

## Quotations about History

### Definitions

*“What is history but a fable agreed upon.”*

–Napoleon

*“There is properly no history, only biography.”*

–Ralph Waldo Emerson

*“History is past politics, and politics present history.”* –Edward Augustus Freeman, *The Methods of Historical Study*

*“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”*

–*Communist Manifesto*

*“History is ‘the memory of things said and done.’”*

–Carl Becker

### Justifications

*“The future is unknowable but the past should give us hope.”*

–Winston Churchill

*“The greatest historian should be a great moralist...able to paint for us the life of plain people, the ordinary men and women, of the times of which he writes.”* –Theodore Roosevelt, *Pastmasters*

*“The study of history would be meaningless if it did not have an ultimately religious significance and religious goal”* –Arnold Toynbee

*“Indeed the general tendency of reading good history must be, to fix in the minds of youth deep impressions of the beauty and usefulness of virtue of all kinds.”*

–Ben Franklin

*“To illustrate the glory of his nation is one of the noblest offices of the historian.”*

–Washington Irving

*“Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature.”*

–David Hume

*“Anyone who is tired of history is tired of life.”*

–Henry Steele Commager, *The Study of History*

*“Perhaps history should show us not how to control the world, but how to enlarge, deepen and discipline ourselves.”*

–Gretel Ehrlich

*“The organized study of history is, I believe, a powerful academic antidote to atomism, the radical aloneness of so many people today. It introduces students (and adults) to companions on a human journey, fellow travelers on the road.”*

–Mary Beth Klee

*“People who take no pride in the noble achievement of remote ancestors will never achieve anything worthy to be remembered with pride by remote descendants.”*

–Thomas Macaulay

*“A nation without an idea of history is like a person without a memory. A victim of amnesia who is lost the remembrance of things past is incapable of acting in the present or of planning for the future.”*

–David Hackett Fischer

*“History cannot give us a program for the future but it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves and of our common humanity, so that we can better face the future.”*

–Robert Penn Warren

*“To recover some of our ancestors’ real thoughts and feelings is the hardest, subtlest and most educated function that the historian can perform.”*

–Theodore Roosevelt

*“The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once on this earth, once 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, one generation vanishing into another, gone as utterly as we are ourselves shall shortly be gone, like ghosts at cockcrow.”*

–G.M. Trevelyan

*“The greatest historian should be a great moralist...able to paint for us the life of plain people, the ordinary men and women, of the times of which he writes.*

–Theodore Roosevelt

## **Lessons**

*“Greed, prejudice, and stupidity (as well as generosity, tolerance, and genius) have always been, and will always be, central to human history. Understanding how others, in their context, worked, succeeded and even failed makes us wiser, less self-satisfied and judgmental, more compassionate and humane, and more capable of recognizing the possibilities and limitations of our non historical experience.”*

–Sheldon Stern, “Beyond the Rhetoric: An Historian’s View of the National Standards.” *Journal of Education*, 1994.

*“The great horrors of the past are very useful. One cannot remind oneself too often of crimes and disasters.”*

–Voltaire

*“The principal office of history I take to be this: to prevent virtuous actions from being forgotten, and that evil works and deeds should fear an infamous reputation with posterity.”* –Tacitus, *Annals*, III. LXV

*“A people which no longer remembers has lost its history and its soul.”*

–Alexander Solzhenitsyn

*“History can be well-written only in a free country.”*

–Voltaire, in a letter to Frederick the Great, May 27, 1737

*“As a professor, I tended to think of history as run by impersonal forces. But when you see it in practice, you see the difference personalities make.”* –Henry Kissinger, quoted in Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography*

*“Perhaps the greatest of all the lessons of history is this demonstration of the complexity of human change and the unpredictable character of the ultimate consequences of any given act or decision of men.”* –Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, page 121

*“Most history is guessing and the rest is prejudice.”* –Will

Durant, *The Lessons of History*, page 12

*“In the last 3,421 years of recorded history, only 268 have seen no war.”* –Will

Durant, *The Lessons of History*, page 11

*“History offers some consolation by reminding us that sin has flourished in every age...Man has never reconciled himself to the ten commandments.”* –Will Durant, *The Lessons of History*

*“Behind the red facade of war and politics, misfortune and poverty, adultery and divorce, murder and suicide, were millions of orderly homes, devoted marriages, men and women kindly and affectionate, troubled and happy with children...Who will dare to write a history of human goodness?”* –Will Durant, *The Lessons of History*, page 40 *“The challenge [in writing history] is to get the reader beyond thinking that things had to be the way they turned out and to see the range of possibilities of how it could have been otherwise.”*

–David McCullough

*“The older one becomes, the more clearly one sees that King Hazard fashions three-fourths of the events in this miserable world.”* –Frederick the Great, quoted in Commager, *The Study of History*, page 85

*“The molding elements of history include ideas, forces, great men—and chance.”* –Allan Nevins, “Is History Made By Heroes?” *Saturday Review*, November 5, 1955

*“History is full of the errors of states and princes.”* –Ben Franklin

## **Objectivity**

*“Poets can sing of things, not as they were but as they ought to have been; whereas the historian must describe them not as they ought to have been but as they were without exaggeration or suppressing the truth in any particular.”*

–Cervantes

*“We don’t have to turn to our history books for heroes. They’re all around us.”*  
–Ronald Reagan, State of Union Message, 1982

*“The historian seeking to know the past does not bring to the partial documentation with which he works a polished and neutral mind.”*

–Charles Beard

*“A greater hazard built into the very nature of recorded history, is the overload of the negative: the disproportionate survival of the dark side, evil, misery, contention, and harm...the normal does not make news.”*

–Barbara Tuchman

*“We read history through our prejudices.”*

–Wendell Phillips

*“...that which attracts the record keeper and the historian is the dramatic, the spectacular, the bizarre and the catastrophic.”* –Henry Steele Commager, *The Study of History*, p. 45

*“To judge or not to judge, that is the historical question.”* –Henry Steele Commager, *The Study of History*, p. 60  
*“The historian...is a creature of his race, nationality, religion, class, of his inheritance and his education, and he can never emancipate himself from these formative influences and achieve Olympian impartiality.”*

–Henry Steele Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past*, p. 318

*“Understanding the past requires pretending you don’t know the present.”*

–Paul Fussell

*“{Most historians are liberal} because they see the necessity of change, that change is the essence of history and, therefore are more sympathetic to change than conservatives. History is a weapon. History ideally strives for objectivity above the battle....But historians, like everyone else, are prisoners of their own experience and their own times....The selection of facts from the past involves an interpretation, a sense of priorities, a sense of values as to what matters. History can be a very strong weapon for people who wish to construct a certain movement in a certain direction.”*

–Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., quoted in Brian Lamb, *Booknotes on American Character*, p. 186

*“...it is never safe to forget the truth which really underlies historical research: the truth that all history perpetually requires to be corrected by more history...History is all things to all men. She is at the services of good causes and bad. In other words she is a harlot and a hireling, and for this reason, she best serves those who suspect her most.”*

—Herbert Butterfield

*“It is an illusion to think we can ever know what really happened; but it is a necessary and beneficial illusion.”*

–Eileen Power

## **Revisionism**

*“We develop strong citizens...if we teach history with all of its dirt and its glory, with all of its questions, with its good guys and its bad guys, instead of only good guys.”* –James W. Loewen, quoted in Brian Lamb, *Booknotes on American Character*, p. 530

*“I have concluded that we need to reverse the idealized picture of the past and turn the spotlight on its grimmer aspects.”* –Otto Bettman, *The Good Old Days, They Were Terrible*

*“A Working Class House in the Capitol City.”* –Plaque in Philadelphia next to the house of James Todd.

*“Today the house is gone and few traces of its occupants remain. Their belongings were inexpensive and easily discarded. No one wrote their biographies. Rarely did their names stand out in history. Yet they made up the vast majority of Philadelphia’s population.”*

*“We love to read the lives of the great, yet what a broken history of mankind they give, unless supplemented by the lives of the humble. But while the great can speak for themselves or by the tons of their admirers, the humble are apt to live inarticulate and die unheard. It is well that now and then one is born among the simple with a taste for self-revelation.”* –Mary Antin, *The Promised Land*

*“Our historical sense is frequently skewed, skewered, or just plain screwed up by myths and misconception...There has always been a tendency to hide the less savory moments from our past. A good case can be made that America is and has been a government of, for and by the special interests.”* –Kenneth C. Davis, *Don’t Know Much About History*, p. xiii

*“Social historians during the past three decades have concentrated on the experiences of America’s outsiders--the poor, the persecuted, and the foreign...To tell the story of the striking miners, etc. does more than give voice to previous inaudible, it exposes the cost of capitalism. This raises very forcefully the disturbing possibility that the study of history does not strengthen an attachment to one society.”* –Joyce Appleby, *Telling The Truth About History*, p. 158

*“How could the tragic stories of the lives of slaves, for example, be incorporated into a simple narrative governed by optimism and progress?”*

–Joyce Appleby, *Telling The Truth About History*, p. 217

*“But in the past few decades we have seen a flowering of an American history sensitive to gender, race, religion, and class, which is to say a democratized history...Such a consciousness of a complex and contingent past quickens people to the idea that they too can contribute to a different future. If presented inclusively history has a powerful potential to impart a sense of individuality, of the possibilities of choice, of the human capacity for both good and evil.”*

–Gary B. Nash, *First City*, p. 10

*“The one duty we have to history is to rewrite it.”*

–Oscar Wilde

## **Skepticism**

*“History is simply a piece of paper covered with print. The main thing is still to make history, not to write it.”*

–Otto Von Bismarck

*“We learn nothing from history except the infinite variety of men’s behavior. We study it as we listen to music and read poetry, for pleasure, not for instruction.”*

–A. J. P. Taylor

*“The great man is a public misfortune.”*

–Chinese proverb

*“History is in fact written by the upper classes for the upper classes.”*

–James Jones

*“The historian always oversimplifies, and hastily selects a manageable minority of facts and faces out of a crowd of souls and events whose multitudinous complexity he can never quite embrace or comprehend.”* –Will Durant, *The Lessons of History*, p. 12

*“The life and soul of history must forever be unknown.”* –Thomas Jefferson, quoted in Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx*, p. 245

*“History is written by the winners.”* –George Orwell

*“History, n. An account mostly false, of events mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers, mostly knaves, and soldiers, mostly fools.”* –Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary*, 1906

*“History is a bath of blood.”*

–William James

*“All centuries are alike in the wickedness of men.”*

–Voltaire

*“Modern men are afraid of the past. It is a record of human achievement, but its other face is human defect.”*

–Walter Lippmann

*“Ignorance is the first requisite of the historian, ignorance which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits.”*

–Lytton Strachey

*“Written history is, in fact, nothing of the kind; it is the fragmentary record of the often inexplicable actions of innumerable bewildered human beings, set down and interpreted according to their own limitations by other human beings, equally bewildered.”* –C.V. Wedgwood, *Velvet Studies*, 1946

*“Happy is the nation without a history.”* –Cesare Beccaria, Introduction to *Treatise of Crimes and of Punishment*.

*“History...is little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind. –Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

*From David McCullough’s John Adams, p. 605: “Who shall write the history of the American Revolution?’ Adams asked. “Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?” “Nobody,” Jefferson answered, except perhaps its external facts.”*

*“It is much easier to find records of the pathological, of violence, crime and disaster, than of quiet and contented lives.”*

–Theodore Zeldin

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