Historiography*

Historiography is the study of how history is written, and it is essentially concerned with the variety of conceptions about the past which a given culture manifests. Historiography is interested in when, where, and why a certain idea of history began to circulate, whether and how this impacted on other distinct practices of society, and finally how it was articulated, how it was written. Because by the time it acquired the status of an independent discipline writers of history had related it to just about all aspects of our social and psychic experience, it soon became clear that history could be understood, at one end of the spectrum, as a general philosophy of life, and on the other as a specific and rigorous mode of inquiry about a specific object or activity. Literary historiography would therefore be concerned with the time, the reason and the manner a certain idea about literature emerged and how it was understood by the critics and historians of a particular epoch, who spontaneously would also evaluate their predecessors. As Herbert Butterfield observes, "the history of historiography is more than a mere branch of the history of thought, more than the mere study of individual thinkers. It comprises the story of establishments and institutions, the policies of governments and teaching bodies, and the results of co-operative endeavour" (*Man on His Past*, 1960).

The origins of historiography can be traced back to Herodotus (495-425 BC), whose aim in writing about the Persian War was to make sure that the great exploits of the Greeks, as well as the barbarians, would not be forgotten. This is the beginning of the dialectic between the single event and its possible universal sense. The more "archaelogical" Thucydides (ca. 471-400 BC) believed that history and politics were intrinsically connected, and raised the problem of a history of the present in which the historian is eyewitness to or participant in the event described. He also sought a distinction between immediate causes and underlying causes. Straddling the Greek and Roman world, Polybius (198-117 BC) seeks on a more pragmatic level a universal view, and abides by the advice of historians who believe that the actual training for a life in politics is the study of History**.** Writing history soon became a *genre*, and the Romans Livy (59 BC-17 AD), Plutarch (ca. 45-125 AD), Lucian (125-200 AD), who developed new styles of recording and recounting past events, elaborated the notion that history could indeed represent a body of knowledge from which one can derive practical norms and social understanding. It is the ideology of *historia magistra vitae* (history as teacher of life), which further separated the field from both philosophy and poetry. In this context, the Roman *Annales Maximi*, which included a register of official events, became the model for the high Middle Ages (for instance, during the Carolingian period).

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In the ensuing centuries, historical thinking and writing were greatly influenced by Christianity, which introduced novel approaches to the overarching relevance of temporality, causality and finality. While Origen (195-254) developed an allegorical hermeneutics, Saint Augustine's providential neoplatonic view of history set the stage for a tripartite subdivision of time into *ortus (ante legem*) or prior to the law, *procursus (sub lege)* or time when laws are in effect, and *finis (sub gloria*) or end of time in God's glory. Events in short were seen as *typical*, as *exempla*, and there was no principle of verification of the sources

Against universal and hegemonic providential history, there slowly emerges, in the later Middle Ages, a competing conception aspiring to validate the middle period of human life here on earth. This more empirical narration took the shape of *Chronicles*, which mostly told of the deeds and valor of the royal houses and nobility. Along with this there occurs a growth of biographies of illustrious figures, which emphasized the civic more than their religious relevance. Giovanni Boccaccio's *Genealogia deorum gentilium* (1363-1375; *The Genealogies of the Gentile Gods*) and *De casibus virorum illustrium* (1355-ca.1374; *The Fates of Illustrious Men*), Vespasiano Da Bisticci's *De Viris Illustribus* (1489; *The Lives of Illustrious Men*) and other collections by Filippo Villani (1325-ca.1407-09), or Francesco Matarazzo (1443-1518) are significant not only because they offer a veritable encyclopedia of people worthy of being remembered, but also because they draw attention to the lives not only of artists but of public servants, polymaths, political leaders and aristocrats, in short, the key players of the emerging process of secularization of European society.

During the Quattrocento, with the revaluation and publication of the writings by ancient authors, a new set of questions arose which spurred a major philosophical turn with respect to what was to be called the Middle Ages. Significant in this context is Sicco Polenton's *Scriptorum illustrium latinae linguae Libri XVIII* (ca. 1437; *Illustrious Latin Writers*), a bulky compendium of Latin literature which attempted the first historical *periodization* by introducing the distinction between classic, medieval, and humanistic periods, the latter also known as "Aevo Modernus" (The Modern Age). Polenton also reintroduced that critical practice of comparing present-day writers with their ancient models. At this time, a tendency developed aimed at *hierarchizing* the work of writers, and at evidencing continuities in style and a certain *unity of intention.*

The Humanistic period was interested in original sources, in witness accounts of any one given event, in translations, in treatises and laws which marked changes in the evolving and constituting of civil society. Key contributions to general historiography are made by Leonardo Bruni (1369-1444), Flavio Biondo (1388-1463) and Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457). Bruni's *Historiae florentini populi* (1405; *History of the Florentine People*) exhibits a critical capacity to compare and contrast facts and relations in a diachronic sense, and attempts to explain history without any reference to supernatural forces (other than

"nature's gift" to the Florentines!). Biondo is credited with having begun the tradition of erudite history, stressing the necessity to be more descriptive and direct while focusing on the sources themselves. Lorenzo Valla is generally considered the founding father of Western historiography. His *De falso credita et ementita Constantini donatione declamatio* (1440; *The Falsely Believed and Forged Donation of Constantine*) employs an analytical method later identified with comparative historical linguistics. Valla raises the question of *authority* and *legitimacy* in history, and makes of historiography a tool in challenging the hegemony of the Church. It will soon appear evident, for instance to Niccoló Machiavelli (1469-1527), that history writing can serve political ends.

It is in fact no accident that Machiavelli makes recourse to Livy as a model. But in his case, politics precedes history and philology. Roman history becomes his paradigm in order to illustrate how to defy the uncontrollable forces of necessity or *fortuna*, seeking a deeper law of causation. Perhaps it is true, as modern thinkers from Friedrich Nietzsche to Michel Foucault have observed, that the engine of social change, and thus of history, is power; nevertheless, for Machiavelli, the actions of individuals are considered less for their individuality or specificity, or how they show their *virtú*, and more in terms of collective interactions.

Machiavelli's contemporary Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540) does not look into the past actions of political figures but at the elements of causation in the fact itself. In his *Storia d'Italia* (1561-1564; *History of Italy*), more emphasis is placed on the individual's "particular" way of being; history turns pragmatic, aiming at the discovery of an all-embracing principle. Rather than political history, Guicciardini engages in historical politics, stressing that humankind's essential trait is to seek one's own personal interest. He attests to the Humanist tendency to remove all external forces from an understanding of the historical process (such as spiritual interventions or philosophical apriori conditions), and to explain the reasons "why" events occur by identifying interconnections among the competing interests of various figures. But unlike Machiavelli, he does not think that *fortuna* can be subsumed or built into the equation: no real logic of history exists; it is naïve to believe that history can be *magistra vitae*.

With print culture solidly established, and following upon the impact of the New World and the Reformation, the shifting political, religious, and geo-historical panorama of the second half of the Cinquecento and of the first decades of the XVII century is witness to a renewed attention to the texts themselves. Paolo Sarpi (1562-1623), author of *Istoria del Concilio di Trento* (1619; *History of the Council of Trent*), consolidates a by now highly specialized field: religious-political history, while Ferdinando Ughelli's *Italia sacra* (1643-1662; *Sacred Italy*) offers the first thorough account of the Church in Italy.

In the field of poetics, growing reflection on the nature and function of the arts led some to eschew history and make of literature a world apart from the realities of the day. Although some late Renaissance treatise writers, such as

Jacopo Mazzoni (1548-1598), Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639), Alessandro Tassoni (1565-1632), and Scipione Errico (1592-1670), favored an heteronomous approach to art, there was also emerging a generation of writers of *ars poetica*e who tended toward an early form of the autonomy of art, and at worst tended toward normative manuals. Here we may enlist, among others, Emanuele Tesauro (1592-1675), Girolamo Aleandri (1574-1629), Francesco Frugoni (1620-1687), and Giovan Mario Crescimbeni (1663-1728), a founding member of the Accademia dell'Arcadia and author of a *Istoria della volgar poesia* (1699; *A History of Poetry in the Vernacular*). Crescimbeni privileges the lyric art form, therefore, in his history of Italian literature (the first of its kind), he singles out *that* specific tradition, at the expense, for instance, of Dante's expressionist poetic, un-exemplary for such pre-enlightenment rationality. Not so with Gian Vincenzo Gravina (1664-1718), another founder of Arcadia, whose *Della ragion poetica* (1708; *The Logic of Poetry*) signals a turning point for literary history. Gravina defines poetry as an imaginative referent of knowledge with the capacity to trigger civic renewal, thus recognizing the intrinsic socio-historicity of art. The XVIII century saw in fact a large segment of the cultured population champion the idea of literature as unrelated to anything but fantasy, whereas others were beginning to question the "truth" in art against a growing scientific and travel literature, and the widening gap between theologians and natural philosophers.

We also witness the emergence of a different kind of historiographic **c**onsciousness, one that can be summarized as a split between an erudite camp (stressing what counts as a source and what the ramifications of a "history" might be) and a philosophical one (focused on the role of reason, and its effects). With the latter goes the universal belief in emancipation and progress in society, specifically reflected in the British and French production of the times. In his anticlerical *Istoria civile del Regno di Napoli* (1723*; A Secular History of the Kingdom of Naples*), Pietro Giannone (1676-1748) rejects previous arguments about the legitimization of ecclesiastical jurisdictions and focuses instead on secular institutions, the relationship between juridical forces, and their relevance in historical process. A practicing lawyer, Giannone studies how and why constitutions are drawn, and sets up a theoretical defense for a separation of powers between State and Church. His *Istoria* gained him European fame, but he was excommunicated and his work was placed on the Index in 1724.

The greatest historical undertaking of the century was the vast collection of *Rerum italicarum scriptores ab anno Christi 500-1500* (1723-1738; *Historians of Italy*) by Lodovico Antonio Muratori (1672-1750), whose relevance in the debate about aesthetics and poetics is also attested by his *Della perfetta poesia* (1706; *On Perfection in Poetry*), in which he argues against the idea that poetry has supernatural origins. In particular Muratori championed the notion of the *verisimile* introducing the distinction between what is real or probable in poetry versus what is real or probable in nature. An adversary of Cartesianism and of John Locke, a severe critic of church corruption and temporal ambitions, an

enemy of the backward-looking academies, Muratori's lasting fame rests with three monumental works: the *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, which became a model for erudite sources and philological rigor; the *Antiquitates italicae medii aevi* (1738-1743; *Medieval Italian Archaeology*), covering various aspects of Italian life in the Middle Ages; and the *Annali d'Italia* (1740-1750; *The Annals of Italy*), a year-to-year chronicle of Italian history from the 5th century to the present day. Muratori's treatment of the Middle Ages prepares the ground for the reappraisal of that period during European romanticism. His work compiles a network of data, documents, manuscripts, letters, registers, diplomatic exchanges, juridical information, offering to a contemporary researcher intriguing and heterogeneous materials: it could be read as a "collective history" à la Fernand Braudel.

Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), the other intellectual giant in early XVIII century Italian historical thought, did not have the erudition of Muratori but had a stronger sense of historical patterns of development. His major achievement was in conceiving a theory of history within which facts find their own justification and inter-relatedness, while subject to some distinct extra-historical mechanism. In *Principi di scienza nuova* (1732; *Principles of a New Science*), he argued that the past unfolds through cyclic *corsi* and *ricorsi*, manifests a triadic breakdown in ages of gods, heroes and men, and comprises a notion of decline and return to the origins after the third period. This occurs not in a universal progressive movement (which is what many Enlightenment thinkers wanted to believe). For Vico, the peoples who make up "nations" go through these cycles at different rates of change while retaining a recognizable identity. Historians and philosophers should bear in mind the dialectic between what humans can know and create (social institutions) and what is ontologically out of their capacity to know or interfere with (nature and providence). Thus, individual and society, myth and science, existence and history are all dynamically interconnected in a process that goes from a primitive age of the senses, then through a period of imagination, finally to one of reason. But what makes Vico relevant to the twentieth century is his claim that poetry can be, and has been, a source of knowledge for historians as well as for sociologists and anthropologists.

In the North, the Milanese philosopher and reformer Cesare Beccaria (1738-1794) achieved international recognition with his influential opuscule on the penal code, *Dei delitti e delle pene* (1764; *Of Crime and Punishment*), which criticized the existing system of justice and called for radical changes in the law and ethics according to the changing times. The Turinese Giuseppe Baretti (1719-1789) expressed the new possibilities of a critique of literature untrammeled by servitude to patrons, as he distanced himself from collectors, antiquarians, philanthropists and court writers. In his polemical essay *Dissertation upon Italian Poetry* (1753), he sets out to prove, against Voltaire, the continuity and integrity of Italian literature. Baretti preferred writers who espoused *sensismo*, and treasured self-awareness against the oppressive demands of existence and

rationality. The Jesuit Girolamo Tiraboschi (1731-1794), director of the Estense library in Modena is the author of a milestone *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1772-1782; enlarged ed. 1794; *History of Italian Literature*), which signals the transition from mere compilation to a work based on factual research. Assimilating the lesson of Muratori and Gravina, Tiraboschi insisted that truth and precision are the first qualities required of an historian. His understanding of literature is broad and embraces all aspects of culture available in written form, paying more attention to *literariness* rather than to the author's *personality*.

Important for later historians is the work of Vincenzo Cuoco (1770-1823), who took part in the Neapolitan revolution of 1799. In his *Saggio storico sulla rivoluzione napoletana* (1801; *Historical Essay on the Neapolitan Revolution*), which relies on Machiavelli's historiography by making history *ancilla* to politics, he criticizes the Jacobins for having promoted a revolution which did not mirror local conditions. Cuoco lays the foundation for an understanding of "passive" versus "active" revolution, a concept which would be widely useful during the XIX and XX centuries. With the fall of Napoleon, the sociopolitical dynamics in Europe changed. Rising against the Restoration, the strongest political force is Nationalism. Historical writing reflects the several ways in which Italian culture started rethinking itself, as documented for instance in the Milanese journal *Il Conciliatore* (1818-1819), which addressed the question of truth and history, the relationship between culture and national identity (necessary if a discourse on national unity were to gain ground), and hosted the debate between romantics and classicists. For the ensuing four decades, critics and historians alike introduced and took positions on a new vocabulary, which sought to redefine the concepts of *origin*, *destiny*, *freedom, independence*, *tradition*, and the link between the *State* and *nation-building*.

The age of the Risorgimento fostered federalist currents in Italian historiography. The Turinese philosopher and politician Vincenzo Gioberti (1801-1852) represented the Catholic liberal strand of history writing. His *Del primato morale e civile degli italiani* (1843; *On the Moral and Civil Superiority of the Italians*) entertained a vision of modern bourgeois societies reconciled under the leadership of the Roman Pontiff, and supported by the military power of Piedmont. Just as politically committed but with more secular convictions was Carlo Cattaneo (1801-1869), author of a history of civilization of Lombardy in which he collects documentary evidence from agriculture, labor relations, use of language, and general customs over time. On the witness-participant side of history writing (he was one of the leaders of the "Cinque giornate"), Cattaneo's *L'insurrection de Milan en 1848* (Italian ed. 1849; *The Insurrection of Milan*) recounts the tragic five-day battle to free the city, and a novel conception of history that anticipates modern theories: the city as the ideal principle of Italian histories.

For some other intellectuals the issue of national independence was pervasive. Literature and history were only a component of this scenario, but a crucial part owing to their power of symbolization and usefulness for the

construction of belief systems. There were historians and historiographers, however, who focused on literature and then essayed to understand the larger world view or the reality that is given outside of the text. Among the authors who wrote Histories of Italian Literature, we recall Cesare Cantù (1804-1895), the liberal moralist author of a 34-volume *Storia universale* (1838-1847; *Universal History*), in which he attributes the development of the arts and sciences to the supremacy of the Catholic Church. In his *Storia della letteratura italiana* **(**1865; *History of Italian Literature*), Cantù argued that national literature should be interpreted against the backdrop of the relentless struggle between Guelphs and Ghibellines, an engine of history which in different guises has pitted bourgeoisie and church against aristocrats and nobles for centuries. Literary critics need to focus on the "content" of the texts, he argues, while historians can read the society in question right *through* the literature. For Cantù, history remains *magistra vita*; thus, in order to achieve national unity the above antagonism must be overcome. This position is shared by Giuseppe Ferrari (1811-1876) in his *Histoire de révolutions d'Italie* (1856-58; *History of Italian Revolutions*). Writing from a Ghibelline viewpoint was Luigi Settembrini (1813-1876), whose *Lezioni di letteratura italiana* (1869-72; *Lectures on Italian Literature*) argued for criteria of analysis based on how pagan, noble, and anti-church writers were; he thus finds in literature the trustworthy expression of Italian society.

Francesco De Sanctis (1817-1883), perhaps the most important Italian cultural critic of the post-Unification period, stood against the erudition of the previous century and the assumptions of the democratic school (i.e.: Mazzini). Hegelian by formation, he believed that the idea is embedded in reality, and that one finds the origin and purpose of literature in history. Literature is a living organism that changes through history because it both makes history and is conditioned by it. In his seminal *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1870-1872; *History of Italian Literature*), De Sanctis illustrates the dialectic between representative writers and their epoch, identifying an expressionistic and socially committed trunk (for instance, Dante), and an impressionistic and self-absorbed lyrical canon (as with Petrarch).

After the annexation of Rome in 1870, historians must contend with the growing influence of positivism, the Hegelians, the materialists, and the spiritualists. Noteworthy is the establishment of a *scuola storica* (historical school), which viewed literature strictly in a positivistic context and continued to assemble archival materials for a more global and heterogeneous history of Italy. On the other hand, with the expanding influence of the sciences there also grew the danger of adopting a scientific model à la Hyppolite Taine, and apply it to literary and cultural memory.

During the first half of the XX century, four major currents in historical studies emerged around distinct groups or schools: the one believing in the primacy of the juridical-economic sphere, the idealist-historicist currents, the

Catholic school, and the Marxist-socialist camp. But what dominated was idealism.

Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) had an immense influence in Italian culture, especially in history, literature, aesthetics, and politics. Before his 1902 *Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale* (*Aesthetics as the Science of Expression and General Linguistics*), the Neapolitan liberal philosopher had subsumed history under the general category of art, but after his rejection of all positivistic modes of thought and the completion of his fourfold system of the spirit (aesthetics, logic, economics, and ethics), he gave history an even greater relevance. Originally referred to as "absolute historicism," Croce espoused a view according to which truth evolved through the historical process, inasmuch as history is the only immanent reality. In his *Teoria e storia della storiografia* (1917; *Theory and History of Historiography*), he argues that History, Knowledge, and Time are all co-terminous, that the distinction between chronicle or pseudo-history and history resides in the latter possessing a Unity which, raised to the understanding (*conoscenza*) of the eternal present, reveals itself "to be at one with philosophy, which in its turn, is nothing else but the thought of the eternal present." IN this fashion history coincides with the act of thinking itself, therefore philosophy "is nothing other than the methodological instance of Historiography, the explanation of the constitutive categories of historical judgments, that is, of the working concepts of historical interpretation." The rise and consolidation of Fascism produced a further revision of Croce's ideas: in 1928 he publishes *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915* (*History of Italy from 1871 to 1915),* in 1932 *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono (History of Europe in the XIX Century)* and with his summa, reiterating his liberal views, *La Storia* (1938; *History as the Story of Liberty),* he reaches the paradoxical conclusion that history consists in what we say or think as historical, that the overall preoccupation of the historian seeking to understand the past entails investigating how the spirit, through human interaction, has constantly attempted to become free, how that has driven all other changes in values.

On the broader front of juridical and economic history two authoritative figures combated Croce: Gaetano Salvemini (1873-1957), a leading anti-Fascist, and Gioacchino Volpe (1876-1971), whose influential *Il medioevo* (1927; *The Middle Ages*) singled out in economics the driving force of social mobility and privileged comparative philological research.

In the period immediately following World War Two, Italian culture opened up to foreign discourses, and idealism underwent much revisions at the hands of general historians such as Delio Cantimori, Walter Maturi, Adolfo Omodeo, Federico Chabod, and Giuseppe Galasso, with much attention going to the re-interpretation of the Risorgimento, the thorny issue on what the "origins of Italy" might mean, and the inclusion of popular culture in the historian's syntheses.

Very evident is the surge in Marxist criticism, with the added stimulus provided by the publication of the writings of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) in the early fifties, which develops more integrative models of analysis and begs the question of revisionism in history writing. A Marxist historiography requires now that scholars take into account the more material and social dimension of artworks, the dialectics of class, the author's world view, questions of influence and circulation, the previously unthematized role of the intellectual as a inter-class strategic group, and the presence of the lower or popular classes in the shaping of a nation and of a politics. But there is also the influence of the French Annales school. New studies appear by Emilio Sereni (1907-1977), with his *La questione agraria nella rinascita nazionale italiana* (1946; *History of the Italian Agricultural Landscape*); Giorgio Candeloro (1909-1988), historian of religious movements and of a monumental ten-volume *Storia dell'Italia Moderna* (1956-1986; *History of Modern Italy*); Rosario Romeo (1924-1987), author of *Risorgimento e capitalismo* (1959; *Capitalism and the Risorgimento*) and books on industrialization; and Ruggiero Romano (1923-2002), a specialist in Latin America who sought to contextualize Italy and Europe in a world perspective, co-edited the 17-volume *Annali d'Italia* (*Annals of Italy*), and lamented the dearth of studies on Italian colonialism. Among the historians of fascism (of which there are three currents, the Marxist, the Radical, and the Liberal), we must not forget the pioneering work of Renzo De Felice (1929-1996), whose 8-volume "revisionist" biography of Mussolini has become a canonical reference point. In philosophy, we recall the work of Eugenio Garin (1909-2004), whose *Storia della filosofia italiana* (1966; *History of Italian Philosophy*) put the history of ideas back into the reality of a documentable Italian world, while rendering obsolete Giovanni Gentile's nationalistic and immanent history of Italian thinking. Finally, in literary studies, there is the 10-volume critical history and anthology assembled by Remo Ceserani and Lidia De Federicis, *Il materiale e l'immaginario* (1980-1985; *Imagination and Material Culture*), in which the arts and culture of Italy are placed in a network of relations with other fields and in a European and Mediterranean context; and Giuseppe Petronio's *L'attività letteraria in Italia* (1979; *Literature and Society in Italy*), with its emphasis on writers as "real" agents endowed with ideas which do have an *effect* on the society in which they live and interact.

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See also: Literary History

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