

Narrative in History

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Historians customarily divide their writing into three stylistic variants – narrative, description and analysis. In teaching, students, both at school and at university, are commonly penalized for using narrative, encouraged to keep description to a minimum, and to focus on analysis. Conventionally, description is used to convey evidence that is used in analysis – if we think of analysis as focusing on causes and consequences then it is clearly necessary, for example, to describe a medieval field-system before we can begin arguing about how it came into existence or what impact it had on village hierarchies, or to outline the contents of the 1935 Nuremberg Laws before we can start to measure their impact on Nazi Germany's Jewish population. Given the fact that the historian's primary focus is change over time, and that all historians deal with discrete periods of the past, narrative in historical studies has come to mean in the first place a chronological account – in political history, of events, in economic history, of changes in output, consumption or some other measurable quantity over time, and so on. But narrative has to be distinguished from chronicle, which is the mere listing of events in sequence of time without any element of assessment or explanation. One can for example contrast Sir Martin Gilbert's histories of the two world wars, or of the twentieth century, which are essentially month-by-month, year-by-year accounts of events, with Sir Ian Kershaw's two volumes in the Penguin History of Europe, *To Hell and Back* and *Roller-Coaster*, covering the same period but linking chronology to analysis: Kershaw is writing history, Gilbert chronicle.

Books, whether research monographs or reinterpretations or overviews and syntheses, are by far the most important product of the historian. Fellows of this Academy in the historical sections have been elected on the basis above all of their book publications, not on the basis of the articles they have written. With very few exceptions, it is through books that historians change our understanding of the past. But writing on a large scale brings a number of problems for narrative. History doesn't move in a straight line. Whatever aspect of the past one chooses to write about, there will be a larger or smaller number of different strands to bring together and explain. If you want to account for the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, for example, you have to deal with the different foreign policies of what eventually became the belligerent powers; if you are trying to explain the Renaissance, you have to look at a variety of Italian cities and in addition to that, widen your field of vision to encompass the fall of Constantinople, the transmission of Ancient Greek knowledge through Arabic culture, and much more besides. Bringing a whole host of different factors into relation with one another is the most challenging aspect of historical narrative, but if you don't do this, then narrative sinks to the level of chronology once more.

A final thought, prompted by the multi-disciplinary nature of this discussion. History is a science, no more and no less, as J. B. Bury, Regius Professor at Cambridge, said over a century ago, and by this he meant that history deploys a whole host of techniques that range from deciphering old handwriting to compiling reliable statistics of mortality rates, from providing convincing documentary proof of controversial theses to mapping trade routes or patterns of settlement. There is also of course an aesthetic dimension to the way in which historians construct and convey knowledge – if there weren't, nobody would read their work except a tiny handful of other historians – but then, this is also true of other disciplines too – how often has one heard mathematicians speaking of the beauty of a particular equation, or astronomers marveling at the photographs taken from the Hubble Space telescope? Anyone familiar with other languages knows that English is the only one in which 'science' is taken to refer to the natural and physical sciences, with the consequence that the human and social sciences – *Geisteswissenschaften*, sciences humaines and so on, as they are called in other languages – are implicitly disqualified as forms of knowledge (*scientia*, in the original terminology) that are verifiable by systematic testing. The fact is, however, that all forms of organized knowledge, including history, are at root scientific: they just use techniques of presenting knowledge, including narrative, in different ways.