camden, for example, regarded his record sources as 'infallible testimonies'.⁶ Many of the technical advances that underpin modern source criticism were made during the seventeenth century – notably by the great **Benedictine** scholar Jean

Benedictine

Of the monastic Order of
St Benedict.



The English historian Edward Gibbon (1737–94) said that the idea for writing his famous account of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* came to him while sitting one evening in the ruins of the forum in Rome. Gibbon started with one major question – what caused such a mighty empire to collapse? – and he embarked on his reading of the historical records with that question always in view. His conclusion, that it was due in large part to the debilitating effects of Christianity, was in line with the radical thinking of the Enlightenment but created a storm of public controversy. (Bridgeman Art Library/Private collection)

Mabillon. But their application was at first confined to monastic history and the lives of the saints, and historians continued to live in a different world from that of the source critic (*érudit*). Edward Gibbon, the greatest historian of the eighteenth century, drew heavily on the findings of the *érudits* in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), but he did not emulate their methods.

The introduction of a critical approach to the sources into mainstream history writing was Ranke's most important achievement. He owed his early fame and promotion to a merciless exposé of Guicciardini's faults as a scholar. His appetite for archival research was truly prodigious. And through his seminar at the University of Berlin he brought into being a new breed of academic historians trained in the critical evaluation of primary sources – and especially the many archival sources that were being opened to research for the first time during the nineteenth century. It was with pardonable exaggeration that Lord Acton saluted Ranke as 'the real originator of the heroic study of records'.⁷

Lord Acton (1834–1902)

British historian, Regius (i.e. royal) Professor of Modern History at Cambridge. Acton was formidably learned, and an obsessive note-taker. He edited the multi-volume *Cambridge Modern History* but never got round to writing a major work of history. It was he who wrote in a letter that 'power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely'.

Ranke won acceptance for the idea that the evaluation of sources and the writing of history must be kept in the same hands. The spread of Rankean method to Britain came comparatively late; it was primarily due to William Stubbs, whose reputation rested not only on his studies of English constitutional history but also on his scrupulous editing of medieval historical texts. To this day, what Marc Bloch called 'the struggle with documents' is one of the things that distinguishes the professional historian from the amateur.⁸

II

Is it authentic?

The first step in evaluating a document is to test its authenticity; this is sometimes known as *external* criticism. Are the author, the place and the date of writing what they purport to be? These questions are particularly relevant in the case of legal documents such as charters, wills and contracts, on which a great deal could depend in terms of wealth, status and privilege. During the Middle Ages many royal and ecclesiastical charters were forged, either to replace genuine ones that had been lost, or to lay claim to rights and privileges never in fact granted. The Donation of Constantine, an eighth-century document that purported to confer temporal power over Italy on Pope Sylvester I and his successors, was one of the most famous of these forgeries. Documents of this kind might be termed 'historical forgeries', and detecting them may tell us a great deal about the society that produced them. But there is also the modern forgery to be considered. Any recently discovered document of great moment is open to the suspicion that it was forged by somebody who intended to make a great deal of money or to run rings round the most eminent scholars of the day. The Hitler dairies did just that. Extracts of what purported to be the Fuhrer's journal were published in a West German magazine in 1983. Although they appeared to add little of significance to our understanding of the Third Reich, being mostly taken up by lists of official engagements and announcements, the diaries aroused intense public interest. They were pronounced genuine by three scholars, including the eminent British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, only to be exposed shortly afterwards as a forgery: forensic texts revealed that both the paper and the ink

were modern. It later transpired that the forger, who specialized in Nazi memorabilia, had produced 62 volumes of the ‘diary’ in five years.⁹

Once suspicions are aroused, the historian will pose a number of key questions. First, there is the issue of provenance; can the document be traced back to the office or person who is supposed to have produced it, or could it have been planted? In the case of great finds that suddenly materialize from nowhere, this is a particularly significant question. Second, the content of the document needs to be examined for consistency with known facts. Given our knowledge of the period, do the claims made in the document or the sentiments uttered seem at all likely? If the document contradicts what can be substantiated by other primary evidence of unimpeachable authenticity, then forgery is strongly indicated. Third, the form of the document may yield vital clues. The historian who deals mostly in handwritten documents needs to be something of a **palaeographer** in order to decide whether the script is right for the period and place specified, and something of a **philologist** to evaluate the style and language of a suspect text. (It was philological tests that clinched Lorenzo Valla’s case against the Donation of Constantine as early as 1439.) More specifically, official documents usually conform to a particular ordering of subject matter and a set of stereotyped verbal formulae, the hallmarks of the institution that issued them. *Diplomatics* is the name given to the study of these technicalities of form. Lastly, historians can call on the help of technical specialists to examine the materials used in the production of the document. Chemical testing can determine the age of parchment, paper and ink; the hand of the Vinland Map forger was betrayed by microprobe analysis of the ink, which revealed a substantial percentage of an artificial pigment unknown before about 1920.¹⁰

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that historians are constantly uncovering forgeries, or that they methodically test the authenticity of every document that comes their way. This procedure is certainly appropriate to certain branches of medieval history, where much may depend on a single charter of uncertain provenance. But for most historians – and especially the modern historian – there is little prospect of a brilliant detective coup. Their time is more likely to be spent perusing an extended sequence of letters or memoranda, recording humdrum day-to-day transactions, which would scarcely be in anyone’s interest

palaeographer

One who studies ancient writings.

philologist

One who studies the development of language.

to forge. And in the case of public records under proper archival care, the possibility of forgery is pretty remote.

For the medievalist some of these skills of detection have another application – to help in preparing an authentic edition out of the several corrupt variants that survive today. Before the invention of printing in the fifteenth century, the only means whereby books could be circulated was by frequent copying by hand; for most of the Middle Ages the *scriptoria* of the monasteries and cathedrals were the main centres of book production. Inevitably errors crept into the copying, and they increased as each copy was used as the basis of another. Where the original (or ‘autograph’) does not survive, which is frequently the case with important medieval texts, the historian is often confronted by alarming discrepancies among the available versions. This is the unsatisfactory form in which some of the major chroniclers of the medieval period have come down to us. However, close comparison of the texts – especially their scripts and the discrepancies of wording – enables the historian to establish the relationship between the surviving versions and to reconstruct a much closer approximation to the wording of the original. The preparation of a correct text is an important part of a medievalist’s work, requiring a command of palaeography and philology. It is made easier now that the texts, which may be held by widely scattered libraries, can be photographed and examined alongside each other.

***scriptoria* (sing.
scriptorium)**

(Latin) The writing rooms of a monastery, where documents were written and copied out.

III

Understanding the text

The authentication of a document and – where applicable – cleansing the text of corruptions are only preliminaries. The second and usually much more demanding stage is *internal* criticism, that is, the interpretation of the document’s content. Granted that author, date and place of writing are as they seem, what do we make of the words in front of us? At one level this is a question of meaning. This involves more than simply translating from a foreign or archaic language, difficult though that may be for the novice trying to make sense of medieval Latin in abbreviated form. The historian requires not merely linguistic fluency but a command of the historical context that will show what the

words actually refer to. Domesday Book is a classic example of the difficulties that can arise here. It is a record of land use and the distribution of wealth in the English shires in 1086, before the institutions of the Anglo-Saxons (and the Danes) had been much altered by Norman rule; but it was compiled by clerks from Normandy whose everyday language was French and who described what they had seen and heard in Latin. Small wonder that it is not always clear; for example, it is not obvious to what form of land tenure the term *manerium* (usually 'manor') refers.¹¹ Nor are our problems solved if we stick to documents written in English. For language itself is a product of history. Old words, especially the more technical ones, pass out of currency, while others acquire a new significance. We have to be on our guard against reading modern meanings into the past. In the case of the more culturally sophisticated sources, such as contemporary histories or treatises on political theory, different levels of meaning may have been embedded in the same text, and this becomes a major task of interpretation. In coming to terms with the instability of language, historians have been influenced by recent developments in literary studies, especially the Postmodernist preoccupation with theories of language (see Chapter 7).

Is it reliable?

Once historians have become immersed in the sources of their period and have mastered its characteristic turns of phrase and the appropriate technical vocabulary, questions of meaning tend to worry them less often. But the content of a document prompts a further, much more insistent question: is it reliable? No source can be used for historical reconstruction until some estimate of its standing as historical evidence has been made. This question is beyond the scope of any **ancillary** technique such as palaeography or diplomatics. Answering it calls instead for a knowledge of historical context and an insight into human nature. Here historians come into their own.

ancillary

Subsidiary, giving help to.

Where a document takes the form of a report of what has been seen, heard or said, we need to ask whether the writer was in a position to give a faithful account. Was he or she actually present, and in a tranquil and attentive frame of mind? If the information was learned at second hand, was it anything more than gossip? The reliability of a medieval monastic chronicler largely depended



The National Archives at Kew house all government records since the Norman Conquest. They were moved from a central London location in the 1970s. Until 2003 the archives were known as the Public Record Office. (Photographers Direct)

on how often his cloister was frequented by men of rank and power.¹² Did the writer put pen to paper immediately, or after the sharpness of his or her memory had blurred? (A point worth bearing in mind when reading a diary.) In reports of oral proceedings, a great deal may turn on the exact form of words used, yet prior to the spread of shorthand in the seventeenth century there was no means of making a verbatim transcript. The earliest mechanical means of recording speech – the phonograph – was not invented until 1877. It is extraordinarily difficult to know exactly what a statesman said in a given speech: if he wrote it out in advance he may well have departed from his text; and press reporters, usually armed with only a pencil and note-pad, are inevitably selective and inaccurate, as can be seen by comparing the reports given by different newspapers of the same speech. In the case of speeches in Parliament a reliable verbatim record can be read, but even this dates back only to the reform of *Hansard* in 1909.

What influenced the author?

What most affects the reliability of a source, however, is the intention and prejudices of the writer. Narratives intended for posterity, on which a general impression of the period tends to be based, are particularly suspect. The distortions to which autobiography is subject in this respect are too obvious for comment. Medieval chroniclers were often extremely partisan as between one ruler and another, or between Church and state: Gerald of Wales's increasing antipathy towards Henry II was due to the king's repeated veto on his promotion to the **episcopate**; Matthew Paris's treatment of the disputes between **Henry III** and the English barons was slanted by his identification with virtually all forms of **corporate privilege** in their dealings with king or pope.¹³ Chroniclers were often influenced too by the prejudices characteristic of educated people of their time – a revulsion against **heresy**, or a distaste for lawyers and money-lenders. Culture-bound assumptions and stereotypes shared by virtually all literate people of the day call for particularly careful appraisal. For the historian of pre-literate societies, such as those of tropical Africa in the nineteenth century, the contemporary accounts of European travellers are a source of major importance, but nearly all of them were coloured by racism and sensationalism: judicial execution (as in **Ashanti**) appeared as 'human sacrifice', and **polygamy** was presented as a licence for sexual excess. Nor does creative literature have a special dispensation in this respect. Novelists, playwrights and poets have as many prejudices as anyone else, and these have to be allowed for when citing their work as historical evidence. E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) is, among other things, a marvellously convincing and very unflattering portrayal of the **British Raj** at district level, but some account must surely be taken of Forster's own alienation from the kind of **stiff-upper-lip** public school man who controlled the administration in India.

The attraction of record sources – of 'witnesses in spite of themselves' (see p. 93) – on the other hand, is that through them the historian can observe or infer the sequence of day-to-day events, free from the controlling purpose of a narrator. But this is merely to eliminate one of the more obvious kinds of distortion. For however spontaneous or authoritative the source, very few forms of writing arise solely from a desire to convey the unvarnished truth. Even in the case of a diary composed without

episcopate

The rank of bishop.

Henry III (1207–72)

King Henry III inherited problems with the English barons from his father, King John. Opposition to Henry was led by Simon de Montfort and Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, and led eventually to the summoning in 1265 of the earliest Parliament in English history.

corporate privileges

The privileges of particular groups, especially the barons.

heresy

Deviation from orthodox religious belief, as opposed to infidels (the unfaithful), who hold to a different religious belief entirely. Heresy was punishable by death in medieval Church courts.

Ashanti

A West African kingdom in modern-day Ghana. It was a major power in the region until the arrival of the British in the late nineteenth century. Britain annexed the Ashanti kingdom in 1901.

polygamy

The system whereby one man is allowed more than one wife. Although clearly in evidence in the Old Testament, it has always been severely condemned by the mainstream Christian churches.

British Raj

British imperial rule in India, lasting from the eighteenth century until 1947.

stiff-upper-lip

The attitude of stoicism and formality which was traditionally inculcated at British public schools in order to teach boys to hide their emotions, especially in the face of pain or adversity.

accredited

Ambassadors are sent by the government of their own country and accredited – attached – to the government of another.

thought of publication, the writer may be bolstering his or her self-esteem and rationalizing motives. A document that appears to be a straightforward report of something seen, heard or said may well be slanted – either unconsciously, as an expression of deep-seated prejudice, or deliberately, from a wish to please or influence the recipient. Ambassadors in their dispatches home may convey a greater impression of bustle and initiative on their own part than is actually the case; and they may censor their impressions of the government to which they are **accredited** in order to fit them to the policies and preconceptions of their superiors. Historians today are much more sceptical than they used to be about the claims to objectivity of the great Victorian enquirers into the ‘social problem’: they recognize that the selection of evidence was often distorted to fit middle-class stereotypes about the poor and to promote the implementation of pet remedies.

The uses of bias

Once bias has been detected, however, the offending document need not be consigned to the scrap-heap. The bias itself is likely to be historically significant. In the case of a public figure it may account for a consistent misreading of certain people or situations, with disastrous effects on policy. In published documents with a wide circulation, bias may explain an important shift in public opinion. The reports of nineteenth-century Royal Commissions are a case in point. Newspapers provide other examples: the war reports of the many British dailies that were opposed to Asquith’s government in 1915–16 are not a reliable guide to what was happening on the front, but they certainly help to explain why the Prime Minister’s reputation at home declined so severely.¹⁴ Autobiographies are notorious for their errors of recall and their special pleading. But in their very subjectivity often lies their greatest value, since the pattern that the writer makes of his or her own life is a cultural as much as a personal construct, and it also illuminates the frame of mind in which not only the book was written but the life itself was led. Even the most tainted sources can assist in the reconstruction of the past.

Reading sources in their context

As described so far, the evaluation of historical evidence may not seem to be unlike the cross-examination of witnesses in a court of law: in both cases the point is to test the reliability of the testimony. But the court-room analogy is misleading if it suggests that primary sources are always evaluated in this way. Public records have most often been studied from one of two standpoints. First, how did the institution that generated the records evolve over time, and what was its function in the body politic? And second, how were specific policies formulated and executed? In this context reliability is hardly the issue, for the records are studied not as *reports* (i.e. testimonies of events ‘out there’), but as parts of a *process* (be it administrative, judicial or policy-making) which is itself the subject of enquiry. They are as much the creation of an institution as an individual, and therefore need to be examined in the context of that institution – its vested interests, its administrative routine, and its record-keeping procedures; any records to do with law or public finance call for technical knowledge of a particularly demanding kind. Considered apart from the series to which they belong, the records of long-vanished public institutions are almost certain to be misinterpreted.¹⁵ To understand the full significance of these records the historian must if possible study them in their original groupings (a principle on the whole respected in the National Archives) rather than in the rearrangement of some tidy-minded archivist. And ideally they should be studied in their entirety. That means examining together incoming and outgoing correspondence. Before modern methods of reproduction, considerable effort was required to make copies of outgoing letters, and the result is that in many important collections they are completely absent; it is therefore difficult to be sure how policies were executed, or what pressures contributed to their genesis. Governments in England did not get on top of this problem until the late seventeenth century.

Sometimes it makes sense to treat a specific source not as a witness, but as a historical event in its own right. In the case of a major public document like Domesday Book, we need to understand how it came into being and what impact it had – by means of textual analysis, related documents from the same source, contemporary comment and so on.¹⁶ More recent documents like the Second Reform Act (1867) or the Balfour Declaration on the

future of Palestine (1917) invite a comparable approach. This is in effect the procedure now adopted by historians of ideas. Traditionally their subject was studied to reveal the pedigree of key concepts, such as parliamentary sovereignty or the freedom of the individual, through a canon of great theorists down the ages. This had the unfortunate effect of implying that the great texts were addressing 'our' issues, and thus obscured the contemporary significance of the sources themselves. But the first task of the historian is to treat these works like any other document of the time and to read them, as far as possible, in the specific intellectual and social contexts in which they were written. This means having regard to both the specific genre – or *discourse* – to which the work belonged, and its relation to other genres with which readers of the time would have been familiar. Scholars such as Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock have pointed out that what contemporaries made of, say, *Leviathan* (1651) almost certainly differed from what Thomas Hobbes himself meant to convey.¹⁷ Context is at least as important as text in coming to terms with an original thinker in the past.

Gaps in the record

A knowledge of administrative and archival procedures is also vital if the historian is to be alert to one particularly serious cause of distortion in the surviving record – the deliberate removal of evidence. While the planting of a forgery in the official record presents major difficulties, it may be a comparatively easy matter to suppress an embarrassing or incriminating document. In the State Papers, for example, almost all the letters to and from **Lord Chancellor Jeffreys** for the reign of James II are missing. Since Jeffreys himself died in the Tower in 1689 after the Revolution, it has been surmised that the papers were removed by some person who had changed sides at the critical moment and stood to gain by suppressing his connection with the infamous judge of the 'Bloody Assizes'.¹⁸ In Britain today the centralization of most government record-keeping at the National Archives – achieved in the mid-nineteenth century – is an effective check on this kind of tampering, but it is still possible for the responsible official to ensure that a sensitive document never leaves the department in which it was produced. Since total preservation is manifestly impracticable, there is a recognized procedure for destroying

Lord Chancellor Jeffreys (1648–89)

George Jeffreys was a zealous and deeply unpopular judge under Charles II and James II. He became notorious for the 'Bloody Assizes' in the West Country, when he sentenced 300 people to death for taking part in the Duke of Monmouth's failed rebellion of 1685.

ephemeral material judged to be of no historical interest, and this is open to abuse.¹⁹ For example, a number of Colonial Office files relating to Palestine in the late 1940s have been destroyed, presumably in order to cast a veil over British actions during the turbulent last phase of the mandate administration; it is also likely that crucial British documents relating to the Suez Crisis of 1956 were destroyed or removed immediately.²⁰ No doubt there have been instances of unauthorized censorship that are proof against detection, but the historian familiar with the administrative procedures of the department in question is a great deal less likely to be duped.

Officially published records

While some records have been carefully removed from the historian's reach, others have been pushed into the limelight. In several fields of modern history, collections of records published soon after the time of writing can be consulted. It is important that these collections should not be accorded special weight just because they are so accessible. They nearly always represent a selection, whose publication was intended to further some practical end, usually of a short-term political nature. The well-known series of *State Trials* was for a long time accepted as a reliable record of some of the major English criminal proceedings since the sixteenth century. But the first four volumes were promoted in 1719 by a group of propagandists in the Whig cause; as a source for the great political trials of the Stuart period they are therefore distinctly suspect.²¹ During the nineteenth century the publication – often on a massive scale – of a politician's correspondence was often considered by his family and followers to be a fitting memorial, but there was usually an element of censorship so that the less savoury episodes were suppressed and the reputation of living persons protected or enhanced. Governments of the same period regarded the publication of select diplomatic correspondence (for example in the British Blue Books) as a legitimate means of building up public support for their policies; some of the 'dispatches' were composed for this very purpose. In all these cases the historian will obviously prefer to go to the originals. If these are not available, the published versions must be scrutinized carefully, and as much as possible must be found out from other sources about the circumstances in which they were compiled.

IV

Weighing sources against each other

It will be clear, then, that historical research is not a matter of identifying *the* authoritative source and then exploiting it for all it is worth, for the majority of sources are in some way inaccurate, incomplete or tainted by prejudice and self-interest. The procedure is rather to amass as many pieces of evidence as possible from a wide range of sources – preferably from *all* the sources that have a bearing on the problem in hand. In this way the inaccuracies and distortions of particular sources are more likely to be revealed, and the inferences drawn by the historian can be corroborated. Each type of source possesses certain strengths and weaknesses; considered together, and compared one against the other, there is at least a chance that they will reveal the true facts – or something very close to them.

This is why mastery of a variety of sources is one of the hallmarks of historical scholarship – an exacting one which is by no means always attained. One of the reasons why biography is often disparaged by academic historians is that too many biographers have studied only the private papers left by their subject, instead of weighing these against the papers of colleagues and acquaintances and (where relevant) the public records for the period. Ranke himself has been criticized for relying too heavily on the dispatches of the Venetian ambassadors in some of his writings on the sixteenth century. Observant and conscientious as most of them were, the ambassadors saw matters very much from the point of view of the governing elite. They were also foreigners, free from local political loyalties, it is true, but lacking a real feel for the culture of the country to which they were accredited.²² The need for primary evidence from ‘insiders’ as well as ‘outsiders’ is an important guideline for historical research, with wide ramifications. The failings of Western writers on African history before the 1960s could be summed up by saying that they relied on the testimony of the European explorer, missionary and administrator, without seriously seeking out African sources.²³ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg recalls that when she started out in nineteenth-century American women’s history, she found herself portraying women as victims because she had stuck to the well-thumbed educational and theological works that men wrote for and about women; her angle of vision was transformed when she uncovered

the letters and diaries of ordinary women which documented the active consciousness of the 'insider'.²⁴

Tough standards now tend to be expected of historians regarding the range of sources they use. In the history of international relations, for example, it is a golden rule that both sides of a diplomatic conversation must be studied before one can be certain what the subject of the conversation was and which side put its case more effectively; this is why the inaccessibility of the Soviet archives prior to the **Gorbachev era** was so frustrating for Western historians of the origins of the Second World War. For historians of government policy in twentieth-century Britain, the temptation may be to confine research to the public records, because these survive in such profusion, and their number is increased every year as more records become available for the first time under the thirty-year rule (see p. 113). But this method is hardly conducive to a balanced interpretation. The public records tend to give too much prominence to administrative considerations (thus reflecting the principal interest of the civil servants who wrote most of them) and to reveal much less about the political pressures to which ministers responded; hence the importance of extending the search to the press and *Hansard*, private letters and diaries, political memoirs and – for recent history – to first-hand oral evidence.²⁵

Gorbachev era

Under communist rule access to state archives in the Soviet Union was virtually impossible. Under Mikhail Gorbachev archives were opened to scholars as part of his policy of *glasnost* (openness).

Hidden traces in the records

The examples just discussed – international relations and government policy – are topics for which there exists primary source material in abundance. In each case there is a well-defined body of documents in public custody, with numerous ancillary sources to corroborate and amplify the evidence. But there are many historical topics that are much less well served, either because little evidence has survived or because what interests us today did not interest contemporaries and was therefore not recorded. If historians are to go beyond the immediate concerns of those who created their sources, they have to learn how to interpret the sources more obliquely. First, many sources are valued for information that the writers were scarcely aware they were setting down and which was incidental to the purpose of their testimony. This is because people unconsciously convey on paper clues about their attitudes, assumptions and manner of life which

may be intensely interesting to historians. A given document may therefore be useful in a variety of ways, depending on the questions asked of it – sometimes questions that would never have occurred to the writer or to people of the time. This, of course, is one reason why beginning research with clearly defined questions rather than simply going where the documents lead can be so rewarding; it may reveal evidence where none was thought to exist. From this point of view, the word ‘source’ is perhaps somewhat inapposite: if the metaphor is interpreted literally, a ‘source’ can contribute evidence to only one ‘stream’ of knowledge. It has even been suggested that the term should be abandoned altogether in favour of ‘trace’ or ‘track’.²⁶

Unwitting evidence

This flair for turning evidence to new uses is one of the distinctive contributions of recent historical method. It has been most fully displayed by historians who have moved beyond the well-lit paths of mainstream political history to fields such as social and cultural history, for which explicit source material is more difficult to come by. A case in point is the religious beliefs of ordinary people in Reformation England. Although the switches of doctrinal allegiance among the elite are relatively well recorded, evidence is very sparse for the rest of the population. But Margaret Spufford in her study of three Cambridgeshire villages has used the unlikely evidence of wills to show how religious affiliation changed. Every will began with a **dedicatory clause**, which allows some inference to be drawn concerning the doctrinal preference of the testator or the scribe. From a study of these clauses, Spufford shows how by the early seventeenth century personal faith in the **mediation of Christ** – the hallmark of Protestant belief – had made deep inroads among the local people.²⁷ It was, of course, no part of the testators’ intentions to furnish evidence of their religious beliefs; they were concerned only to ensure that their worldly goods were disposed of in accordance with their wishes. But historians alert to the unwitting testimony of the sources can go beyond the intentions of those who created them.

Legal history arouses relatively little interest among historians at present, but court records are probably the single most important source we have for the social history of the medieval and early modern periods, when the vast majority of the population

dedicatory clause

The opening section of a will, which dedicates the testator’s soul to the care of Almighty God.

mediation of Christ

Catholic theology teaches that the believer needs the agency of the Church in order to go to heaven after death. Protestants believe that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross provides all the mediation between God and mankind that is needed, and that a believer need only believe in Christ in order to enter into heaven.

was illiterate and therefore generated no records of its own. This was how Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie was able to write his micro-history of Montailou (see above, p. 82). The bishop who carried out the **Inquisition** there intended to root out the **Cathar** heresy. But, as ‘a sort of compulsive **Maigret**’,²⁸ his meticulous recording of witnesses resulted in a detailed and salacious record of village life. As Le Roy Ladurie puts it, the high concentration of Cathar heretics in Montailou ‘provides an opportunity for the study not of Catharism itself – that is not my subject – but of the mental outlook of the country people’.²⁹ When historians distance themselves from the contemporary significance of a document in this way, its reliability may be of only marginal significance: what counts is the incidental detail. In eighteenth-century France it was the practice for unmarried pregnant women to make statements to the magistrate in order to pin responsibility on their seducers and salvage something of their reputations. Richard Cobb carried

Inquisition

Officially known as the Holy Office, this was the Catholic Church’s legal department charged with investigating accusations of heresy.

Maigret

The painstaking fictional detective created by the Belgian crime writer Georges Simenon (1903–89).



When the Cathar heresy took hold in southern France in the thirteenth century the Church sent the Inquisition to stamp it out. Centuries later the French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie used the Inquisitors’ records to build up a remarkably detailed picture of the intimate lives of the inhabitants of the little mountain village of Montailou. Le Roy Ladurie was reading the records with very different priorities from those of the men who originally compiled them. (Paul Shawcross)

Cathar

A form of religious heresy that spread rapidly in south-western France in the thirteenth century. It is also known as Albigensianism, from its centre in the town of Albi. It held that, since humans' true home is in heaven, the world must be evil. It was seen as a major doctrinal and political threat both by the papacy and by the kings of France, and was finally crushed by the Inquisition and by a ruthless military campaign known as the Albigensian Crusade.

out a study of fifty-four such statements made at Lyon in 1790–2, and as he points out, the identity of the seducers is a trivial issue compared with the light that is shed on the sexual mores of the urban poor, their conditions of work and leisure, and the popular morality of the day.³⁰ It is studies such as these that demonstrate the full force of Marc Bloch's injunction to his fellow historians to study 'the evidence of witnesses in spite of themselves' (see p. 93).

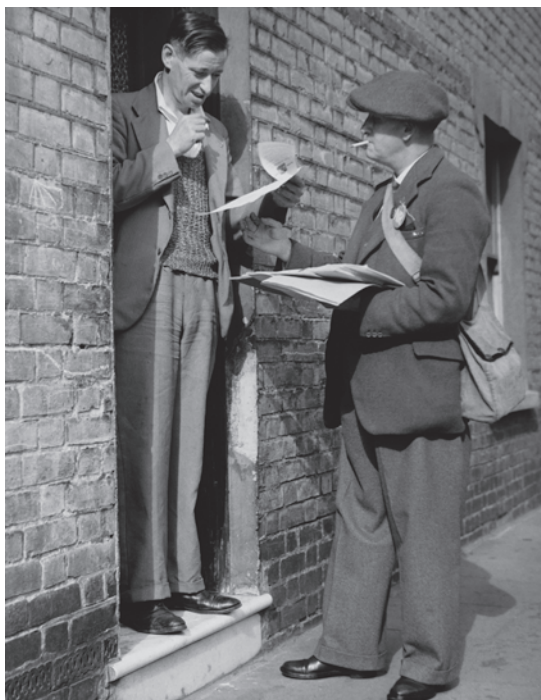
V

The analysis of statistical evidence

Nothing has been said until now about quantitative data. Does the precision of numbers not rescue us from the manifold problems of analysis raised by textual sources? It is sometimes imagined that the application of quantitative methods displaces the traditional skills of the historian and calls for an entirely new breed of scholar. Nothing could be further from the truth. Statistical know-how can only be effective if it is subject to the normal controls of historical method. Given the special authority that figures carry in our numerate society, the obligation to subject quantitative data to tests of reliability is at least as great as in the case of literary sources. And once the figures have been verified, their interpretation and their application to the solution of specific historical problems require the same qualities of judgement and flair as any other kind of evidence.

Unreliable statistical evidence

A historian is saved an immense amount of work if he or she is lucky enough to find a set of ready-made statistics – say a table of imports and exports or a sequence of census reports. Yet the reliability of such sources must never be taken for granted. We need to know exactly how the figures were put together. Were the returns made by the man-on-the-spot distorted by his own self-interest – like the tax-collector who understated his takings and pocketed the difference? Were the figures conjured out of thin air by a desk-bound official, or totted up by a subordinate who was not competent in arithmetic? Both these possibilities arise in the case of impressive-looking statistics published by British colonial



Regular ten-year censuses in Britain started in 1801, during the Napoleonic War. They constitute a key resource for economic, social, local and even family historians; when the National Archives put the 1901 census returns on the web, demand for access was so great that the system immediately crashed. But how accurate are census returns? Were respondents telling the truth? Did census enumerators make mistakes? Quantitative methods cannot tell us. (CORBIS/Hulton Archive)

administrations in Africa, which were often based on returns made by poorly educated and underpaid chiefs. How much scope was there for errors of copying as the figures were passed on from one level of the bureaucracy to the next? Could the same item have been counted twice by different officials? Where statistics were compiled from questionnaires, as in social surveys or the census, we need to know the form in which the questions were put in order to determine the scope for confusion on the part of the respondents, and we have to consider whether the questions – on income or age, for example – were likely to elicit frank answers. Only an investigation of the circumstances of compilation, using the conventional skills of the historian, can provide the answer to these questions.

Often what interests historians is less a single set of figures than a sequence over time which enables them to plot a trend. The figures must accordingly be tested not only for their reliability but for their *comparability*. However accurate the individual totals in such a sequence may be, they can only be regarded as a statistical sequence if they are strictly comparable – if, that is, they are measuring the same variable. It needs only a slight discrepancy in

occupational schedule

The list of recognised occupations in the census. The given occupation of individuals enumerated in the census had to conform to the schedule. The schedule was defined differently from one census to the next.

the basis of assessment to render comparisons null and void. A classification that seems clear and consistent on paper may be applied differently over time, or between one place and another, which is one reason why even today comparative criminal statistics have to be treated so cautiously. In the case of the English census, the increasing refinement of the **occupational schedule** in every count since 1841 means that it is difficult to quantify the growth and decline of specific occupations. Even the most seemingly straightforward statistical sequences may conceal pitfalls of this kind. Consider, for example, the official cost-of-living index, which measures the cost of a typical 'shopping-bag' against the current wage-rate. In Britain the index, begun in 1914, ought to provide a reliable picture of the declining standard of living during the Depression of the 1930s. But during the inter-war period the price side of the index continued to be based on the same 'shopping-bag', even though changing patterns of consumption meant that the weighting given to the various items (fresh vegetables, meat, clothing, etc.) in 1914 no longer corresponded with the actual make-up of the average family budget.³¹

Compiling the statistics

Most quantitative history, however, is not based on ready-made statistics. It was only in the late seventeenth century that the advantages of a statistical approach to public issues began to be canvassed, only during the nineteenth century that the state acquired the resources of manpower and money to undertake such work, and only in the twentieth century that statistical information was gathered in a really comprehensive way by both government and private bodies. For most of the questions that interest historians, the likelihood is that the figures will have to be laboriously constructed from the relevant surviving materials. To construct quantitative data in such a way that valid statistical inferences can be drawn from them is no easy matter. The issues of reliability and comparability will be posed, not once, but many times over, as the historian seeks out data from varied and scattered source materials.

For the historian of periods earlier than the nineteenth century, the problem of selection is likely to have been partly or wholly solved by the ravages of time. But the residue that survives is still a sample of the original range of records, and it is important to

recognize that it is often anything but a random sample. Some types of record are more likely to survive than others because their owners had a greater interest in their survival or better facilities for preserving them, for reasons that may introduce a manifest bias into the sample. Thus surviving business records are nearly always weighted in favour of the successful long-lasting firm, at the expense of smaller businesses that were unable to weather a crisis. Lawrence Stone was dogged by a problem of this kind in his study of the English aristocracy between 1558 and 1641. Although he had some information on all the 382 individuals who held titles at that period, the proportion of noble families whose private papers survive in abundance never rose above one-third, and these families were mostly those of wealthy earls rather than minor barons whose estates were more subject to disintegration or dispersal. Stone was accordingly obliged to make allowances for the fact that many of his findings were drawn from an unrepresentative sample.³² This is just one of the pitfalls that lie in wait for the historian seeking clarity in quantification.

VI

Methodology and instinct

In approaching the sources, the historian is anything but a passive observer. The relevant evidence has to be sought after in fairly out-of-the-way and improbable places. Ingenuity and flair are required to grasp the full range of uses to which a single source may be put. Of each type of evidence the historian has to ask how and why it came into being, and what its real import is. Divergent sources have to be weighed against each other, forgeries and gaps explained. No document, however authoritative, is beyond question; the evidence must, in E.P. Thompson's telling phrase, 'be interrogated by minds trained in a discipline of attentive disbelief'.³³ Perhaps these precepts hardly merit the name of method, if that suggests the deliberate application of a set sequence of scientific procedures for verifying the evidence. Innumerable handbooks of historical method have, it is true, been written for the guidance of research students since Ranke's time, and in mainland Europe and the United States formal instruction in research techniques has long been part of the postgraduate historian's training.³⁴ Britain, on the other hand, has until recently been the

home of the ‘green fingers’ approach to source criticism. G.M. Young, an eminent historian of the inter-war period, declared that his aim was to read in a period until he could hear its people speak. He was later echoed by Richard Cobb:

The most gifted researchers show a willingness to *listen* to the wording of the document, to be governed by its every phrase and murmur ... so as to *hear* what is actually being said, in what accent and with what tone.³⁵

This suggests not so much a method as an attitude of mind – an instinct almost – which can only be acquired by trial and error.

But to argue further, as Cobb did, that the principles of historical enquiry defy definition altogether is a mystification.³⁶ In practice, unfavourable notice of a secondary work often turns on the author’s failure to apply this or that test to the evidence. Admittedly, the rules cannot be reduced to a formula, and the exact procedures vary according to the type of evidence; but much of what the experienced scholar does almost without thinking can be described – as I have tried to do here – in terms that are comprehensible to the uninitiated. When spelt out in this way, historical method may seem to amount to little more than the obvious lessons of common sense. But it is common sense applied very much more systematically and sceptically than is usually the case in everyday life, supported by a secure grasp of historical context and, in many instances, a high degree of technical knowledge. It is by these taxing standards that historical research demands to be judged.

Bishop Stubbs’ Select Charters and the British constitution

The work of the nineteenth-century British historian Bishop William Stubbs (1829–1901) is an example of the application of scholarly historical research to contemporary concerns. Stubbs was Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, and later Bishop of Chester and of Oxford. His compilation of medieval charters and his three-volume *Constitutional History of England* were drawn up to show through exhaustive documentary evidence the antiquity – and therefore the legitimacy – of English legal and political institutions. His work is therefore as important nowadays

for what it reveals about the Victorian mentality as it is for understanding the period Stubbs was actually studying.

British rule in Palestine

Palestine, roughly equivalent to modern-day Israel and Jordan, was a province of the Turkish Ottoman Empire until after the First World War, when the British took the area over, under mandate from the League of Nations. However, the British were also bound by their undertaking under the 1917 Balfour Declaration to establish a homeland in Palestine for the Jewish people. Palestinian resistance to Jewish immigration grew steadily through the 1930s. After the Second World War and the Holocaust, increasing demands for large-scale Jewish settlement in Palestine enjoyed considerable international support. Jewish terrorist groups, Irgun and the Stern Gang, launched a series of bomb attacks on British troops and administration buildings. British attempts to create some sort of bi-national Arab–Jewish state failed, and in 1947 the United Nations (UN) agreed to partition Palestine between Jews and Arabs. Britain handed the mandate back to the UN in 1948, and the UN immediately declared the Jewish state of Israel.

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