

OBAFEMI AWOLowo UNIVERSITY, ILE-IFE, NIGERIA.

Inaugural Lecture Series 194

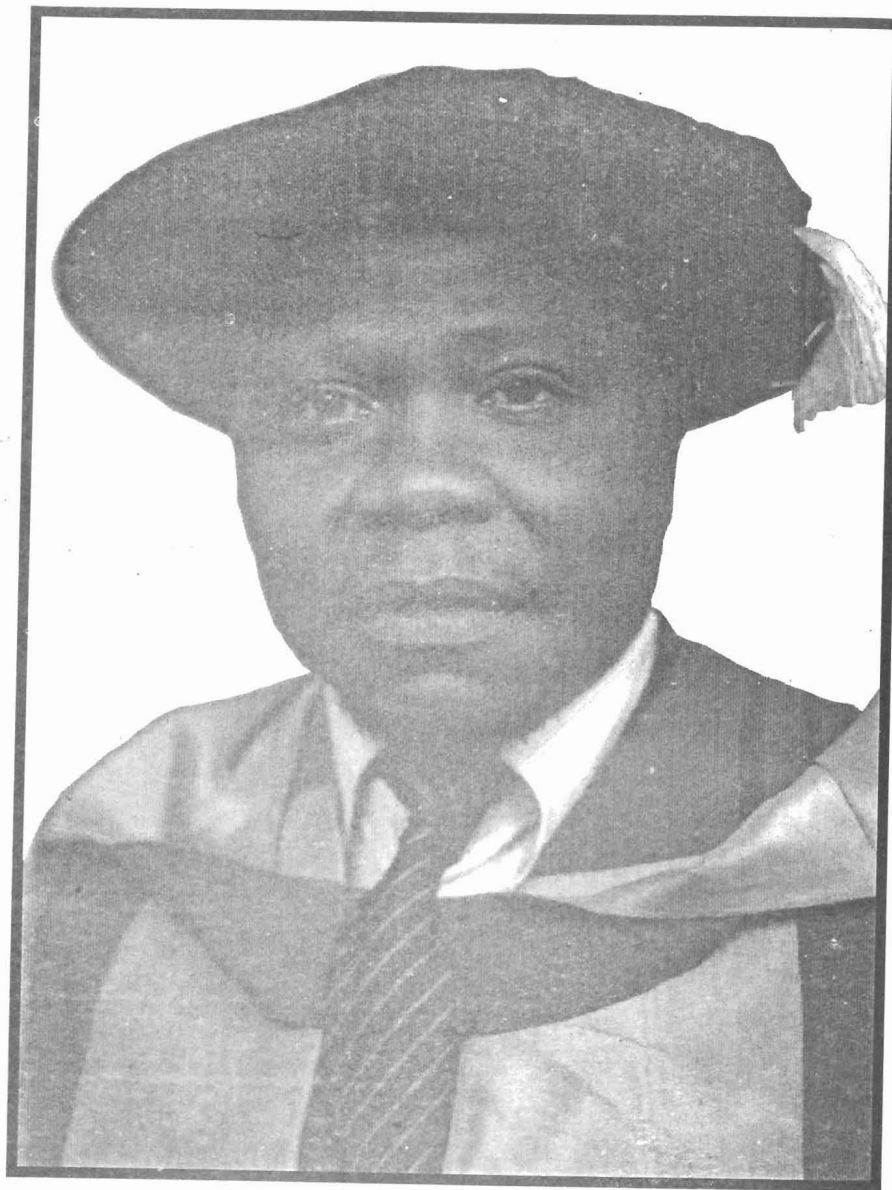
**THE PROBLEMS OF HISTORICAL
UNDERSTANDING**

By

Professor A. Olorunfemi
Professor of History



OBAFEMI AWOLowo UNIVERSITY PRESS LIMITED.



PROF. A. OLORUNFEMI
Professor of History

THE PROBLEMS OF HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

By

Professor A. Olorunfemi
Professor of History

**An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at Oduduwa Hall,
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife
on Tuesday, July 11, 2006**

Inaugural Lecture Series 194

**Obafemi Awolowo University Press Limited,
Ile-Ife, Nigeria.**

© Obafemi Awolowo University Press Limited

ISSN 0189-7848

Printed by
Obafemi Awolowo University Press Limited
Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

Introduction

As a historian, I suppose that my audience would expect me to speak on a particular topic or event in history. However, I have chosen to talk about a specialized aspect of history, the *Philosophy of History*. This is because in the last few years, my interest in this area had developed to overshadow all the other aspects of history*. I have also been teaching this aspect of history to both undergraduate and postgraduate students not only in my department but also as a visiting scholar in several other sister universities across the country. The *Philosophy of History* as a subject had introduced several generations of students to the theories behind every piece of historical writing. It has also engendered in them the capacity to read more critically and reflect on the practices governing their own discipline. It is now necessary to speak on this aspect of history to a wider academic audience. This is a great opportunity to explore this field so as to expand the range of understanding and knowledge about the wide-ranging options available to the academic historian and his students.

Peter Loewenberg once wrote: "each historian and each age redefines categories of evidence in the light of its needs, sensibilities, and perceptions. The value of any conceptual framework is what new combinations of data or inferences from the data it may contribute to the historian's ability to interpret documents and the other raw material of history".¹ This presupposes that every piece of historical work has a theoretical basis on which evidence is selected, collated, filtered and understood.² This conviction is no doubt universally applicable. The task of the historian has not changed since the time of Herodotus, the father of history. Facts must be collected and analyzed in the context of an individual's own methodology. It is only a few who still cling to the fading hope of writing definitive history.³ The need to know the wide range of approaches to the understanding and writing of history has therefore been able to push the aspect of history known as the Philosophy of history to the front burner of this academic discipline.

The Philosophy of history is not strictly speaking, a branch of History itself; but that of Philosophy. In this context, philosophy can be described as 'a science of ideas', that is, a science dealing with thoughts about different features and phenomena in the universe. The main duty of the philosopher is to study the various forms of human experience and relate them as best as he can, to experience as a whole. Thus, Philosophy of history, like other branches of philosophy, embraces a specific group or body of pivotal problems. But because of the scope and nature of the subject, the term 'Philosophy of history' does not embrace a precise body of knowledge, which is there to be acquired by anybody who so desires. In fact the philosopher of history may not necessarily be a historian, since he is interested not in knowing this or that historical event, but in relating the historical process as a whole to experience.

Philosophy of history as a branch of knowledge is not as old as classical philosophy. When the term was first used in the 18th century by Francois Voltaire, a French writer, philosopher and historian, it meant for him critical and scientific history based on the idea of the progressive development of society, independent of the will of God. For him, historical change was brought about only by changes in ideas. Hegel, the German philosopher of the late 18th and early 19th centuries used the term to mean universal or world history as opposed to empirical, local and natural history. Later in the 19th century, the Positivists for whom the primary task of philosophy was 'the discovery of uniform laws' saw philosophy of history as an empirical science leading to the discovery of general and immutable laws governing the course of historical events. But in the 20th century, 'Philosophy of history' developed to mean a 'second degree thought about the past'. R.G. Collingwood, the English historian and philosopher saw the subject as the intellectual process by which historians come to study the past i.e. the interaction between the past and the historian's conception of that past⁴. This process embraces a body of related pivotal problems, which unless well articulated and understood the subject of History can be very tedious both to the historian and his audience. It is in an attempt to throw some light on these that I have decided to discuss the problems of historical understanding.

The first and perhaps most popular idea about History as a subject of study is also its first major misconception. To the layman, history is all about what happened in the past, and these things belong to a world of change, a world where things come to be and cease to be. Such things, according to ancient Greek metaphysical thought up to the 5th Century B.C., ought not to be knowable and therefore history ought to be impossible because, according to the Greeks, for anything to be an object of study leading to genuine knowledge must be permanent⁵.

Aristotle, Plato and Herodotus belonged to this anti-historic age in Greece. It was a period when those who attempted to write 'history' were mainly concerned with recording theocratic and mythical accounts of the past. Theocratic accounts were not in any meaningful way concerned with human actions; they were mere assertions of what the writer is made to know about the actions of the gods. Similarly, myths as we still know them today do not deal with the facts of life. They record only divine actions' conceived to have occurred in a remote, dateless and unknowable past, represented by such vague and imprecise phrases like 'in the beginning of things', 'once upon a time' or 'long long time ago'. However, it was Herodotus- the father of modern history writing – who blazed the trail by brushing aside all these. He pursued a course of research which produced his own account of the Greco-Persian Wars, thus showing that even though history is about what happened in the past, it was still possible to capture the essence of that past. It is not that his works would perfectly fit our contemporary model of critical and interpretative history, there is no doubt that Herodotus did open a new vista of knowledge. For him, history is an account, not of the actions of the 'gods', but of human actions actually performed in the past.

Even today, a lot of people still wonder why what had happened in the past, whether glorious or inglorious, should be a serious subject of study. The assumption is that in any case, these events are dead and done with, and in most, if not in all cases, few people desire their repetition especially when such events are distasteful to the people or society involved. For instance, so far, for purposes of study, no group or groups of people

in the world have clamored for a repeat performance of the two World Wars (1914-18; 1939-45); neither would anyone wish for a re-enactment of the slave-trade era in West Africa, the apartheid regime in South Africa, the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 to 1970, or even the very recent experience like the last years of military rule in Nigeria before 1999. In the same vein, the much advertised famous era of Mai Idris Alooma of the Kanem-Bornu empire, the one-time flourishing Oyo empire and even the glorious era of the far-flung British empire – when Britain was ‘Great’ and ‘Britannia ruled the waves’; will for ever remain the records (the histories) of those societies and peoples.

Of course, it is very obvious that none of such events can be re-enacted or re-created in exactly the same form or magnitude however much we try. Even professional actors cannot bring back the real pictures and scenes of what had actually happened. For instance, it is very doubtful whether African countries today or even in the future would want to allow another form of colonialism, in form and content, as they were subjected to up to the middle of the twentieth century. Similarly, it is inconceivable for any Nigerian who missed the Nigerian Civil War (of 1967-70) whether because he was not yet born, or was an infant or for any other reasons, to induce the actors – all of them – to re-enact the thirty month-old war for any reason, whether for purposes of study or film production. Surely many of the principal actors on both sides are either already dead or old and incapacitated. Even if all of them are still around, it is reasonable to assume that *most*, if not all of them would not allow themselves to be used as guinea pigs, and made to go through the horrors of blood-bath in the same way as had happened to them between 1967 and 1970.

To the professional historian, history is not just a narration of what has happened in the past. It is more than a mere trans-shipment of ready-made information from one generation to another. History is a Greek word which simply means an investigation or enquiry. It is a science of human actions. According to Herodotus, the father and founder of history, “history is science in the form of enquiry⁶⁷”. It is true that history deals with past actions – achievements, set-backs or failures and aspirations – of

human beings. The task of the historian is to describe such actions so that they shall not be forgotten by posterity. But more than that, history assumes that man is a rational being who has reasons for his actions. Therefore, the function of history is partly to ascertain what men have done in the past, but most importantly to discover why they have done so. In other words, history does not confine its attention to bare narration of events in a chronological order derisively referred to in Yoruba language as *Oba ku, Oba je* i.e. when a king dies another one is installed. Historians consider these events in a thoroughly humanistic manner as actions of human beings who had reasons for acting as they did.

It is by doing all these things that the functions of history within the society can be clearly articulated; that is, to retain, or tell us about the past so that we may learn about or understand the present and possibly prepares us for the future. But it is in accomplishing these goals that the historian is faced with the pivotal problems of historical understanding. These include the identification and ascertainment of historical facts, and the methodology of collecting, organizing, synthesizing and interpreting evidential data. These two major problems are further compounded by the obvious fact that all these hang on what pre-suppositions the historian himself as an individual, has vis-a-vis the kind of history that can be recovered from all kinds of data – oral and written-available to him.

Identification of Historical Facts

History has been described as a hard core of interpretation surrounded by a pulp of disputable facts. According to G.R. Elton, such historical facts are knowable only by the evidence they leave behind; but in many cases, that evidence is not clear-cut⁷. The difficult question then is how and under what conditions can the historian ascertain or know ‘facts’ which, being now gone beyond recall or repetition, can no longer be for him objects of perception. Unlike the historian, the scientist can in most, if not, in all cases, collect his ‘facts’ directly by observation. This is because in science, facts are empirical, perceived as they occur. But in history, the word ‘fact’ bears a very different meaning; it is arrived at

inferentially by a process of interpreting data according to a complicated system of rules and assumptions. Because the historian can not manufacture or 're-create' the materials on which he hopes to construct his image or picture of the past, he has to rely solely on the evidence supplied to him by various other sources.

One of the major sources of materials available to the historian can be grouped under the title Oral Traditions. According to J.A. Vansina, Oral Traditions consist of all verbal testimonies which are reported statements of the activities of human beings in the past⁸. Such testimonies are rendered in a form suitable for oral transmission, and are transmitted from one person to another and from one generation to the other through the medium of language. However, such testimonies do not include rumours and 'hear-say' because even though they are also transmitted through the medium of language, they are not known to have been concerned in any meaningful way with events that actually happened in the past. In other words, the preservation of Oral Traditions depends on the power of memory of successive generation of human beings.

These testimonies constitute a major source of evidence for reconstructing the past activities of pre-literate societies especially in Africa. This is because of the observable fact that most African societies believe that, though not in print, their history and traditions had been kept for ages in what one commentator aptly described as "the bookless world of the ancients". It is not surprising therefore, that historians, particularly those engaged in the history of pre-literate, pre-colonial period of such societies often regard Oral Traditions as 'primary source materials' because of the assumption that such testimonies must have originated from eye-witnesses, who at that time, were not conscious of the social or political importance of such materials. But unfortunately in most cases, nothing now is known about the first eye-witness from whom the testimonies originated, nor of those who subsequently transmitted them. The result is a chain of transmissions in which each successive informant forms a link, and in which every testimony becomes a 'hear-say' account.

Moreover, there is no doubt that the exclusive reliance on human memory—which is believed to be inferior to written records—known for its unreliability for the preservation and transmission of these accounts, do sometimes lead to serious distortions and misrepresentations. This is why J.A. Vansina had suggested that the fragile evidence embodied in them be fortified by the super-intelligence of additional evidence and techniques provided by such other disciplines like archaeology, social anthropology, linguistics, etc. But today, the nature and methods of collection and transmission of Oral Traditions are seriously affected by the social and political functions they are meant to perform in their specific cultural contexts. Therefore, in spite of the 'surgical operations' prescribed by J.A. Vansina to salvage Oral Traditions and make them useful as authentic source materials for the historian, their value remains in serious dispute because of the deliberate neglect of the critical evaluation and assessment which such materials deserve before they are used. It is now common to find even the so-called 'traditional custodians' of such accounts being tele-guided to bend truth and twist facts in order to achieve desired political or socio-economic objectives. Where and when such devices are supported by the apparatus of political power, the chances of recovering the authentic versions of such traditions are lost perhaps for ever, and the unsuspecting historian is thoroughly disarmed in his attempt to obtain an objective insight into the past he is studying.

Written or printed materials in general constitute the other major source of information at the disposal of the historian. They include archival materials, private papers of outstanding individuals in the society, official government papers, diaries, etc. — all of which have come to be regarded as primary source materials for the same reasons for which oral traditions are so classified. Other materials in this category include journal articles, published texts, magazines and even contemporary government papers. But these are regarded not as primary, but secondary source materials because they represent the synthesis, evaluations and sometimes re-interpretations of existing primary source materials which now include oral traditions.

Even though they are written and their authenticity do not therefore depend on the power of the memory, this category of source materials also share the same limitations with oral traditions and oral source materials in general. Some of them have been deliberately compiled by individuals and institutions to perform specific functions in the society. Experience has shown that such functions include the propagation of the view-points and achievements of particular political regimes and their leaders to the exclusion of others, or merely to vilify its opponents, and the creation of a sense of solidarity and oneness among members of a community. The result is that such source materials often distort historical facts.

Newspaper publications stand out as a separate class of its own. Particularly since independence, Nigerian newspapers have become the 'mouth-piece' of their proprietors and stake-holders. It is not uncommon to find that many of them publish sensational stories, sometimes deliberate falsehoods, carried conspicuously and in bold prints on their front or back pages to entice potential customers. Sometimes, some of them preempt the outcome of events by publishing imaginary stories either to confuse their readers or to prejudice the outcome of unfolding events. Such 'history written in a hurry' creates problems for the competent historian because in the event of any retraction such are usually published in an obscure unexpected and unnoticed corner inside a later issue of the newspaper.

History and Science

Given the problems associated with the identification and collection of source-materials, the central problem in historical understanding can be tied to the traditional argument of whether the study of history can, and should be pursued in the same way as the scientists study such subjects like biology, chemistry, physics, etc. This is a fairly recent argument which has divided philosophers into various conflicting camps. The kernel of this argument arose from the suggestion that the methods by which science studies the world of nature could also be applied in the study of human affairs. Thus, throughout the nineteenth century, German scholars frequently

referred to 'historical science' when they meant no more than the idea of a systematic intellectual discipline. They believed that one was being scientific if one aspired to the highest degree of objectivity that the solution to a problem required and permitted. This, of course, involves making enquiries before arriving at conclusions. There is no doubt that the social scientist including the historians has made fruitful use of the ideas of scientific hypotheses, educated guess, etc. as to the alternatives or possibilities involved in a study. This was why J. Bury in 1903 could confidently assert that 'History is science, no more no less'¹⁰.

If history were science, that is, amenable to the equations, formulae, theorems, etc. of the science, then the problems of historical understanding would probably not have existed, or at best, they would not have been as intimidating and insoluble as we have them today. However, there is no harm in using the term 'social science' or 'behavioral science for social studies'—including history—as long as this is not confused with a full-blown idea of the natural sciences. According to Bertrand Russell, 'the mathematics of human behaviour cannot be as precise as the mathematics of machine'¹¹. It is incontestable that neither history, nor any of the social sciences, can feel confident in showing the same resounding results that chemistry or nuclear physics can do, and none of them can compete with the natural sciences in predictability except in very limited and specialized areas of inquiry. In fact, the historian does not pretend forecasting what will happen in the future. For instance, the historian can not emulate the natural scientist *by experimenting with the available historical materials* and drawing demonstrable conclusions from them. If he has tons of archival records papers and other relics of the combatants of the two World Wars or even those of the recent Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), the fact remains that he cannot re-create or resurrect those events for on-the-spot assessment and study. This is because the past is thoroughly dead, and the future is always yet unborn.

G.R. Elton, unlike J. Bury is not interested in the philosophical argument but in the practicability of history. According to him, '... whether history is an art or science, is a dead issue, it is both...' However, he has

not been able to throw any new light on this problem, and especially on the relationship between scientific explanation and history. For instance, he has neglected the core issues – the absence of universal acceptance for historical explanation, and the whole complex of factors responsible for different historians interpreting the same historical event, or complex of them, in radically different fashions. These are the real issues of the problems of historical understanding. It is true that history can easily be intelligible to persons without any professional training in the subject. On the other hand, the sciences are full of technicalities, equations, etc. which can be understood only by the scientists. But the fact that history is written in everyday language, and has not developed any special vocabulary of its own does not mean anybody can produce meaningful and intelligent historical accounts. According to W.H. Walsh, history can be described as scientific in some ways because it is a study with its own recognized methods which must be mastered by any one who hopes to be proficient in it.

However, historians do not have among themselves a uniform, mutually recognizable set of explanatory tools like the scientists. Even the vocabulary which they use, and the very hypotheses and presuppositions they make – which form the basis of their explanations – very often vary from one historian to the other. On the contrary, apart from the universally acceptable language of the natural sciences, which cut across national borders, the assumptions, hypotheses and pre-suppositions which form the basis of scientific explanation are, and have to be mutually intelligible to the community of scientists world-wide, for them to be considered as vital tools of explanations.

Because of all these, the problems of disagreement among scientists are not as insoluble as these same problems among historians. In deed, it is far easier in science for a superior theory which provides a more comprehensive explanation to supercede an earlier or even a contemporary one with less explanatory capability. In other words, whereas the author of a scientific theory that has been superceded by a new one can be persuaded by sheer force of arguments based on universally

acceptable scientific laws and procedure of inquiry, it is always extremely difficult for one school of historical interpretation to persuade the other about the falsity of its position.

Moreover, the historian deals with past human actions – actions that have ceased to exist, while the scientist can study human actions and other objects of their study as they are being enacted. This, of course, affects the material evidence the two of them can obtain. While the scientist can re-create the phenomenon he is studying, the historian cannot. In fact, the scientist can make his observations repeatedly in most cases, to collect-new data if the previous observations had not satisfied him, or merely in order to acquire sufficient facts as the basis of his explanation. On the other hand, the historian having missed a social event, or any event at all, cannot re-create such in order to bring it under fresh observation. Moreover, in collecting his data, the historian invariably deals not only with *living objects*, but also with reasoning objects whose actions and or reactions are conditioned by a complex of factors which are not very easily amenable to observations and study. These objects are more difficult to predict than the operative factors in the natural world, in which natural objects form the core of scientific explanation. This is because such objects, even when they have life, e.g. trees, animals etc. do not have self-consciousness, and are therefore much easier to observe and study.

The scientist studies in typology to arrive at generally acceptable theories or facts. But most, if not all, historians do not hope that their studies would result in general laws that can be used to explain similar types of historical events. The futility of the historian's ability to predict the future can also be linked with the same reason that historical events do not occur in a unileneal fashion, and that, for example, the reasons for a revolution in a particular society or country do not necessarily give the same revolution in another one. Therefore, for the professional historian, the debate whether history is arts or science is basically irrelevant. The ultimate aim of scientific enquiry is the acquisition of knowledge; and this is also the primary purpose of historical scholarship. This is why the historian avails himself or herself of the intellectual processes employed by

the scientist. But in history, unlike most of the sciences, controlled experiment under controlled conditions are definitely impossible. The course of history is not only unforeseen but also unforeseeable. According to Arthur Marwick, "the human affairs which the historian studies, is more complex, less easily analyzable, less accessible to quantitative and precise presentation than the physical state of affairs¹²." Consequently, historical research cannot be expected to present theories that can be demonstrated and used as bases for invoking general and immutable laws, or for full-proof predictions.

Historical Evidence

The historian is also compelled to grapple with a series of other problems arising from this central one. Perhaps the most important of these is the crucial question of what historical 'facts' or 'truths' or evidence are made of. To the layman, historical facts are contained in public archives, private papers of outstanding individuals in the society, ancient relics, archaeological remains, government papers, etc. But to the professional historian, these are merely the raw (source) materials from which he is expected to produce historical accounts. The problem of the historian in this respect is not whether these materials are readily available or not, but that of what should be the historian's proper relation to them. Again, different philosophers and schools of thought have taken conflicting positions on this issue.

According to W.H. Walsh, there is the Correspondence School of thought which believes in the independent and objective existence of each historical fact. In other words, members of this school believe that historical facts are fixed and determined, and cannot be affected in any way by what historians think about them. The Coherence School, on the other hand, holds that everything the historian believes about the past is a function of the evidence at present available to him, and of his own skills in interpreting them. In other words, 'facts' which do not bear relations to present evidence must be unknowable, and should therefore have no significance whether for the historian or for any one else. A third theory

held by the Perspective School, represents a compromise between the Correspondence and Coherence theories. According to it, every historian contemplates the past from his own stand-point, but nevertheless has a chance of attaining some understanding of what actually happened in the past. This is because, according to the Perspective theory, finished history is the product of two factors: the evidence from which the historian starts, which he ought to accept whether he believes it or not; and the subjective element, i.e. the point of view of the historian made up largely of his own moral and metaphysical presuppositions. This perspective theory further argues that in spite of varying points of view, each historian has some valid insight into what happened in the past. In other words, the Perspective theory believes that there is no 'absolute truth' but that 'truth' or 'fact' is essentially a relative concept.

This philosophical discourse was carried a little forward by E.H. Carr¹³. His view on 'historical fact' is a kind of synthesis of the Correspondence and Perspective theories. He adopts the view-point that there can be no historical fact until the historian evokes it, and brings it to light. According to him, an event is not a historical fact merely because it has happened, but becomes one only when the historian decides to make it so and also when it is fixed into a larger complex of events. It is only then that it is of interest and significance to the historian. For instance, E.H. Carr had observed that Caesar's crossing of that petty little stream known as River Rubicon – which has entered into the list of English proverbs – had become history mainly because of the events that followed for Caesar; whereas thousands of other human beings had similarly crossed the same stream before and after him without the notice of the historian. In the same way, British colonial records had reported that Mungo Park 'discovered' the River Niger in 1796. It has become a great historical land-mark because of its importance for the British during the era of European colonization of Africa. Yet, Africans at Segou had been living around, and seeing the river on a daily basis perhaps for thousands of years before Mungo Park's visit. True history is the study of the things that human beings have done in the past for which there are records, and

particularly why they did them and what the doing caused. But whereas it can be said that in the sciences, the 'facts' speak for themselves, in history, the facts, according to E.H. Carr, 'speak only when the historian calls on them; it is he (the historian) who decides to which fact to give the floor, and in what order or context'.

Objectivity and History

If the 'facts' are not allowed to speak for themselves, then the problem arises whether historical accounts can be the 'objective' or 'true picture' of what actually happened in the 'past. Objectivity in this context means the presentation of 'perfect history'; that is, historical accounts free of all personal biases or devoid of impartiality in which the historian himself is neutral or detached. Lord Acton states that detachment, neutrality and impartiality are needed in producing an objective historical account.

Objectivity in history is a reasonable professional requirement; but so far, it has remained a kind of wishful thinking. Whereas the scientist can be neutral, impartial and detached from his experiments while procuring 'raw materials' for his research work, the historian finds it difficult to be so detached. Even though historians themselves often make a distinction between what is 'good' or 'bad' history, between ordinary propaganda and what is not, yet they do not have, in the same way as the scientists, generally accepted principles or criteria for ascertaining historical objectivity. The interpretations of one historian are often indignantly repudiated by another, and even the reconciliation among these divergent accounts on the same subject is hardly achievable because the sources of disagreement may not be technical i.e. over the correct interpretation of evidence, but rather over the ultimate pre-conception of the different historians, which in this case are not universally shared. This is because, in most cases, every historical account is invariably written from a certain view-point, and can only make sense from that particular point of view.

This lack of consensus (among historians) arises from the large element of subjectivity in the relationship between the historian and his

materials, most noticeable in the inevitably selective process underlying the historian's dealings with his materials. For instance, the historian can only study a limited aspect of the past; and even within this chosen field, he cannot ascertain all the facts, nor can he explain all the events. Consequently, he has to limit himself to what is important in the past. But it is in his judgement of what is important and what is not, what is relevant and what is not, that the historian falls short of the kind of objective reality which obtains in the natural sciences. Very often, the historian's selection of what is important and relevant is dictated largely by his own world-view, or by other considerations which can hardly be described as objective. Even the so-called primary sources which the historian regards as near-authentic materials from which he selects what is important or relevant from what is unimportant and irrelevant, is not, as already mentioned, derived by him directly from the past. Such materials come to him, at best as second hand, and they amount to a pre-selection from a larger body of evidence. In turn, this selection must have been done on the basis of the selector's own criteria of relevance and irrelevance, and of importance and unimportance. Therefore in processing the materials to write history, the historian is already saddled with a multiple dose of subjectivity in trying to interpret and understand the past.

History and Religion: Problems of Relation

The discussion about the relationship between history and religion – particularly the Christian faith – is not meant to be a deliberate provocation of any sort. Rather, it is an attempt to demonstrate the influence that contemporary religious beliefs and practices had imposed on the course of history, past and present, and probably will continue to impose in the future if the present trend continues unabated. Specifically, it is meant to show how the frivolous use of the name of God continues to have negative impact on historical understanding, especially in the identification and ascertainment of historical facts. This discussion is limited to the influence of the Christian religion alone because when Islam began in the 7th century A.D., it was evident that the study of history was going to serve as the

most powerful vehicle for shaping Islamic society and of developing its intellectual outlook. Thus the sense of history and the need for history, developed as part of Islamic doctrine. It is true that the only Muslim view of the purpose of history writing then was to obtain the pleasures of Allah'. *The Quran* actually enjoins man to acquaint himself with history by paying detailed attention to material remains of the past, and learning about the peoples and nations of that past. Moreover, *the Quran* does not believe or preach that nature, or the will of Allah, works blindly and arbitrarily because it believes that there are certain historical reasons or factors responsible for change in society.

The relationship between history and (the Christian) religion is not a recent phenomenon; it dates back perhaps to the beginning of organized human society. Until the onset of the Hellenic age (5th Century B.C.), the known antecedents of history were theocratic and mythical accounts of the past. These were as already mentioned, not concerned in any meaningful way with human deeds and actions, but they were records of the actions of God himself. For instance, the *Old Testament Bible* contains a lot of such theocratic accounts; in it, the impression is created that the Hebrew Jehovah was responsible for all the achievements and disasters that befell the Israelites. Divine characters in these accounts are conceived as super human rulers of the human societies, whose actions are therefore done partly to these societies and partly through them. Myths in particular record only divine actions – the human element having been completely eliminated¹⁴.

However, the influence of the Christian doctrine on historiography became more noticeable during the Middle Ages (in Europe) when theology and the providential interpretation of the past became the core of medieval learning. This period was marked by the triumph of the Christian religion in Europe, and the ancient Greco-Roman polytheism was replaced by Christian monotheism. It was also a period when the transition of the Christian view of God as an omnipotent and omniscient Being, who knows and could make everything, to the view of history as something foreordained

and guided by the hands of God became an easy and logical one. In other words, it did not require much exertion or scientific investigation for the Roman theologians of the period to modify their theological view of God to obtain an historical view of the same God. Indeed, there emerged a clerical arm of the state closely linked with the secular arm, though formally distinct from it.

This merger between history and the Christian religion had very far reaching implications for the development of historical scholarship. For instance, the doctrine of 'original sin' and God's grace had significant importance not only for development of medieval Christian outlook, but also for the study and understanding of history. Men, unlike in the optimistic humanism of Greco-Roman philosophy ceased to do just what he wills; but laden with the burden of his original sin, acts in conformity with his blind desire - not a fortuitous blindness due to the failure of insight, but a necessary blindness inherent in action itself. In effect, men's actions were no longer regarded as the outcome of their free and unfettered will, but that of God's will for them. But because God is supposed to do no evil, the theologians decided to attribute what ever was wise in human nature and action, not as a product of man's wisdom, but of God's grace and providential will, while at the same time they attributed what was destructive and foolish in human actions, not to divine mischief-making, but to man's blindness and folly. At the same time the Christian idea of God was that of a good, humane and providential God who pre-determines the end of human action and maps out its course, thus making the human will to serve God's purpose. In other words, in so far as everything was determined by God, medieval historians were exonerated from the basic task of empirical enquiry; it was merely sufficient for them to provide the full explanation for the operations of the laws of God. Therefore these historians were particularly in an advantageous position since God was the prime determinant and every historical event or disaster could be attributed to God's will and wisdom.

Medieval Christian historiography also had an eschatological element – in the periodization of history; the reign of the father or incarnate

God was the age of unbelief or paganism. This is followed by the present age or the reign of the son; also known as the Christian age. The third and the final age is the reign of the Holy Ghost which is still to begin in the future, and to be the absolute end of time, development and the universe. In other words, the Christian revelation was regarded as being able to give a view of the entire history of the world from its creation in the past to its ultimate end in the future. Thus medieval historiography looked forward to the end of history as something fore-ordained by God and, through revelation fore-known to man.

The most serious problem in this Christian approach to historical scholarship was that of 'crowding man out of history'. Moreover, this kind of the interpretation of natural and human history inevitably resulted in narrowness and lack of tolerance of any attempt to subject the dogmas of the church to empirical and critical analysis. It was this narrowness, untenable any longer during that period as a result of the increasing knowledge of the world that was to be mainly responsible for the eventual disintegration of medieval ideas in the era of the Renaissance¹⁵. It was this that also gave birth to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the first really successful attempts were made to divorce the spiritual arm of the state from its secular arm.

But if historical scholarship thus suffered a decline during the Middle Ages largely as a result of the influence religion came to exert on historiography, and partially recovered during the era of the Church Reformation, there are threatening indications now that a lot of people have decided that there should be no differentiation between faith and knowledge. In Nigeria, particularly in the last few decades, there had been a huge expansion in the proliferation of the faith and the establishment of churches and ad-hoc places of worship as if there is now a downstream/grass-root deregulation of salvation¹⁶. This has also led to a greater and unfettered freedom in the interpretation of the Christian faith. These new churches, some pocket-size, others sometimes one-man 'denominations' are gradually over-shadowing the older established churches both in number and in their appeal to a sizable portion of the

society'¹⁷. This is not saying anything new that the leaders of the older churches are not aware of. But it is being mentioned here to draw attention to the problems that have been created, and are creating, and possibly will continue to create for the historian and historical understanding. Many of these new 'churches' indulge in the profane use of the name of God by combining and embellishing all kinds of circumstances to enrich their messages with so many fictions which sometimes end up being presented later as 'historical facts'. This is because, in all such situations, the substance, if they ever had, is easily forgotten, while the fabulous elements increase and the truth is lost.

However, this does not imply that the historian rejects off-hand the existence of God or the teachings of the Holy Scriptures; neither history nor the historian himself preaches disobedience to the injunctions of God because 'faith' is an individual and personal affair to the believer. But like Thomas Aquinas, the Italian Dominican Friar, practicing historians, sane ones at least, would make a distinction between 'faith' and knowledge of this physical world. They would be able to comprehend that the spiritual world has a different kind of reality from the human world, and therefore in dealing with both worlds, different methods and yard-sticks must be applied. According to him, since the world of natural objects was made by God, He alone knows it: and conversely since the world of nations or human history had been created by man, it is something that man can hope to know. He further stated that all knowledge concerning man and the earth is dependent on experience; hence there is no need for any supernatural illumination from anywhere else either for the acquisition of such knowledge, or for the assurance that such knowledge is correct.

Similarly, E.H. Carr states that "a serious historian may believe in a God who has ordered and given meaning to the course of history as a whole....." though he quickly added that "he (the historian) may not believe in the Old Testament kind of god who intervenes to slaughter the Amalekites or cheats on the calendar by extending the hours of day-light for the benefit of Joshua's army"¹⁸ The question the practising historian

today is bound to ask is whether God *personally* intervened in these cases. If it were nowadays, the historian would be more interested in the concrete and objective causal factors like the advantages in men and arms, combat strategy, mastery of terrain and other logistic problems, which Joshua possessed *vis-à-vis* his Amalekite enemies. In the same way today, it might be difficult for the historian to believe or understand how God "flew" a passenger from London to Lagos without the knowledge of the passenger himself until he had landed safely in Lagos. The historian is also not likely to be at ease blaming God (or destiny) and /or other unknown forces, whether spiritual or otherwise, for societal and national woes like air disasters, motor accidents on our roads, collapsed buildings, etc. because in history, even accidents have ascertainable causes¹⁹. According to M.C. D'Arcy, it would not do for a student to answer every question in history by saying that it was 'the finger of God'²⁰. History teaches that wherever it is possible to find the cause or causes of what has happened in the past, one should resist having recourse always to the 'gods'. After all, *the Bible* says "Give unto Ceasar what is Ceasar's...."

Conclusion

The problems highlighted so far are not new to the study of history. Practicing historians have had to grapple and struggle with them in order to make their accounts intelligible to their readers. Of course, one recognizes that there is hardly any discipline

without its own special conceptual and methodological problems, many of which invariably involve some form of history. For instance, the medical doctor who seeks to find out from his patient the nature of his ailment before reaching a decision as to what medication to apply, must like the historian, ask questions about the history, i.e. the origin and nature of the ailment. The student of International Relations will definitely do much better if he knows some history of the nations under study. The Law student will perform better if he familiarizes himself with the historical background that gave birth to the legal issues being analysed. And in the purely political sphere, without some knowledge of the past, the present

becomes incomprehensible and unintelligible. History is the one subject that can expand our world-view and at the same time, distinguish us as a people and facilitate our proper cultural orientation. In short, the study of the past makes the world we live in today more intelligible because we can discover through it, how things have come to be what they are at present.

These advantages of knowing the past have been repeatedly mentioned on several occasions by many scholars. Even a large number of non-historians equally recognize the crucial importance of knowing the past for the benefit of the present and the future. These functions may not be as 'magical' as science and technology in accelerating the pace of socio-economic developments of a society or a nation; but neither will the knowledge of history retard them. Even the more developed nations of the world have not neglected the study of their past; and in some, a knowledge of their history is voluntarily compulsory for all their students up to University level irrespective of their course of study.

But in Nigeria, it is a sad commentary that government itself had through its action and inaction virtually killed History as a subject, or at least had whittled it down as 'one of those useless disciplines' by removing it from the curriculum of secondary schools and merging it loosely with Social Studies. The same government not only allows, but sometimes insists on the celebration of cultural festivals with these young minds in attendance, dressed in traditional costumes, to add colour by dancing, singing and the presentation of drama sketches, even though they hardly know the significance or the history of what they are celebrating. Sometimes, they are made to visit ancient shrines, museums and other places of historical importance, or are shown portraits of past heroes as if these effigies would open their mouths and speak'.

Historians have in the last few years been calling on government to reverse itself and allow the study of History as a separate and compulsory subject in our secondary schools because the denial of history's

rightful place in the education of its citizens is one of the gravest dangers that can befall any people or any culture. It is believed that at this stage of the educational ladder, students are already well prepared to appreciate our past, our culture and our orientation. According to C.H.K. Marten, History gives the young mind a vast store-house in which to wander at will. It is designed to open the mind to higher ideals, concepts and values. It is a vehicle for the training of the memory, the cultivation of the imagination and the development of balanced judgement. The biographies of great men furnish an inspiration and a model for others. Through history, a sense of solidarity is promoted, a feeling of oneness, of partnership with one's country, and an attitude of fellowship towards other nations and peoples²¹. In short, history interpretes for the child, the whole of human life because according to Cicero, not to know what took place before you were born is to remain for ever a child. Professor Levi-Strauss also says:

...those who ignore history condemn themselves to not knowing the present because historical developments alone permits us to weigh and to evaluate in their respective relations, the elements of the present²².

Thank you for your attention.

Notes

*I wish to express my profound gratitude to my teacher. Dr. S.O Osoba who first enlisted my interest in the Philosophy of History, and to the Department of History of this University for allowing me to teach the course over a long period of time to both undergraduate and post-graduate students.

(Endnotes)

- ¹ Loewenberg, Peter *Decoding the Past: The Psychohistorical Approach (Second Edition)* New Brunswick, 1996, p.15
- ² Green, Anna and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of history. A Critical reader in twentieth-century history and theory*, New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- ¹ Collins, Robert O. (ed), *Problems in African History. The Precolonial Centuries*, New York & Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, Inc. 1994, p.xi.
- ⁴ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993 (edn.), pp. 1-7.
- ⁵ *Ibid.* 14 – 17
- ⁶ *Ibid* 17 - 28
- ⁷ G.R. Elton (with R.J. Evans.), *The Practice of History (2nd edn.)* London: Blackwells Publishing Inc. 2001 edn.
- ⁸ J.A. Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, London: Penguin 1973. p. 4-8.
- ⁹ S.M. Guma, "The Nature and Use of Oral Literature" *New Classics* 4, 1977 p.4. cited in S.F. Afolayan, "

- ¹⁰Pre-colonial Concept of History in Nigeria". *Africana Marburgensia (Selected Papers on West African History)* 1986. p. 44.
- ¹¹B.Bussells, Portraits from Memory (1958) p. 20 cited in E.H. Carr, *What is History?* p.50.
- ¹²A. Marwick, *The Nature of History* London: Macmillan, 1984.
- ¹³E.H. Carr, *What is History?* pp. 4-6
- ¹⁴R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, pp. 14-16.
- ¹⁵V.H.H. Green, *Renaissance and Reformation: A survey of European History between 1450 and 1960*. Edward Arnold, 1962.
- ¹⁶O. Onoja, "Deregulating Salvation" *Nigerian Standard* (Jos), June 6-10, 1977.
- ¹⁷Levi Obijiofor, "A Nation of Pastors" *The Guardian* (Lagos) February 17, 2006.
- ¹⁸E.H. Carr, *What is History?* p. 68.
- ¹⁹Bisi Deji-Folutile, "Leave God out of these Tragedies". *The Guardian* (Lagos) May 3, 2002.
- ²⁰M.C.D'Arcy, "The Sense of History: Secular and Sacred", cited in E.H. Carr, *What is History?* p. 68
- ²¹C.H.K Marten, *Why we study History (Essays of the Historical Association)* (London, 1964) Published by Manson Publishing Company, Oron, 1990. p.11.
- ²²C. Levi-Strauss, cited in Beverly Soughgate, *Why Bother with History?* Pearson Education, 2000 edn.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Articles in Journals, Newspapers, Magazines, etc.

- Afigbo A.E. "Fact and Myth in Nigerian Historiography" *Nigerian Magazine*. 122-123 1977.
- Afigbo A.E. "Applied History and the Nigerian Nation" *Historical Society of Nigeria*, (32nd Annual Congress) 1987.
- Afolayan. S.F. "Pre-colonial Concept of History in Nigeria" *Africana Marburgensia Selected Papers on West African History* 1986. p.44
- Ajayi, J.F.A. "History and Society" *Historical Society of Nigeria* (Annual Congress) Keynote Address, 2005.
- Akinrinade, O. "Myths as History: A critique of the Traditions of Origin of Nigerian Ethnic Groups" *Africa Revista do Centro de Estudos Africanos de VSP* 1985.
- Biobaku, S.O. "The Problem of Traditional History with Special Reference to Yoruba. Tradition." *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*. Vol. 1 No. 1. December 1956.
- Bisi Deji-Folutile, "Leave God out of these Tragedies" *The Guardian* (Lagos) May 3, 2002.
- Dray, W.H. "On the Nature and Role of Narrative in Historiography" *History and Theory*, 10. No.1, 1971, 153-171.
- Fain, H. "History as Science". *History and Theory*. 1970.
- Levi Obijiofor, "A Nation of Pastors" *The Guardian*, (Lagos) February 17, 2006.

- Lowie, R. "Oral Tradition and History: Discussion and Correspondence" *American Anthropologist* 1915. 597-599.
- Melden, A.L. "Historical Objectivity, a Noble Dream?" *Journal of General Education*, 1952.
- Nadel, G. "Philosophy of History Before Historicism" *History and Theory* 3, 1964 291-315.
- Newton, A.P. "Africa and Historical Research" *Journal of African Society*, 22, 1922-23.
- Norman, A.P. "Telling it like it was; historical narratives on their own terms" *History and Theory*, 30, No.2 1991.
- Onoja, O. "The Deregulation of Salvation: The Nigerian Pentecostal Movement in Perspective" Department of History, Nasarawa State University, Keffi. August 26, 2004.
- Onoja, O. "Deregulating Salvation" *Nigerian Standard*, Jos. June 6-10, 1997.
- Osoba, S.O. "The History of Pre-literate Nigerian Societies and Oral Traditions: A Conceptual and Methodological Assessment" *Historical Society of Nigeria* (15th Annual Congress).
- White, Hayden V. "Historicism and Figurative Imagination" *History and Theory* 14, 1975.
- White Hayden V. "The Burden of History" *History and Theory* 5, 1966 pp. 27-50.
- Unger, R. "The Problem of Historical Objectivity: A Sketch of its Development to the time of Hegel" . *History and Theory*, 1971.

Inaugural Lectures

- Adediran, A. The Problem with the Past. *Inaugural Lecture Series 159*. Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) Ile-Ife 2002.
- Akinjogbin, I.A. History and Nation Building. *Inaugural Lecture Series 126* OAU, Ile-Ife, 1977
- Alagoa, E.J. The Python's Eye: The Past in the Living Present *Inaugural Lecture Series* University of Port- Harcourt, 1981.
- Oloruntimehin, B.O. History and Society *Inaugural Lecture Series 18*. OAU, Ile-Ife 1976.
- Omosini, O. Evolution of African Historiography: An Overview, *Inaugural Lecture Series 97* O.A.U., Ile-Ife, 1991.

Books

- Anatoly, R. *Historical Knowledge* Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1982
- Aron, Raymond, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. G.J. Irwin, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961.
- Atkinson, R.F. *Knowledge and Explanation in History: An Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. London: Macmillan, 1978.
- Barraclough, G. *An Introduction to Contemporary History* London: Watts. 1964.
- Bernal. J.D. *Science in History* Penguin, 1969
- Burke, P. (ed.) *New Perspectives on History Writing*. Cambridge: Poultry Press, . 20011 edn.

- Carr, E.H. *What is History?* London: Macmillan, 1989. edn.
- Collingwood, R.G. *The Idea of History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993 edn.
- Collins, Robert O. (ed), *Problems in African History. The Precolonial Centuries*, New-York & Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, Inc. 1994.
- Croce, Benedetto, *History: Its Theory and Practice*, trans. D. Ainslee, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1921.
- D'Arcy, M.C. *The sense of History: Secular and Sacred*, New York 1959.
- D'Arcy, M.C. *The Meaning and Matter of History*. New York: Meridian, 1961.
- Danto, Arthur C., *Analytical Philosophy of History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965.
- Dilthey, Wilhelm, *Meaning in History*, ed. H.P. Rickman, London: Allen and Unwin, 1961.
- Dray, William, *Laws and Explanation in History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957
- Dray William, *Philosophy of History*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J, Prentice-Hall, 1964
- Dray, W.H. *Philosophical Analysis and History*, New York: Harper and Row, 1966.
- Elton, G.R. (with R.J. Evans) *The Practice of History* (2nd Edition) London: Blackwells Publishing Incorporated, 2001 (edn.).
- Feuerbach, I. *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* New York, 1946

- Gallie, N.B. *Philosophy and Historical Understanding*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1964.
- Gardiner, P. *The Philosophy of History. Oxford Readings in Philosophy*, OUP 1974
- Gardiner, P. *The Nature of Historical Explanation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952
- Garham, G. *Historical Explanation Reconsidered*, Aberdeen University Press, 1984 edn.
- Geyl, Peter, *Debates with Historians*, The Hague: Wolters and Nijhoff, 1955.
- Green, V.H.H. *Renaissance and Reformation: A Survey of European History between 1450 and 1660*. Edward Arnold, 1962.
- Green, Anna and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of history. A Critical Reader in Twentieth Century History and Theory*, New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- Haddock, B.A. *An Introduction to Historical Thought*. London: Edward Arnold 1980.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (transl.) Prentice-Hall Inc. 1997.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *The Philosophy of History*- New York: Dover 1959
- Henige, D. *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimera?* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.
- Henige, D. *Oral Historiography*, London: Longman, 1982
- Hook, S. *From Hegel to Marx*, New York, 1950
- Howard, M. *The Lessons of History*. Oxford, (Paperback) 1993 edn.

- Lemmon, M.C. *The Discipline of History and the History of Thought*, London and New York, 1995.
- Loewenberg, Peter *Decoding the Past: The Psychohistorical Approach (Second Edition)* New Brunswick, 1996.
- Lowith, Karl. *Meaning in History*, London: Phoenix Books, 1967 edn.
- Mandelbaum, Maurice *The Problem of Historical Knowledge*, New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1938.
- Manuel, Frank E. *Shapes of Philosophical History*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1965.
- Marwick, Arthur. *The Nature of History*, London: Macmillan, 1984.
- Martin, R. *Historical Explanation: Re-enactment and Practical Influence*. London: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- Meiland, J.W., *Scepticism and Historical Knowledge*, New York: Random House, 1965.
- Meyerhoff, H. *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*, New York, 1959.
- Murphy, M.G. *Our Knowledge of the Historical Past*, New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1973.
- Popper, K.R., *The Poverty of Historicism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957
- Reardon, B. *Religious Thought in the Reformation*, London: Longman, 1981.
- Southgate, B. *Why Bother with History?* Pearson Education, 2000. edn.
- Stern, Fritz. *The Varieties of History from Voltaire to the Present*, New York: Meridian Press, 1956.

- Steuer, Robert, *The Nature of Historical Thinking*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1967
- Thompson, P. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Oxford, 1978.
- Vansina, J. *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, London: Penguin, 1973.
- Vansina, J. *Oral Tradition as History*, Madison, 1985.
- Walsh, W.H., *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, London: Hutchinson, University Library, 1967 edn.
- Weber, Max, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. E.A. Shils and H.A. Finch, Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1949.
- White, Morton, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge*, New York: Harper and Row, 1965.
- Von-Fritz. K. *The Theory of the Mixed Constitution in Antiquity* New York: 1954.