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Between Science and Literature: Ged Martin Places History at the Center of the Academic World

This important work in the philosophy of history began its life as a series of public lectures Ged Martin delivered at the University of Western Ontario in 1996. The origins of the book are reflected in the writing style, which is marked by vivid images, digressions on interesting historical personalities, and frequent humorous asides. This work is not a rambling one, however, and the anecdotes Martin provides were all chosen to illustrate the fundamental arguments he makes about the craft of history. The ideas he presents about such issues as value-neutrality in historical research, the nature of surviving evidence, the importance of counterfactual history, and common historical fallacies will be of interest to all historians. This is especially true of his thoughts on the term "historical significance" and the question of what is a "long time" in history.

Martin recently retired from teaching Canadian Studies at the University of Edinburgh. A distinguished scholar of the British Empire and Commonwealth who has published on topics ranging from Canadian Confederation to the founding of Australia, he draws most of his illustrative examples from the histories of the English-speaking countries. The plethora of Canadian examples explains why this book was eligible for the prestigious Pierre Savard Award of the International Council for Canadian Studies. Martin makes repeated references to events in Canadian history, especially Confederation, in the course of illustrating his points about general themes. The fact that Martin chose familiar material for his examples should not obscure the universal applicability of his ideas, which deserve the careful consideration of historians studying all countries, periods, and thematic sub disciplines, not just Canadianists and specialists in Imperial-Commonwealth history.

This work will probably end up being read mainly by graduate and senior undergraduate students taking historical methodology courses. It would be unfortunate, however, if this work were confined to a narrow
scholastic ghetto; it offers non-historians significant insights into a number of broader issues. Written by a practicing historian, this work is in the tradition of Geoffrey Elton, E. H. Carr and Richard J. Evans, and differs from the philosophies of history produced by R.G. Collingwood, Michael Oakeshott, and other professional philosophers.[1] Nevertheless, Martin engages with abstract philosophical issues, and this book will be of interest to philosophers wishing to relate generalizations to concrete examples. Economists and political scientists could also gain something from Martin's insights into the process of decision-making.

The relationship between narrative and explanation is of crucial importance for Martin. In his eyes, the spinning of grandiose historical explanations is as bad as a purely descriptive version of history that avoids analysis of causation. He demonstrates the impossibility of complete historical explanation, using Arthur Lower's analysis of the causes of Canadian Confederation as a case study (p. 45). Martin stakes out a middle ground between people who see history as the scientific search for hard causal relationships and pure descriptivists who believe that looking for "A caused B" relationships is pointless. He argues that while certainty in historical analysis is impossible because of the differences between history and the experimental sciences, some attempt at historical explanation, however tentative and provisional, is a necessity, if a sometimes impossible one. Martin's version of history is halfway between poetic description and the relative certainty of the physical sciences (pp. 35-76).

Martin defines history as essentially the study of decisions taken by people in the past. He conceives the historian's task as attempting to establish the thinking of historical actors at the time of decision, because this information illuminates the questions of why, how, and when a decision was taken. For Martin, understanding how the decision-makers in a given situation perceived their futures is crucial to historical analysis, for in making a particular choice, a historical actor is opening the door to one sort of future while closing off another (pp. 111-148). Consideration of past futures is therefore an inescapable part of historical analysis, according to Martin, because it helps us to discern which decisions were significant in their consequences while emphasizing the problems with notions of historical inevitability. Remarking on the contrast in political culture between socialist and poor Saskatchewan and right-wing oil-rich Alberta, Martin suggests a counterfactual that reveals the problems with socio-economic determinism, reminding us that the Laurier government's decision to create two provinces with a boundary running north-south was
not decided upon until the last minute (p. 198). In the centennial year of these provinces, Martin's comments on this subject are very pertinent.

It is important to note that in discussing historical counterfactuals, Martin is not endorsing the imaginative, If-Hitler-Had-Won-The-War sort of counterfactual familiar to readers of paperback fiction. Instead, he is calling for hard research into how people in the past expected their futures to unfold (pp. 191-192). Martin is far more cautious about counterfactual history than Niall Ferguson, distancing himself for Ferguson's enthusiastic advocacy of the counterfactual approach.[2]

Martin's emphasis on individual decisions is refreshing and a ringing challenge to determinist theories of history. He argues that individuals possess the freedom to choose, examining the dictum "poverty causes crime" to reveal the problems with deterministic conceptions of human action, past and present. For similar reasons, Martin rejects teleological conceptions of history, suggesting that the theories of Fukuyama (and by extension those of his predecessor Marx) are ultimately incompatible with the idea of human agency (pp. 82-85).

Martin's view of human decision-making is similar to that recently advanced by Malcolm Gladwell.[3] Martin shows that understanding historical decisions is rarely simple and that historical actors frequently make decisions based on intuition and gut feeling, without being able to verbalize their reasons. He uses Mackenzie King, who reached his decisions in an almost intuitive fashion, as a case in point (p. 79). As King's diaries illustrate, rational decision-making can be a misnomer. Even when people record a cogent explanation for their choices, the historian is often left wondering whether this was the real motivation. Rarely does enough evidence survive for the historian to compare public and private statements and come to a firm conclusion about someone's thoughts when they made a crucial decision. Martin shows that even the most private sources can be utterly uninformative as to motives, citing Lester Pearson's cryptic entry for the day he enlisted in 1915 (p. 85). The practical challenges of historical research and the distortions caused by the incomplete nature of the surviving sources are important themes dealt with by Martin. Historians working on periods and themes where sources are particularly scant will appreciate his observations on this subject (pp. 30-32).

The author also explores the differences between individual decisions, collective decisions (e.g., cabinet resolutions and parliamentary votes), and mass ones (e.g., national elections and the phenomena studied by social
and economic historians). Martin's comments on the differences between mass, collective, and individual decisions are interesting, especially in light of James Surowiecki's recent work on the wisdom of crowds.[4] Martin shows that it is hard enough to discern the motives of a single individual, let alone ascribe intentions to a group as complex as an electorate. Martin uses the large majority won by Leonard Tilley's pro-Confederation government in 1866 to illustrate this point. Historians often say that the New Brunswick electorate rejected Confederation in 1865 and accepted it in 1866, but Martin picks this interpretation apart, revealing the difficulties in distilling a general election down to a single issue (p. 102-103). Discussing the 1995 Quebec referendum, Martin observes the difficulties in explaining how Daniel Johnson ended up in a different camp than his brother, Pierre-Marc. He argues that if the motives of such articulate public figures are difficult to analyze, understanding how millions of average Quebeckers arrived at their respective decisions will be even more difficult (p. 251).

Martin suggests that history is about the interaction of momentous decisions made by a limited number of powerful individuals and the billions of little decisions made by ordinary people (pp. 79-107). He does not enter into the thorny question of whether the cumulative effects of masses of little decisions are greater than the impact of the decisions of the powerful few. Social and economic historians (along with economists and people choking on urban smog) would tend to emphasize the former, while traditional political and diplomatic historians stress the latter. Martin wisely avoids antagonizing either group of historians by refusing to prioritize the historical study of one type of decision-making over another. Past Futures is a work that is respectful of all historians and which will probably be read with interest by scholars working in a wide range of thematic subfields. It thus stands in marked contrast to polemical works in which historians active in one subfield attack those in another. Martin cites Jack Granatstein's Who Killed Canadian History? and its critics but does not devote much time to this controversy (pp. 261, 293).[5]

Many of the author's most interesting insights into Canadian history are clustered in the chapter dealing with the concept of historical significance. As an outsider who has spent much of his life studying Canada, Martin has had the opportunity to view the country from a unique comparative vantage point. He shows that many definitions of "significance" are essentially quantitative and that numbers help determine what historians consider important. At first glance, such a definition of significance is cold
comfort to historians of Canada, given the country's tiny population. However, Martin shows that numbers are not everything and that a small population can nevertheless be extremely significant in the global scheme of things. He identifies several significant or striking things about Canadian history: the survival of the French language in Canada, despite the numbers being against it; the disproportionate role Canada played in the two world wars; and the very fact Canada has survived as an independent state next to a much more populous country (pp. 202-204). At the same time as outlining what he sees as important, he shows that definitions of significance are subjective and vary over time. In Canada, as in Australia and New Zealand, the aboriginal past has increased in significance in recent decades (p. 241). Martin mentions that aboriginal politics also brought about the redefinition of what is a long time, with pre-settlement dates seeming less distant than they once did (p. 184).

While this is an important work, it is not without flaws. An up-to-date bibliography of works in the philosophy of history would have been welcome. A more serious problem is Martin's failure to explicitly engage the various postmodernist theories of history (or rather, attacks on the discipline of history) offered by Keith Jenkins and others.[6] Combating postmodernism may be as rewarding as punching a wave, but it would have been interesting to hear the author's thoughts on the movement. For an effective refutation of the more extreme postmodernist claims, readers will have to turn to Richard J. Evans's *In Defence of History*. Despite these omissions, this book is one that promises to stimulate historians at every career stage from senior undergraduate to senior scholar.

Notes

The history of science is the study of the historical development of human understandings of the natural world and the domains of the social sciences. (The history of Arts and humanities are termed History of scholarship). Science was portrayed as a major dimension of the progress of civilization. In recent decades, postmodern views, especially influenced by Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962), the history is seen in terms of competing paradigms or conceptual systems battling for intellectual supremacy in a wider matrix that includes intellectual, cultural, economic and political themes outside pure science. New attention is paid to science outside the context of Western Europe. The distinction between science and technology, between knowledge and understanding on the one hand and the application of that knowledge to making something, or using it in some practical way, is fundamental. Science produces ideas about how the world works, whereas the ideas in technology result in usable objects. Science merely tells us how the world is. That we are not at the centre of the universe is neither good nor bad, nor is the possibility that genes can influence our intelligence or our behaviour. The social obligations that scientists have as distinct from those responsibilities they share with all citizens comes from them having access to specialised knowledge of how the world works, not easily accessible to others. Ged Martin. Past Futures: The Impossible Necessity of History. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. xi + 290 pp. $53.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8020-8979-3. Reviewed by Andrew Brodie Smith Published on H-Canada (October, 2005). Martin recently retired from teaching Canadian Studies at the University of Edinburgh. A distinguished scholar of the British Empire and Commonwealth who has published on topics ranging from Canadian Confederation to the founding of Australia, he draws most of his illustrative examples from the histories of the English-speaking countries. The plethora of Canadian examples explains why this book was eligible for the prestigious Pierre Savard Award of the International Council for Canadian Studies.