

The Historian and His Times

Historians are often rightly accused of carrying contemporary ideas and values back into the past and using them inappropriately to evaluate actors and institutions of bygone days. The presumption in this accusation is that historians know a lot about their own times and relatively little about former times. But such need not be the case.

I remember reading long ago a collection of essays by the distinguished political and intellectual historian of 16th and 17th century Britain J. H. Hexter. In the book's introduction, Hexter notes how much he is at home in those remote times and how relatively ignorant and unaware he is of the times in which he was living. He simply had devoted much more time and effort to the long ago and far away than he had to informing himself about his own times and circumstances.

I often feel the same way, especially in regard to popular culture. When I hear people refer to contemporary actors, entertainers, and athletes, I often say to myself, Who are these people? Even more so for "celebrities," people who have done nothing, but are famous for being famous. I'm pretty sure I know more about Grover Cleveland and his presidential administrations than I know about Donald Trump and his. And I have no doubt that I know more about the U.S. economy of the period 1865-1950 than I know about the current U.S. economy.

One really can live in the past. Indeed, it's what historians are supposed to do.