

The practice of history and the cult of the fact

I

British historians are notoriously suspicious of philosophical reflections about the nature of their craft. The charge is no doubt exaggerated, but it is hard to deny that they have sometimes gloried in presenting themselves as straightforward empiricists for whom the proper task of the historian is simply to uncover the facts about the past and recount them as objectively as possible. Despite the inroads of post-modernist culture, this characterisation continues to hold good for many practitioners,¹ and lately their outlook has been defended anew in recent theoretical work.² Among those who have not only adopted this stance but have offered a theoretical justification of it, by far the most eminent in recent times has been Sir Geoffrey Elton, who always combined his large and distinguished output as an historian of early-modern Europe with a forthright willingness to reflect on the nature of historical enquiry, a topic on which he published no fewer than three books.³ While this readiness to come forward as a philosopher of history was unusual, Elton's actual philosophy was a reassuringly familiar one: he presented himself at all times as an unashamed exponent of the cult of the fact.⁴ Elton's theoretical writings may thus be said to offer a particularly illuminating means of assessing the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, and it is accordingly on his vision of the historian's task that I shall concentrate in what follows.

This chapter is a revised and extended version of an article that originally appeared under the title 'Sir Geoffrey Elton and the Practice of History' in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 7 (1997), pp. 301–16.

¹ A point well emphasised in Roberts 1996. For the analogous place of what Peter Novick has called 'hyperobjectivism' in the American historical profession, see the fascinating details in Novick 1988, esp. pp. 573–629.

² See, most notably, Evans 1997, esp. pp. 75–102.

³ For the three main statements of Elton's creed see Elton 1969a, Elton 1970 and Elton 1991.

⁴ I owe this phrase to Liam Hudson, who originally applied it more generally to the methods of British social science. See Hudson 1972.

II

If we begin with Elton's first and fullest consideration of the methods and purposes of historical study, his book entitled *The Practice of History*, we find a revealing metaphor running through the argument. The aspiring historian is pictured as an apprentice – at one point specifically as an apprentice carpenter – who is aiming to produce a first piece of work to be inspected and judged by a master craftsman.⁵ Elton repeatedly speaks of the need for the young scholar to undergo 'a proper apprenticeship'. He must acknowledge that 'his life is that of an apprentice learning a craft'; that he needs to 'train himself to his trade'; and thus that he needs to be 'instructed, guided, and trained'.⁶

One assumption worth noting is that both teacher and pupil are always assumed to be male. A further and pivotal assumption is that teachers and writers of history are best viewed as practitioners of a *techné*, as craftsmen who have mastered a distinctive set of skills and are thus in a position to pass on what Elton describes as 'the truths of practice and experience'.⁷ This commitment is strongly reinforced by the authorial voice we hear throughout Elton's writings on historical method. The tone is very much that of someone who has rules to impart, rules that an apprentice will do well to read, mark and learn if he is to be 'thoroughly and properly trained'.⁸

The first important lesson that the apprentice learns from the opening chapter of *The Practice of History* is that 'history deals in events, not states; it investigates things that happen and not things that are'. From this it is said to follow that historians must think of their analyses 'as steps in a chain of events, as matters explanatory of a sequence of happenings'. They must therefore 'concentrate on understanding change, which is the essential content of historical analysis and description'.⁹ Subsequently this activity is equated with providing explanations of events. The historian's basic duty is 'to consider and explain change', and this ability is identified with the process of 'deducing consequences from disparate facts'.¹⁰

I am not sure how much headway we are to imagine that the apprentice may already have made in his historical studies. But he will not need to have read very much to know that all these contentions are highly debatable. Suppose he has at least turned the pages of some works in the

⁵ For the aspiring historian as an apprentice, see Elton 1969a, pp. 34–5, 144, 159, 216; as an apprentice carpenter, p. 214.

⁶ Elton 1969a, pp. 103, 113, 213, 221. ⁷ Elton 1969a, pp. 15, 19, 160, 187.

⁸ See Elton 1969a, p. 219, and for the theme of teaching more generally cf. pp. 178–221.

⁹ For these quotations see Elton 1969a, p. 22. ¹⁰ Elton 1969a, pp. 37, 128–9, 166.

history of art or philosophy. In that case he will know that by no means all historians are preoccupied with explanation, especially if by that process we mean (in Elton's formula) the deducing of consequences. Some are instead concerned with the provision of interpretations, and thus with the process of placing texts and other such objects within the fields of meaning from which their own individual meanings can arguably be inferred. If, in addition, the apprentice has read any religious or economic history, he will know that even historians concerned with explanation are by no means always interested in explaining events. Some are interested in accounting for such matters as the prevalence of particular belief-systems or the ways in which past systems of production and exchange have worked.

I suppose we are not to imagine that the apprentice will have read any works in the philosophy of history. Certainly he will not have done so if he has been following the lessons of the master, for Elton explicitly assures us in the Preface to *The Practice of History* that 'a philosophic concern with such problems as the reality of historical knowledge or the nature of historical thought only hinders the practice of history'.¹¹ Nevertheless, our imagined apprentice might surely be a sufficiently reflective person to wonder how it can possibly be the case that, as Elton maintains, the way in which historians explain events is by 'deducing consequences from disparate facts'.¹² It is true that a knowledge of consequences may sometimes lead an historian to reconsider the significance of an event. But the result of doing so will not be to explain it; it will merely be to re-identify what stands to be explained. When it comes to explanation, the historian surely needs to focus not on the outcome of events but on the causal conditions of their occurrence.

These considerations might lead one to conclude that Elton must simply have made a slip at this point, and that what he must have meant to write was that historians explain events by way of assigning their causes. Since he insists, however, that 'to suppose that causal relationships are the main content of history is an error', he apparently has no wish to be rescued in this way.¹³ But in that case I cannot make sense of his view of historical explanation, simply because I cannot see how the act of tracing the consequences of an event has any bearing upon the explanatory task of giving an account of why it occurred.

If we turn, however, to Elton's second book on the study of history, we encounter a more sophisticated and extended analysis of historical

¹¹ Elton 1969a, p. vii; cf. also p. 129, where the theoretical literature on historical explanation is dismissed as 'quite remarkably barren and irrelevant'.

¹² Elton 1969a, p. 129. ¹³ Elton 1969a, p. 23.

explanation in which the emphasis is placed entirely on causes rather than consequences. I am referring to *Political History: Principles and Practice*, which Elton originally published in 1970. The first three chapters are largely given over to a more genial if less incisive development of a number of claims already advanced in *The Practice of History* about the alleged primacy of politics in historical studies. But in chapter 4, entitled 'Explanation and Cause', Elton breaks a considerable amount of new ground. He also breaks a considerable number of lances, tilting at the entire philosophical literature on historical explanation with breathtaking self-confidence.

While the outcome is polemically spectacular, the argument is weakened by Elton's insistence that good theory in this area amounts to nothing other than a reflection and restatement of practice.¹⁴ Since it is historians who provide historical explanations, he repeatedly proclaims, it is for them to tell us what makes a good explanation, rather than listening to what he describes as philosophers' nonsense. What is needed is an account of 'what the historian does', an analysis of 'the historian's concept of cause', an investigation into 'what the historian might mean by talking about causes'.¹⁵

Elton may well be right to stress the pragmatic element in the notion of explanation, an element perhaps best captured by saying that good explanations are those which succeed in removing puzzles about the occurrence of facts or events. But it hardly follows that good historical explanations will consist of anything that practising historians may care to offer us in the way of attempting to resolve such puzzles. Historical explanations cannot be immune from assessment as explanations, and the question of what properly counts as an explanation is inescapably a philosophical one. The question cannot be what historians say; the question must be whether what they say makes any sense.

This is not to deny that Elton may be justified in claiming that the philosophers he discusses imposed too stringent a model by making it a requirement of good historical explanations that they be nomological in form, such that the task of the historian is held to be that of explaining facts and events by reference to empirical laws of which they can be shown to be instances.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the philosophers in question were surely right to insist that the provision of causal explanations in history must

¹⁴ See Elton 1970, esp. p. 135, and cf. Elton 1991, esp. pp. 3, 34, 51, 54, 61.

¹⁵ Elton 1970, pp. 125, 136, 145; on philosophers' nonsense see p. 129.

¹⁶ See Elton 1970, esp. pp. 124–30 for his attack on attempts to apply hypothetico-deductive models of explanation to history. His target is the kind of argument put forward in Hempel 1942.

to some extent depend on our capacity to relate particular instances to wider generalities. Elton strongly disagrees, arguing that generalisations are 'no help at all' in the search for historical explanations, since historians are always concerned with 'the particular event'.¹⁷ But the *non sequitur* is blatant: even if it were true that historians are only concerned with particular events, it certainly does not follow that they are under no obligation to investigate causal uniformities in order to explain them. Despite Elton's assurances, moreover, I cannot myself see how historians can hope to solve any puzzles about the occurrence of facts or events without making some attempt to relate such particulars to a broader explanatory background.

If we now return, however, to the point at which we left Elton's argument in *The Practice of History*, we find that none of these considerations greatly matters to him after all, since these are not the questions that he chiefly wants the apprentice to address. At the end of chapter 1 he suddenly introduces a new and different claim about the objectives of history. The apprentice is now told that history, 'to be worthy of itself and beyond itself, must concentrate on one thing', namely the extraction from all the available evidence of what Elton later calls 'the true facts'.¹⁸ This is not perhaps a very felicitous way of introducing the argument, since it subsequently emerges that, for Elton, a true statement is a statement of fact, so that the concept of a true fact turns out to be a pleonasm.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the new and contrasting claim he wishes to advance is not in doubt: it is that historians are basically engaged in the assembling of facts with the aim of arriving at the truth.²⁰ Announcing this commitment, Elton declares his unswerving allegiance to the cult of the fact. There can be no doubt, he insists, that 'the truth can be extracted from the evidence' and thus that, by uncovering the facts of history, the historian can aspire to discover 'the true reality of the past'.²¹

Elton's later pronouncements about historical method admittedly involve some shifting back and forth between these two perspectives. His inaugural lecture at the University of Cambridge, delivered in 1968 and reprinted in his book *Return to Essentials* in 1991, begins by reverting to the claim that 'the essence of all history is change'.²² His second inaugural

¹⁷ See Elton 1970, pp. 132, 151–2, and cf. the attack on the place of generalisations in explanation at pp. 126–31.

¹⁸ Elton 1969a, pp. 68, 86. ¹⁹ Elton 1969a, pp. 86, 133.

²⁰ Elton 1969a, p. 70. Thereafter the point is continually reiterated; see pp. 74, 97, 101, 117, 123.

²¹ Elton 1969a, pp. 79, 97. ²² Elton 1991, p. 80.

lecture, delivered as Regius Professor of Modern History in 1983 and reprinted in the same volume, speaks in even more emphatic tones about 'the inadequacy of any historical analysis which is not predominantly directed towards an understanding of change through time'.²³ But on the whole it is the alternative idea of extracting the truth from the assembling of facts that wins the day. The first inaugural lecture insists that historians must engage in 'the proper assessment and proper study of evidence', adding that this is because they are 'concerned with one thing only: to discover the truth'.²⁴ Chapter 3 of *Political History*, which is actually entitled 'Evidence', likewise speaks about the bodies of material studied by historians and promises that 'something like the truth can be extracted from them'.²⁵ The second inaugural lecture ends by repeating once more that the sole aim of the historian is that of 'telling the truth about the past'.²⁶ Finally, these are precisely the 'essentials' to which Elton recalls us in his *Return to Essentials* of 1991. The apprentice must acquire 'a professional training' in 'the treatment of the historical evidence' about every event he investigates, with the eventual aim of arriving at 'the truth of the event and all that surrounds it'.²⁷

The second chapter of *The Practice of History* adds some examples to clarify what Elton means by speaking about items of historical evidence.²⁸ The sort of thing he has in mind, he says, is something like a financial account, or the record of a court case, or one of the material relics of the past, such as a house. These are 'far and away the most important and common' types of evidence that the apprentice can expect to encounter, and these are the sorts of documents and factual materials out of which he must extract the truth.²⁹

I imagine the apprentice exhibiting a certain surprise at this point. Perhaps these forms of evidence are the most common, but is it obvious that they are 'far and away the most important'? What about the major works of theology, philosophy and science that adorn our libraries? What about the heritage of great paintings and other works of art that fill our museums and galleries? Elton gives his answer in the concluding chapter of *The Practice of History*. The apprentice must learn to distinguish between optional aspects of historical study and 'real' or 'hard' history.³⁰ The 'hard outline' of historical research and teaching 'must consist of the actions of governments and governed in the public life of the time', this being the

²³ Elton 1991, p. 120.

²⁴ Elton 1991, pp. 89, 91.

²⁵ Elton 1970, p. 84.

²⁶ Elton 1991, p. 125.

²⁷ Elton 1991, pp. 30, 54.

²⁸ The examples are repeated in Elton 1970, pp. 12–13.

²⁹ Elton 1969a, p. 101.

³⁰ Elton 1969a, pp. 190, 197, 199. On 'real' history see also Elton 1970, esp. pp. 22, 32.

only theme 'sufficiently dominant to carry the others along with it'.³¹ But as long as this forms the 'backbone' of our historical studies,³² there is no harm in adding such optional extras as intellectual history or the history of art, although the latter admittedly encourages 'woolliness and pretence'.³³ Elton even allows that some kinds of intellectual history – for example, the history of political theory – may have a positive value, since the study of people's thinking about politics 'bears directly on a main part of the student's "hard" history' through its connection with 'the problem of political organisation and action'.³⁴ By the time Elton came to publish *Return to Essentials*, however, he had noticed with evident dismay that in the meantime the history of ideas had been 'suddenly promoted from the scullery to the drawing room'.³⁵ To cope with this unforeseen impertinence, he takes greater care in his later work to warn the apprentice that intellectual history is not 'real' history at all. 'By its very nature' it is 'liable to lose contact with reality', and is indeed 'removed from real life'.³⁶

The apprentice is thus left with some very definite instructions about what to study and how to study it. He must concentrate on 'hard' history, and thus on the type of evidence originally singled out in chapter 2 of *The Practice of History*: the evidence provided by such things as the record of a court case or a material relic such as a house. He should then make it his business to extract the facts, and thus the truth, from such forms of evidence. He must remember, as chapter 2 puts it, that 'historical method is no more than a recognised and tested way of extracting from what the past has left the true facts and events of that past'.³⁷ Nor need the apprentice have any doubt 'that the truth can be extracted from the evidence by the application of proper principles of criticism'.³⁸ Provided that he follows his instructions properly, the goal can unquestionably be achieved. As with all successful cults, the cult of the fact promises to guide us towards a final truth, 'a truth which', as Elton somewhat gnominically intones, 'is more absolute than mere truthfulness'.³⁹

By this stage I imagine the apprentice beginning to feel slightly bewildered. Elton has offered him the example of a house as an instance

³¹ Elton 1969a, p. 172. The point is still more emphatically made in Elton 1970, esp. pp. 7, 65, 157, 177.

³² Elton 1969a, p. 197. Cf. also Elton 1970, where he insists (p. 73) on the 'primacy' of political history and singles it out (p. 68) as 'the most important' subject of historical research.

³³ Elton 1969a, p. 190.

³⁴ Elton 1969a, p. 190. For a repetition and enlargement of the argument, see Elton 1970, pp. 43–53.

³⁵ Elton 1991, p. 12.

³⁶ Elton 1991, pp. 27, 60.

³⁷ Elton 1969a, p. 86.

³⁸ Elton 1969a, p. 97.

³⁹ Elton 1969a, pp. 73–4.

of the type of evidence from which he is expected to extract the facts in such a way as to arrive at the truth. But how can one hope to set about seeking the truth, *simpliciter*, about such a thing as a house? Will it not be necessary to approach the study of the house with some sense of why I am studying it, why it might be of interest, before I can tell how best to go about examining it?

Elton has of course foreseen the anxiety and offers an interesting response. The opening chapter of *The Practice of History* introduces a distinction between 'real' historians and amateurs.⁴⁰ Amateurs such as Lord Acton or G. M. Trevelyan (who was 'a really fine amateur') intrude themselves and their enthusiasms upon the past.⁴¹ By contrast, real historians wait for the evidence to suggest questions by itself. As Elton later puts it, the questions a real historian asks are never 'forced by him upon the material'; rather they are forced by the material upon the historian. The real historian remains 'the servant of his evidence', of which he 'should ask no specific questions until he has absorbed what it says'.⁴² The distinction recurs in chapter 3, in which we are again informed that the questions we ask as historians must 'arise out of the work' and 'not be sovereignly imposed on it'.⁴³

This kind of injunction has been central to the German tradition of hermeneutics, and is prominent in the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer, especially his *Wahrheit und Methode* of 1960.⁴⁴ It is true that Gadamer's name makes no appearance in *The Practice of History*, and that when Elton later invokes him in *Return to Essentials* it is only to dismiss him as ponderous and confused.⁴⁵ It seems to me, however, that Elton is not only echoing one of Gadamer's most characteristic themes, but that the argument they are both putting forward embodies a salutary reminder about the need to be aware of our inevitable tendency towards pre-judgement and the fitting of evidence into pre-existing patterns of interpretation and explanation.⁴⁶ Moreover, the warning seems all the more valuable in view of the fact that the premature consignment of unfamiliar evidence to familiar categories is so hard to avoid, as even apprentice historians know.

There remain some difficulties about applying this rule in practice. Gadamer would certainly not approve, in the first place, of the positivistic confidence with which Elton asserts it. Consider again Elton's example of a house as an instance of the kind of raw evidence that an apprentice

⁴⁰ Elton 1969a, pp. 29–36.

⁴¹ Elton 1969a, p. 31.

⁴² Elton 1969a, p. 83.

⁴³ Elton 1969a, p. 121.

⁴⁴ See Gadamer 1960 and cf. Gadamer 1975.

⁴⁵ Elton 1991, pp. 29, 38.

⁴⁶ Gadamer 1975, esp. pp. 235–74.

might confront. Gadamer would point out that Elton has already begged the question by characterising the object under investigation as a house. It will be unwise for Elton to retort that the object under investigation must be a house because it is described as such in all relevant documents. The House of Commons is described as a house in all relevant documents, but it is not a house. Nor will Elton fare any better if he replies that the object must be a house because it looks like a house. On the one hand, an object might look nothing like a house and nevertheless be a house. (Think of lighthouses now used as houses.) On the other hand, an object might look very like a house and nevertheless not be a house. (Think of the mausoleums designed by Sir John Vanbrugh.) As Gadamer always stresses, we are already caught up in the process of interpretation as soon as we begin to describe any aspect of our evidence in our own words.⁴⁷

A second and more intractable problem arises as soon as we ask how far we can hope to carry Elton's idea of confronting a piece of evidence such as a house and allowing it, as he repeatedly demands, to force its questions upon us. Elton is adamant that 'the only proper ambition' for an historian is 'to know all the evidence', with the result that the task of the apprentice historian must be to begin by acquiring 'total acquaintance with the relevant material' if he is to end up by telling the truth about it.⁴⁸ The underlying aspiration to arrive at a definitive reading of a body of evidence dies surprisingly hard. Elton's commitment has more recently been echoed, for example, by Peter Gay, who has written of his regret at his decision to entitle his major work on the eighteenth century *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*. Gay remarks that while "'the Interpretation'" would have sounded immodest' this would nevertheless 'have been what I meant'.⁴⁹

But what would it mean to offer *the* interpretation of the Enlightenment? It would mean, at the very least, offering an analysis sufficiently comprehensive to enable us either to incorporate or to set aside every rival reading of every piece of evidence that might be thought relevant to the provision of a total picture of the high culture of the eighteenth century. Not merely is such a project of doubtful intelligibility, but the mere attempt to undertake it would consume endless lifetimes. Any analysis

⁴⁷ On language as the medium in which all interpretative activity is carried on, see Gadamer 1975, esp. pp. 345–66.

⁴⁸ See Elton 1969a, pp. 87, 96 and cf. pp. 88, 92, 109.

⁴⁹ Gay 1974, p. 211 n. But Gay generally pleads for a perspective more akin to the one I am defending here; see, for example, Gay 1974, pp. 210–13, 217. For a discussion of Elton's and Gay's arguments see Novick 1988, pp. 610–12.

of the phenomenon of the Enlightenment will inescapably be based on a series of prior judgements about the nature of its most characteristic preoccupations, together with a further series of judgements about how best to illustrate them. But to engage in such judgements is already to recognise that we are, of course, offering only *an* interpretation. Our resulting survey may be a model of fairminded inclusiveness, but it cannot possibly include everything, and will therefore be open to continuous re-interpretation both by scholars who discover new facts and by scholars who offer new interpretations of the significance of existing ones.

The same objections apply even in the case of Elton's seemingly more modest demands upon the apprentice historian. As we have seen, Elton's basic suggestion is that, when confronting an item of evidence such as a house, the apprentice should begin by acquiring 'total acquaintance' with it if he is to end up by telling the truth.⁵⁰ Again, however, the question is how we can hope to render intelligible the idea of seeking total acquaintance with an item of evidence such as a house. Consider, for example, the project of acquiring total acquaintance with Chatsworth House, and thereby arriving at the truth about that principal residence of the Dukes of Devonshire. A complete study of all the facts about Chatsworth would be literally endless. It would take a lifetime for the apprentice to accumulate anything like a full description (whatever that may mean) of the house itself. (How many windows does it have? How many panes of glass? How big is each pane? How much do they weigh? Where did they come from? How much did they cost?) So far the apprentice has not even entered the muniment room to stare glassily at the scores of manuscript volumes devoted to the lives of Chatsworth's owners and the process of building it. (How many volumes? How many pages in each volume? How many words on each page? What sort of ink was used?)

As Elton's discussion proceeds, however, he evidently begins to see the difficulty, or at least begins to shift his ground. In chapter 3 of *The Practice of History* he is still assuring us that historians 'can discover something fairly described as the truth' about the objects of their research.⁵¹ But in chapter 4 he frequently replaces this contention with the very different and vastly more modest claim that historians can hope to arrive at some particular truths. Whereas chapter 2 had spoken of recovering 'the truth' about 'past realities', chapter 4 prefers to speak of the historian's capacity

⁵⁰ See Elton 1969a, pp. 87, 96 and cf. pp. 88, 92, 109.

⁵¹ See Elton 1969a, p. 117; but cf. pp. 179, 221, where he continues to insist on his earlier claims about 'the truth'.

to find out 'solid truths' and thereby to 'establish new footholds in the territory of truth'.⁵²

It subsequently turns out that this more modest account of the historian's task is what really matters to Elton. The aim of the 'real' historian is that of arriving at new truths by way of adding to the number of incontrovertible facts. It is because of his sense that, as he puts it in chapter 3 of *The Practice of History*, there are many things that historians 'know beyond doubt' and 'can say with certainty'⁵³ that Elton later savages the deconstructionists and their scepticism about facts with such assurance. Elton knows beyond question 'who the eldest surviving child of Henry VIII was'; this is one of an 'enormous number' of historical facts 'on which no dispute is possible'.⁵⁴ It follows that, when he finds himself obliged to confront such deconstructionist critics as Dominick LaCapra with their claim that 'there cannot be any ascertainable certainties in history', Elton is in no doubt about how to respond.⁵⁵ Although he does not know how to spell Professor LaCapra's name, he knows for a fact that LaCapra is merely exhibiting 'the mindless arrogance of the self-satisfied' if he is attempting 'to deny the existence of facts'.⁵⁶

It is true that Elton betrays himself into some blank contradictions in the course of mounting this argument. The earlier chapters of *The Practice of History* are emphatic that 'a great deal of history' is 'knowable and known beyond the doubt of anyone qualified to judge', and thus that 'some historical writing is simply and obviously right'.⁵⁷ But in the final chapter, and again in *Return to Essentials*, Elton is no less emphatic that the historian 'must be a professional sceptic',⁵⁸ and that one of the main functions of 'real' historians must be 'to cast doubt upon the possibility that in historical studies anyone will ever be finally "right"'.⁵⁹

Elton's restatement of his ideal is far from coherent, but his ideal itself is surely clear and unexceptionable. If we now return to Chatsworth with no higher ambition than to say a number of true things about it, we can surely hope to succeed. We may be able to determine such factual matters as its overall height, the size of its grounds and perhaps even the number of its rooms with absolute finality, so long as we take care to avoid any problems of an interpretative kind (such as, for example, what is to count as a room). If this is all that is meant by the quest for

⁵² Elton 1969a, pp. 168, 177. ⁵³ Elton 1969a, p. 111. ⁵⁴ Elton 1969a, p. 80.

⁵⁵ For the discussion of LaCapra's views see Elton 1991, pp. 58–61.

⁵⁶ Elton 1991, p. 59. ⁵⁷ Elton 1969a, pp. 107, 123. ⁵⁸ Elton 1991, pp. 23–4.

⁵⁹ Elton 1969a, p. 206. On the need for 'sceptical thinking' and 'critical scepticism' on the part of historians see also pp. 55, 103, 205.

the truth – that is, the capacity to uncover and state a number of facts – then it can certainly be granted to Elton that, as he puts it in chapter 3 of *The Practice of History*, historians are often able to end up by offering statements ‘of manifest and incontrovertible truth’.⁶⁰

Unlike his initial demand, Elton’s more modest proposal at least has the merit of suggesting a research programme that could in principle be carried out. It is not clear, however, that this will necessarily alleviate the anxiety originally expressed by our imagined apprentice. He now knows that his job is to find out a number of facts about Chatsworth with the aim of stating a corresponding number of truths about it. But he also knows that the facts about Chatsworth are so numerous that he will never be able to find out more than a very small fraction of them. (If he stupidly decides, for example, to start by finding out how many stones went into its construction, he will certainly never finish his dissertation on time.) Moreover, since every fact he discovers will have to be expressed in words, and since Michel Foucault has by now familiarised even apprentice historians with the thought that all classificatory schemes are subject to endless challenge and revision, he may even begin to wonder how many genuinely incontrovertible facts he can hope to state. Suppose, for example, he decides to catalogue the works of art contained in Chatsworth. He wants to know whether he should include the furniture. The correct answer, obviously, is that he should include only those items of furniture which are also works of art. But what is required for something to be a work of art? On the one hand, the question clearly has no simple answer, perhaps no answer at all. But on the other hand, the apprentice needs an immediate answer if he is going to be able to state as a matter of incontrovertible fact how many works of art Chatsworth contains. Perhaps there are fewer incontrovertible facts than he has been led to believe.

The apprentice need not despair, however, for Elton is on hand to reassure him that (as he remarks in speaking of my own writings on this subject) these are unduly high-falutin doubts.⁶¹ But even if the apprentice feels duly reassured, he is still in need of some advice about how to start work on his thesis about Chatsworth. What sort of incontrovertible facts should he be looking for? What sort of facts should he be trying to find out?

One obvious way of replying would be to revert to the somewhat Socratic approach I initially proposed. What first attracted you, one

⁶⁰ Elton 1969a, p. 176.

⁶¹ Elton 1991, p. 42.

might ask in return, to the idea of making a study of Chatsworth? What made you think that a dissertation on this particular mansion of the late seventeenth century might be of interest? I think this would certainly be my own response. I would expect the apprentice to have some views about why it might be of some value – here and now, to himself and others – to know more about Chatsworth and its history. Just as the value of factual information depends on what the historian wants to understand, I would argue, so the attempt to uncover new facts needs to be guided by a sense of what appears to be worth understanding.⁶² I would urge the apprentice, in other words, to solve the problem of how to study Chatsworth by first asking what might be the purpose of studying it at all.

If our imagined apprentice is expecting some such answer from Elton, however, he is in for a rude shock. It is Elton's view that asking such questions is the quickest way of revealing that you have failed to understand the nature of the historian's craft. He insists in *The Practice of History* that our historical studies must be kept entirely separate from any such concerns,⁶³ and in *Return to Essentials* he reiterates the point with even greater vehemence. 'The fundamental questions we put to the evidence' must remain 'independent of the concerns of the questioner'.⁶⁴ We must recognise that Chatsworth – or any other relic of the past – must be studied 'in its own right, for its own sake', and that this constitutes 'the first principle of historical understanding'. What distinguishes 'real' practitioners of history is their willingness to grant the past 'full respect in its own right'.⁶⁵

It might be supposed that what Elton means is that, once we have selected a topic for investigation, we must be sure to treat it in its own terms, even though the topic will of course have been selected on the grounds that it seems to us to possess some inherent value and interest. This would be to say – to cite an epigram of John Dunn's – that the historian should be Whig as to subject matter, Tory as to truth.⁶⁶ But to assume that this is Elton's position would be seriously to underestimate the sweep of his argument in *The Practice of History* about the need to approach the past 'in its own right, for its own sake, and on its own terms'.⁶⁷ It is Elton's view that we must take the greatest care *not* to select our topics on the grounds that they seem to us to have some current interest or (worse still) some contemporary social relevance or importance. The point is made with ferocious emphasis, and with Elton's

⁶² For a classic account of a similar view of factual evidence see Carr 1961, pp. 1–24.

⁶³ Elton 1969a, p. 65. ⁶⁴ Elton 1991, p. 55.

⁶⁵ Elton 1969a, pp. 18, 66, 86.

⁶⁶ Dunn 1980, p. 26. ⁶⁷ Elton 1969a, p. 86.

habitual repetitiousness, in every chapter of his book. The historian must avoid any attempt 'to justify his activity as a social utility'. To proceed in this way is to commit 'the cardinal error'. He must recognise that his entire pursuit 'involves, above all, the deliberate abandonment of the present'.⁶⁸ The same point is made yet again in *Return to Essentials*. We are now assured that the entire project of historical research ('all of it') must be completely divorced from the 'needs and concerns of the present'.⁶⁹

By this stage I imagine the apprentice becoming seriously worried, perhaps even a touch desperate. Does this mean that all the facts I might discover about Chatsworth are of equal interest? Am I just to go there and start making a list of anything it occurs to me to say about it? If this is all I am expected to do, might I just as well be studying something else, perhaps anything else?

If the apprentice is insolently attempting a *reductio ad absurdum* he is in for another rude shock, for it turns out that this is exactly what Elton believes. When he addresses the question of teaching in the closing chapter of *The Practice of History*, he goes so far as to declare that the actual content of what we teach, and *a fortiori* what we study as historians, 'matters in essence very little' and is indeed 'of no importance'.⁷⁰ Real historians, as he had earlier put it, are not distinguished by the problems they study but by 'the manner of their study'; their problems may appear 'narrow or petty', but they gain their importance from 'the techniques of study' they impart.⁷¹ This is a truth that needs to be grasped not merely by teachers of history but by 'anyone concerning himself with historical studies in any form'. The purpose of our studies must be sought 'in the intellectual training they provide', and it is because 'all history, properly deployed' can equally well supply this training that 'it matters in essence very little what particular sections of it are taught'.⁷²

I imagine the apprentice stunned at this point into incredulity. So it doesn't matter in the least what facts I find out about Chatsworth, so long as I employ the right techniques to find them out? This is precisely Elton's point. 'The University', as he patiently explains, 'must train the mind, not fill the untrained mind with multi-coloured information and undigested ideas, and only the proper study of an identifiable discipline according to the rules and practices of that discipline can accomplish that fundamental purpose'.⁷³ But what of our ability to learn from the past about unfamiliar social structures, about developments in art, religion and philosophy, about the conditions and mechanisms of political and

⁶⁸ Elton 1969a, pp. vii, 66, 86.

⁶⁹ Elton 1991, p. 72.

⁷⁰ Elton 1969a, pp. 187, 188.

⁷¹ Elton 1969a, pp. 34, 69.

⁷² Elton 1969a, pp. 186, 188.

⁷³ Elton 1969a, p. 199.

economic change? Some of these examples are Elton's, but they leave him unmoved. 'This is nothing to do with the framing of courses for study and examination, with the real work of intellectual training.'⁷⁴ But what about his earlier insistence that it matters very much what kind of history we learn and teach, since 'the actions of governments and governed' alone provide us with a backbone of 'real' or 'hard' history? Here I do not know what to say, for as far as I can see Elton makes no effort to reconcile this argument with his yet more strongly voiced belief in the overriding importance of technique.⁷⁵

III

It is surely worth pausing at this sensational moment to reflect on the completeness of the disjunction that Elton eventually draws between the content and the justification of our historical studies. What could have prompted so great a scholar to paint himself into such a dark and dismal corner? The clue lies, I believe, in considering the nature of the intellectual crisis so painfully reflected in the pages of *The Practice of History*. By the time Elton came to publish the original version of this manual in 1967, he had issued some of his best-known technical scholarship as well as two of his most widely used textbooks. As *The Practice of History* makes clear, he not only thought highly of this *oeuvre*⁷⁶ but had managed to persuade himself that the kind of research in which he himself specialised called for the exercise of exceptional human powers. He speaks of the need for a searching intelligence, for sympathy and judgement, for 'imagination controlled by learning and scholarship'.⁷⁷ He even speaks in an uncharacteristic moment of pomposity of the historian's 'obligations as an artist' as well.⁷⁸

Elton was acutely aware, however, that a number of prominent historians had meanwhile ceased to believe in the validity or importance of the sort of administrative and political history in which he had made his name. Among those particularly singled out in *The Practice of History* for

⁷⁴ Elton 1969a, p. 200.

⁷⁵ One possible reconciliation might take the form of saying that the required technical skills can best be gained from studying certain types of document, and that the most suitable types on which to practise are those concerned with English central government. So far as I am aware, Elton never explicitly suggested this reconciliation, although he arguably hinted at it in Elton 1969b, p. 33.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Elton 1969a, pp. 174–6.

⁷⁷ See Elton 1969a, pp. 112, 177 and cf. Elton 1970, p. 108 on the exceptional skills needed to write political history.

⁷⁸ See Elton 1969a, pp. 158–9 and cf. p. 124.

arguing that such preoccupations have 'ceased to be valid' are Richard Southern and Keith Thomas.⁷⁹ As Elton concedes, both acknowledge that political history retained its importance so long as the teaching of history in British universities remained closely tied to the training of a political elite and a civil service capable of running a great empire. With the loss of these social conditions, however, Southern and Thomas were led to conclude that the justification for singling out this kind of history had come to an end as well. Both accordingly enter what Elton describes as unacceptable pleas for a new sense of why history might matter to our society, together with a call for the cultivation of new forms of historical enquiry – a call for more intellectual history in the case of Southern, more social history in the case of Thomas.⁸⁰

A surprising feature of *The Practice of History* is that Elton makes no attempt to respond to these arguments by seeking to vindicate the social value or cultural significance of his own very different kind of research. He could surely have attempted – as several of his admiring obituarists did – to convey some sense of why the study of administrative and constitutional history might still be thought to matter even in a post-imperial culture dominated by the social sciences. It is true that, a couple of years later, he made some gestures in this direction in his first inaugural lecture. But it is striking that he almost instantly stopped short, apologising for starting to speak in such a 'very vague and rather vapoury' way.⁸¹ Faced with the question of how a knowledge of history might help the world, he preferred to advise historians to 'abandon and resign' such aspirations altogether.⁸²

Why was Elton so doubtful about assigning any social value or utility to his own brand of history? I am not altogether sure, although the answer must certainly be connected with his curious but persistent belief that any attempt to vindicate the usefulness of studying the past must include a demonstration of the historian's capacity to issue predictions.⁸³ This is particularly a theme of Elton's first inaugural lecture. 'We are told', he confides, that what historians must do if they are to be socially useful is to answer the question 'What help can the past offer to the future?'⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Elton 1969a, pp. 17–18, 185.

⁸⁰ For a discussion of these claims see Elton 1969a, esp. pp. 17–18, 185–6.

⁸¹ Elton 1991, p. 93. ⁸² Elton 1991, p. 96.

⁸³ The same anxiety afflicted J. H. Hexter at much the same time, but he instead responded by attempting to vindicate the historian's predictive powers. See Hexter 1971, esp. pp. 36–42. But Hexter appears to miss his own point, for the predictions he discusses – although presented as those of an historian – are not issued in virtue of his being an historian at all.

⁸⁴ Elton 1991, p. 84.

But who tells us this? It is hard to think of any contemporary historian or philosopher of history who has advanced this argument, and Elton himself mentions no names. He can scarcely have in mind his two *bêtes noires*, Southern and Thomas, both of whom are exclusively concerned with the question of how the past might be made relevant to the present. Nor can he be thinking of the Marxist historian he most frequently attacks, Christopher Hill, for while it was undoubtedly an aspiration of classical Marxism to make use of historical materials to formulate predictive social laws, Christopher Hill has never exhibited anything more than a passing interest in that aspect of Marxist philosophy.

There remains something of a mystery surrounding the sources of Elton's scepticism about the broader educational value of his own studies. About the fact of his scepticism, however, he leaves us in no doubt. His second inaugural lecture robustly declares that 'we should not trouble ourselves too much' about the alleged lessons of history, since this would be to study the past for an 'inappropriate and usually misleading purpose'.⁸⁵ Eight years later, in the version of his Cook Lectures published in *Return to Essentials*, his mood had become even more dismissive. He begins by stigmatising the nineteenth-century belief in the lessons of history as little more than an influential absurdity, and goes on to warn us against the 'temptation' of believing that the study of history is of any relevance to our future or present state.⁸⁶

Elton clearly recognised, however, that these commitments left him with only two possible ways of convincing us – as he always remained anxious to do – that the study of history should nevertheless be recognised as a vocation 'appropriate to the highest abilities of the human reason'.⁸⁷ One alternative would be to abandon any attempt to vindicate the social value of his own kind of history in favour of claiming that the value of the subject somehow lies in the study of the past as a whole. This is the line he begins to follow in *Return to Essentials*, and especially in the three Cook Lectures included in that book. The first lecture opens by informing us that 'history teaches a great deal about the existence of free will'. The second adds that a professional assessment of the past can be used to demolish a number of comfortable myths. The third concludes that history can tell us about the unexpected and, again, about the reality of human freedom.⁸⁸

These are not perhaps very promising lines of thought, and it is surely to Elton's credit that he never made any effort to explain or develop them.

⁸⁵ Elton 1991, p. 114.

⁸⁶ Elton 1991, pp. 4, 9.

⁸⁷ Elton 1969a, p. 16n.

⁸⁸ Elton 1991, pp. 7–8, 45–6, 73.

He was undoubtedly aware that the past has always been studied for a myriad of changing reasons, and that any attempt to summarise them will almost inevitably degenerate into just such a string of clichés. But this leaves him with only one means of vindicating the importance of his own studies. As we have already seen, he is forced into arguing that any attempt to offer a social justification of history is an irrelevance, the reason being that what matters in history is not the content of our studies but the range of techniques we deploy in practising them. This is the conclusion which, in effect, supplies him with the theme of both inaugural lectures reprinted in *Return to Essentials*. The second proclaims that the value of historical study lies entirely in the ‘mind-training capacity’ it provides. Even more bluntly, the first concludes that what historians ‘are here to teach the world’ is nothing other than ‘the proper assessment and proper study of evidence’.⁸⁹

We can now see what makes Elton’s image of the historian as a master carpenter such a revealing one. What matters, he believes, is not whether we are engaged in making tables, chairs or wooden spoons; what matters is the nature of the craft skills equally required for engaging in any of these activities. Like Mr Gradgrind, Elton believes that ‘facts alone are wanted’. It follows, in Elton’s philosophy, that the most important task must be to learn how best to find them out.

By now I should expect the apprentice to have given up trying to write his dissertation on Chatsworth, perhaps devoting himself instead to a career in retailing (as Elton appears to recommend at one point).⁹⁰ I fear that some such feeling of discouragement would certainly have been my own response, although Elton’s outstanding success as a teacher suggests that there must be some way in which I am failing to respond with adequate appreciation to his advice to neophytes. Be that as it may, I should like to end by summoning my imagined apprentice once more to ask Elton if he doesn’t fear that something of broader educational significance may have been forfeited by his unrelenting insistence on technique at the expense of content. It turns out, however, that Elton has no regrets, since he is not sure about the value of a broader liberal education in any case. This darkest vein of scepticism surfaces – without preamble or explanation – in his first inaugural lecture, in the course of which Sir Richard Morison, one of Henry VIII’s propagandists, is approvingly cited for the view that education is a great cause of sedition and other mischiefs in commonwealths. Elton follows up the quotation with a disconcerting flurry of questions. ‘Should we’, he suddenly asks,

⁸⁹ Elton 1991, pp. 89, 108.

⁹⁰ Elton 1991, p. 94.

‘really be practising education? Are we not overestimating it as a power for good, or possibly underestimating it as a power for evil? Ought we not sometimes to stand away from the whole question of education?’ Even more disconcerting is his response. Education ‘is a livelihood’, he concedes, ‘but it may be a folly’, and it is undoubtedly a cause of mischief in commonwealths.⁹¹

Elton’s fundamental reason for wishing to emphasise technique over content appears to have been a deeply ironic one: a fear that historical study might have the power to transform us, to help us think more effectively about our society and its possible need for reform and reformation. Although it strikes me as strange in the case of someone who spent his life as a professional educator, Elton clearly felt that this was a consummation devoutly to be stopped. Much safer to keep on insisting that facts alone are wanted.

⁹¹ Elton 1991, p. 85.