

# Instant History

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THE TERM 'Instant History' is of very recent origin but the essential conflict implicit in those two terms 'Instant' and 'History' is as old as history. 'Instant History' seems first to have been used in America as a jibe against the swifter chroniclers of the Kennedy era. They have been likened to the food processers who offer us instant foods, claiming that their frozen or dehydrated simulacra are really equivalent to the *haute cuisine* that once emerged only from long, skilled hours in the kitchen. Can the scholar writing immediately after the event produce work that deserves the same title, 'history', as the output of his colleagues using well-matured techniques in analysing events from the distant past?

This paper, of course, comes from an unrepentant defender of instant history — though not of all its products. I believe that it is usually possible to write about events as soon as they occur and to present a balanced account which is comparable in its objectivity and its achievement to the balanced account which the traditional historian, writing about the happenings of past centuries, aspires to provide. As one who practises instant history, I am not prepared to accept that my occupation is in any essential way different from that of the traditional historian (there is, moreover, comfort in the instant historians of earlier times — Herodotus, Thucydides and Tacitus; Froissart, Clarendon and Burnet, to name but a few). The idea that 'contemporary history' is a contradiction in terms dates back, I think, to the professionalisation of history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Those trained in the deciphering and interpretation of documents, in the assessment of events outside the scope of living memory and — supposedly — current passions, have been tempted to see efforts to describe the undocumented and emotion-ridden present as mere journalism and, even if a legitimate operation, as one totally distinct from their own.

Many activities are, of course, stabled together under the label 'history'. The economic historian, the social historian and the military historian all have their own separate sources and skills. Even within the mainstream of national history the work of someone writing, say, the life of King Stephen, and of someone describing the passage of the Great Reform Bill are profoundly different — the first piecing together a few fragments of information, the second swamped by a vast flood. I would indeed argue that the historian of 1832 is pursuing an activity far closer to the historian of the immediate present than

to the historian of 1100. It is certainly hard to envisage a moment five, ten, or fifty years back at which history ceases to be history and becomes journalism.

One of the commonest objections to contemporary history lies in the supposed difficulty of being objective about the present. In describing the world in which he lives and breathes and votes, the historian is presumed to be more swayed by prejudice and emotion than when he describes events long past. I am unimpressed by this argument. Historians of every period seem able to acquire equally deep emotions about their subject matter. One has only to think, for example, of the Whig school, so dominant throughout the nineteenth century, and the interpretation which they put upon the religious turmoils of the seventeenth century. In my childhood, I used to hear my grandfather, A. F. Pollard, a highly scholarly character, express far more vehement views about Martin Luther than I have ever ventured about any contemporary politician.

Some years ago I happened upon the tomb of Mandell Creighton in Ely Cathedral. It is engraved with the briefest of epitaphs: 'He tried to write true history'. Creighton died in 1901. I could not help wondering when the placing of such an epitaph upon a historian would have become impossible? It is not that those of us who write history today, whether of the traditional or the instant variety, don't try to write the truth — of course, we all do. But in this self-conscious, psychologically aware age we are much too modest or too realistic to claim that we are reaching the truth. We know that truth is many-sided and relative and that the history of any period has to be rewritten for each generation, not just because of new evidence but because of a changing sense of the evidence that is important. No defender of instant history would claim finality for his observations or his conclusions; the most he would assert is that he may, on balance, get quite as near to the truth as a historian a hundred years hence will do.

But, of course, the contemporary historian has his own distinctive problems and it is to these that I want to devote the rest of this paper. I must utter one initial warning. What follows is necessarily autobiographical, based to an overwhelming extent upon my own experience since 1951, writing the last five Nuffield College Studies of British General Elections. These have been very 'instant' works, each completed within about three months of the event and published about four months later. Some people have protested at this unseemly haste, not objecting to instant history as such, but wondering whether a brooding pause of a few months might not help. Aside from the personal quirk of working better and seeing more clearly under great pressure, my reply to this is that if one is writing instant history and not aspiring to the perspective of ten or of fifty years it is better to write immediately on top of the event. The 1966 book provides a very good example of this. The day Tony King and I sent our manuscript of to the press at the beginning of July, Frank Cousins resigned

from the Cabinet in protest against its incomes policy and two weeks later the drastic 'July 20th measures' were introduced. As we read our proofs at the beginning of August Tony King and I reflected on how inevitably we would have put in defensive or ironic subordinate clauses in our account of the arguments about the economy that were being used in March. Our tone would have changed just a little: we could not have written exactly the same sentences in August that we had written in May. Am I giving away my whole case in saying this, in asserting that one's perspective is necessarily changed by subsequent events? I do not think so. If one is trying to summarize an event as it seemed at the time, trying to get the facts together, the less one is contaminated by posterior wisdom, by looking back at the events with a knowledge of the consequences, the greater the force and immediacy of one's narrative.

The authors of the Nuffield Election Studies from their inception in 1945 onwards have been conscious of two gaps in their work. One gap — the absence of direct knowledge of what thirty-five million electors were really thinking — is no part of my current theme and I won't develop it here, for it is a gap that will afflict subsequent writers quite as acutely as the contemporary historian. (It is, however, a gap which can in some measure be plugged, as a forthcoming work based upon a series of exhaustive nationwide surveys will, I hope, show.) The other gap — the absence of data or documentation about the *haute politique* of the elections — is one where we are much more open to criticism by the traditional historian. What determined Attlee to dissolve Parliament in October 1951 and what was Morrison's reaction? Who influenced Macmillan not to go to the country in May 1959 but to wait until October? The inner discussions within the party hierarchies about the tactics and the timing of an election are matters which can be written about years later when there is complete access to private papers and party documents but which certainly cannot be dealt with in a fully footnoted way immediately after the event.

Although this gap at the top level undoubtedly exists, a great deal can be done to fill it. Indeed, I think that I am prepared to argue that one can do more to fill it when one is working at the actual time of the event than when one is tackling it fifty years later, purely on the basis of documentary material.

Let me instance one technique — the circulation of manuscript to the actors in the events. This is an activity which never seems to have received a critical discussion. In the last two elections my co-author and I sent out for comment a large number of selected chapters to particular people, usually people whom we had interviewed and whom we regarded as people of judgement. Wherever they disagreed on factual points we would always double-check elsewhere before, as we usually did, accepting the correction. Whenever they disagreed on points of judgement we had to be much more careful; there were those who tried to bounce us out of saying things that were embarrassing to them or to their party. But, despite some awkward moments,

in general we found the circulation of draft manuscripts an invaluable way of checking and enriching our story, particularly as most of the events we were describing were recent and memories were not yet too blurred (though instances did occur of honest clear-headed people flatly denying occurrences of which they themselves had told us a few months earlier).

However, a much more important weapon in the armoury of the contemporary historian is the possibility of extensive interviewing. At least in our field, we have found no difficulty about access. Between 1963 and 1966 Tony King and I conducted some 400 interviews. We saw virtually everybody who was anybody among the party leaders and the party officials; some we saw seven or eight times. In general they were remarkably frank, and in the few areas where we encountered stonewalling we usually got a fair idea of what was going on by returning repeatedly to the subject with different people and from different angles. Often, too, reticences were abandoned once the election was over. Some of what we were told was very one-sided but we could usually crosscheck by talking to people with another point of view.

In such an operation, a great deal of patience is needed. One must write up interviews exhaustively and reread past notes before going to new interviews. One must reassure those one sees that one will not waste their time — to show that one already knows a lot about their central problems is a good way of encouraging frankness. One must also reassure them that one will not abuse their confidence. The technique of such interviewing depends upon personal relationships, upon the establishment of trust. That involves the acceptance of certain ground rules: our interviews were always conducted on the understanding that they were 'on lobby terms', that nothing said could be attributed to them in print or quoted to others in private, that we were merely gathering background material. It was appreciated that we had no interest in printing personal gossip or being *Time*-style inside-dopesters. Our approach has, of course, one great academic limitation: footnotes cannot be given to document the story. We were once publicly accused of four unspecified but 'easily checked' errors in a single paragraph; we did not feel free to reply that all our statements were confirmed by the complainant's colleagues and that no fewer than seven had read the manuscript in draft. As in almost every case we had to let the authenticity and accuracy of our efforts be judged as a whole. It is comforting that the number of demonstrable errors known to us is, in fact, very small. When twenty or fifty years hence someone with full access to all the documents writes on how the dates of the 1964 or 1966 elections were determined, I doubt if their pictures will be very different from the ones we painted; the ground for this immodest claim is simply that we were able to test out our theses on so many of the people who were directly involved, both by interview and by asking for their comments on our draft manuscript. I am not saying that we were never hoodwinked. I am

sure that everything we wrote would be subject to revision on points of detail. But I should be surprised if anyone will be able to show that our general picture was fundamentally out of perspective.

Interviewing is, of course, not a monopoly of the instant historian. Those who write about events of up to fifty or sixty years ago are often able to make contact with survivors from that period. Yet such contacts are all too frequently disappointing. Memories are uncertain and the well-briefed researcher is constantly shocked to find clear-headed respondents transposing by several years events in which they took a leading part. A rare minority of politicians and civil servants are endowed with total recall and the American development of 'oral history' has drawn some rare treasure trove. But, although interviewing about the distant past occasionally may lead to the discovery and salvaging of invaluable private papers, for the most part it yields colour rather than facts. I very much doubt if in ten years' time we were to question about the events of 1966, the people whom we saw last year, we would obtain more than a fraction of the data we got then.

The instant historian has other advantages. One is simply administrative. It is much easier to collect ephemera and press cuttings. A large amount of election literature that would never otherwise be preserved can be assembled quite easily at the time. In most writing about the twentieth century the press must be a major source and in writing about elections it must usually be *the* major source on events. Although newspapers are preserved and much can now be done with microfilms and xeroxing, nothing can match the convenience of being able to buy and cut all the papers as they come out. There is also the chance to check on press stories. One can always telephone or write to a journalist to see if more lay behind a particular article or assertion. Moreover, one can evaluate the quality of particular writers and crosscheck with their rivals in a way that would be virtually impossible years later.

A more intangible advantage that the contemporary historian can have is self-confidence. With diligence and historical imagination it is, of course, possible to reconstruct the atmosphere of a moment in the distant past, to develop a sense of the relative weight and popularity of leading figures, even to have some feel for their appearance and their personal style of acting. But the task is a very hard one. It is infinitely easier to describe one's own time and to write about people one has met and talked with and seen on the platform and on television. During each of the last elections I have spent four to five days a week travelling about the country, talking with party officials and attending meetings. I have not done so because much of the material picked up in this way actually appears in the book — there are, in fact, very few passages derived exclusively from encounters in such travels. I have done so because of the confidence it engenders that I have not missed out on some essential aspect of affairs. Of course, I depend upon the press and upon many other

sources, but I know that, when my co-author or I have talked during the campaign with regional officials of each party who have in turn had direct contact with every individual constituency in Britain, we can feel far more assurance in our sense of the atmosphere of 1966 than if we had merely stayed at our desks or than we ever could about, say, 1906, depending entirely upon documentary evidence.

Another advantage of the instant historian is his exposure to criticism — not just from other scholars, but also from actors in the drama and from journalists and other observers. He can amend his second editions and he can write his sequels differently in the light of their comments and corrections.

Of course there are disadvantages to set against all the advantages that I have enumerated. Much the biggest is the loss of documentation. Papers exist in the files of the party headquarters at Smith Square and in the private archives of Mr. Wilson, Mr. Heath and others, which would have thrown extra light and authority on our 1966 story. This is undoubtedly a great handicap — but it can be exaggerated. An acquaintance of mine, a professional historian, became a temporary civil servant during the war. When, after the war, he was wondering whether to go back to academic life or to stay in Whitehall, a man came to see him who was writing a section of the official war history. My friend was appalled to find that this fellow-historian, a competent and sensible man who had worked diligently through all the documents, had consistently misinterpreted every event of which my friend had direct knowledge. The episode was sufficient to dissuade him from giving in his notice. Obviously I don't want to draw a Luddite moral: I believe in the fullest exploration of all the documents that can be gathered together. But if one had to choose between a story based entirely on a comprehensive set of official documents and one based entirely on interviews and press reports, I am not at all sure that the latter should not be preferred.

Another problem facing the instant historian lies in a special kind of involvement. I argued earlier that a traditional historian could get as emotionally involved with the characters of past centuries as with his contemporaries. But at least he is not tempted to worry about their reaction; he cannot hope to induce in them second thoughts or teach them how to act more effectively in the future. The instant historian is alone in facing the snare of moving from an observer to an actor in his drama. It may be true that the clarifications of any period of history contribute to the future; educating people to understand how others have behaved in the past should enable them henceforward to formulate wiser policies. But the challenge to the instant historian is much more direct; he must hope to be read by current politicians and journalists and, if he has anything important to say, he must expect them to quote and argue about and react to his words.

This points up one special utility of contemporary history — myth destruction. Some of the classic myths in British electoral history —

Chinese slavery, the Zinoviev Letter, the Savings Bank scare — which continued long after the election was over to be a living force in British politics, would have been seen in a different perspective if an academic analysis of their exploitation had been made at the time. I think that the Nuffield book on the 1951 election may have done a little to keep the stories of the 'warmonger' scare of that year in proportion (although in fact — and this is one of the few second thoughts I have had about the judgements in the Nuffield books — I may have gone too far in discounting the Labour exploitation of the warmonger theme). In a wider way I think I would claim that the Nuffield series had made a small contribution to the growing recognition that the election is the end of a five-year not a three-week process and that political planning must be more and more long-term. To be less parochial, I would strongly argue that the books on the Suez affairs and the books on the Kennedy period have had an important and, on the whole, beneficial effect on the conduct of subsequent politics.

But although the writing of contemporary history may have a feedback into the historical process, it is, of course, death to the soul if the writer consciously moves from being an observer to being a manipulator, if his goal changes from the pursuit of truth to the pursuit, in some sense, of power. The contemporary historian must, like every author, have readers in mind: he wants his book to sell some copies, he wants to see favourable reviews, he wants the approbation of those of his friends and colleagues whose judgement he respects. But if he has the interests of scholarship at heart, he will, I think, hope for the immortality of other men's footnotes. R. B. McCallum in launching the Nuffield series was conscious of how much he would have been helped, as a late nineteenth century historian, if similar works had been written two generations ago: he taught me to hope, not that I had come anywhere near to writing the last word on the elections I was describing, but that I was writing things which would increase the accuracy and affect the judgements in all subsequent writing on the subject. My job was largely to provide a quarry for historians fifty years hence, a source that would enable them to find their facts more easily and to set them out in better perspective, that would at least make them hesitate before reversing the verdicts put forward by those having direct contact with the events concerned.

Over the past ten years it has fallen to me to supervise theses on British elections sixty and eighty years ago. Obviously I could not help asking myself how far the very competent scholars concerned were getting nearer to the truth of the events of 1880 or 1906 than I had been getting to the truth of the events of 1951 or 1959. I came to the conclusion that, although they could say more of the *haute politique* of Downing Street and Westminster, of the private actions and reactions of the leading politicians than I had been able to, someone who tried in the year 2050 to recreate the atmosphere and

the events of an election year would get more from the instant history provided in the nineteen-fifties than from the documentary reconstruction of events two generations earlier.

The coming of instant history has brought one special hazard with it. Arthur Schlesinger has suggested that the problem of 'managed history' may become as serious as that of 'managed news'. Politicians may co-operate only with their own favoured historians and try to shape their accounts. Moreover, as archives remain under seal for fewer and fewer years, politicians may become more selective in what they put down on paper. There is nothing new in the anxiety of public figures for their ultimate reputation. It has sometimes seemed to me that Prime Ministers have been disproportionately generous with knighthoods for historians because they, in return, covet for themselves the accolade of history. But it does seem probable that the conjunction of high pressure journalism and instant history has made our leaders increasingly self-conscious, increasingly prone to act 'for the record' rather than on the simple merits of the case before them (however self-defeating such a tendency may be for their true reputation).

I must not end without referring to the purely educational justification for instant history. We don't want the past to be something unrelated to the lives of those who are studying it — the past should be seen as a continuum running into the present and the future. But everyone who has taught twentieth century history is aware of the awful void that exists as far as the last fifteen or twenty years are concerned. Even a simple chronicle of recent events is hard to come by. It is important that people with the values and traditions that come from historical training should be trying, as far as they can, continuously to fill this void. Some of the judgements that emerge from this instant history will be revamped as the private evidence becomes public, but many will survive; meanwhile students will benefit by watching the attempts to analyse events of which they themselves have cognisance.

But education is not for the student alone. The ordinary citizen observing events and the politician acting in them will benefit if academic talents are continuously directed to the analysis of the immediate past. It is bound to affect, in some small measure, policy making and the style of politics. The theatre benefits from good criticism; so does politics.

Yet I don't want to conclude this defence of instant history with a utilitarian argument. In the academic community the pursuit of knowledge must be its own reward. Although the writing of instant history has some special fascinations in the immediacy of the events it deals with and in the contact with the actors in those events, its essential appeal is, like that of all history, the sorting of human conduct into comprehensible patterns. From the scholar's point of view, it is worth doing because it is fun to do.