

HISTORY

ARTS FOR HEALTH

Series Editor: Paul Crawford, Professor of Health Humanities, University of Nottingham, UK

The *Arts for Health* series offers a ground-breaking set of books that guide the general public, carers and healthcare providers on how different arts can help people to stay healthy or improve their health and wellbeing.

Bringing together new information and resources underpinning the health humanities (that link health and social care disciplines with the arts and humanities), the books demonstrate the ways in which the arts offer people worldwide a kind of shadow health service – a non-clinical way to maintain or improve our health and wellbeing. The books are aimed at general readers along with interested arts practitioners seeking to explore the health benefits of their work, health and social care providers and clinicians wishing to learn about the application of the arts for health, educators in arts, health and social care and organisations, carers and individuals engaged in public health or generating healthier environments. These easy-to-read, engaging short books help readers to understand the evidence about the value of arts for health and offer guidelines, case studies and resources to make use of these non-clinical routes to a better life.

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HISTORY

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Hanni and David

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FOREWORD: CREATIVE PUBLIC HEALTH

The *Arts for Health* series aims to provide key information on how different arts and humanities practices can support, or even transform, health and wellbeing. Each book introduces a particular creative activity or resource and outlines its place and value in society, the evidence for its use in advancing health and wellbeing and cases of how this works. In addition, each book provides useful links and suggestions to readers for following-up on these quick reads. We can think of this series as a kind of shadow health service – encouraging the use of the arts and humanities alongside all the other resources on offer to keep us fit and well.

Creative practices in the arts and humanities offer a fantastic, non-medical, but medically relevant way to improve the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. Intuitively, we know just how important creative activities are in maintaining or recovering our best possible lives. For example, imagine that we woke up tomorrow to find that all music, books or films had to be destroyed, learn that singing, dancing or theatre had been outlawed or that galleries, museums and theatres had to close permanently; or, indeed, that every street had posters warning citizens of severe punishment for taking photographs, drawing or writing. How would we feel? What would happen to our bodies and minds? How would we survive? Unfortunately, we have seen this kind of removal of creative activities from human society before and today many people remain terribly restricted in artistic expression and consumption.

I hope that this series adds a practical resource to the public. I hope people buy these little books as gifts for family and friends,

or for hard-pressed healthcare professionals, to encourage them to revisit or to consider a creative path to living well. I hope that creative public health makes for a brighter future.

Professor Paul Crawford

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Growing up as the daughter of a research scientist and a yoga teacher, I was caught between two world views. One was rational, delineated by rules, striving for cure and betterment through a dedication to learning, scientific experimentation and observation, and one was more fluid, reaching towards health and wellbeing through an ongoing journey of mind, body and spirit expansion. While my father worked in a laboratory and lectured to halls full of medical students, my mother brought equilibrium and companionship to members of our community, as she guided them through their sun salutes in the local church halls. In our suburban semi-detached house, allopathic medicine and a holistic view of health co-existed under one roof.

It seems quite fitting that I am now a Professor of Health History. Historians need rigour, discipline, imagination and creativity in equal measure. While history relies on evidence, it is nothing without interpretation. What is less discussed is that history can also provide us with new avenues and toolkits to think about and experience the world. These insights and techniques, furthermore, can improve health and wellbeing. They can do this at the personal, communal and structural levels, both mentally and physically.

This modest contribution to the Emerald *Arts for Health* series probes the role that reading, writing, advocating with and participating in history can play in extending health and wellbeing. I am very conscious that it represents a start rather than a definitive guide and I take full responsibility for any faults, omissions or oversights. It is a work which sits on the shoulders of many excellent researchers. While it has been a joy reading so many various insightful contributions to the subfield, this book can claim to be

no more than an accessible introduction, signposting areas where people can look to access more in-depth analyses.

My thanks are particularly extended to the case study authors who are presented within this book. Andres Dobat, Geoffery Kohe, Coreen McGuire, Chris Russell and Aja Smith: I am really thankful for your insightful contributions and for allowing me to showcase your research in this way. I also extend my warm thanks to Paul Crawford, who as well as being a source of constant encouragement, has taught me the benefits of thinking outside of the box. Additional thanks go to the publishing team at Emerald and the two anonymous reviewers who fed back on the proposal and improved the book's content through their shrewd recommendations. Thanks also to the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia. I was privileged to take part in its Visiting Fellowship programme which, as well as introducing me to some wonderful Health Humanities scholars, provided me with some much-needed time to write up this work. It also allowed me to test some of the ideas within a seminar format and engage with enlivening discussions and feedback. Last, but by no means least, I am extremely grateful to Lisa Clarkson, whose eagle-eyed copy editing – executed with such grace and good humour – has been an immeasurable help.

I am in no doubt that this small volume is not as eloquently expressed as what my wordsmith father would have achieved. Nor is it as insightful and generously crafted as anything my mother would have guided. Nevertheless, this book curiously reflects my parents' composite influences and – because of that – it is symbolically offered as a token of my enduring love for them: Hanni (1932–2012) and David (1935–2015).

WHY HISTORY? AND WHY HISTORY FOR HEALTH?

We are historical animals. Both deliberately and subconsciously, we look back over our shoulders and reach to history to situate ourselves. History helps us to understand our own life stories or the stories of those we love. History is also mobilised when we seek the stories of those we have never met, but are intrigued by, or admire. In a more disquieting vein, history reveals to us the motivations and circumstances of those who make us recoil in disbelief. History helps us to understand national and international dynamics. It allows us to make sense of the ways that political, social and economic institutions, systems and attitudes come to dominate and, sometimes, how they fall.

Needless to say, this can be an emotionally loaded process. History, when accessed in its most scholarly incarnations by analysing texts and sifting through documents in archives, can be reassuring and confirming, but it can also – in equal measure – be revelatory, ground-breaking and even shocking. Furthermore, beyond the ivory towers of formal scholarship, the discipline also works at micro- and meso-levels as a means for emotional retrieval. For example, perhaps without defining the process as historical, we engage with history when grandfather's war medals are passed around at a family reunion, when an old love letter found stuffed at the back of a drawer is shared with a new generation, when

community members attend a local history talk, or when former classmates are brought back together after several years apart. As famously portrayed by Marcel Proust, deeply buried personal histories can be unlocked through re-experiencing a long-forgotten, yet fleetingly familiar, taste. For Proust, it was a madeleine momentarily dipped in a cup of lime blossom tisane. On a much more prosaic level, to this day, I cannot smell a certain brand of suntan lotion without being instantly transported back to my 10-year-old self in Germany, in the early 1980s, having the lotion liberally applied by my mother as we sat on deckchairs by a lake. Smelling that perfume never fails to reignite in my own history bank the joyful surety of being young, without responsibilities, safe and loved, while it simultaneously dredges up the buried pains of the lessons of independent adulthood, and the gnawing ache of grief in the momentary reflection that both my parents have passed.

The emotionally charged nature of engagement with history intimately links it with issues of health and wellbeing. Yet, surprisingly, history has rarely been examined in the round as a force to nourish positive health outcomes. Distinguished bodies of work have looked at the role of museums and galleries in the support of personal and public health objectives, and the role of history in health policy development – and some of those ideas are enfolded within this introductory book – but no previous work has brought together in one volume a multiplicity of approaches, viewing history centrally as a flexible and capacious tool with many health applications. History as a therapeutic agent can be accessed through interaction with objects and artefacts in community spaces of museums and galleries. It can also be mobilised through reading, writing and *doing* historical research, whether as a subject-participant or as an author. For example, history as a force for improved mental health can be demonstrated in the empathy that it evokes and the social healing it can stimulate. What is more, beyond the benefits offered through its intellectual and literary functions, history plays an important role in health policy-making by providing important precedential models or highlighting missed opportunities of the past. In several landmark legal cases involving matters of health and wellbeing, historians have played vital roles as expert witnesses, correcting assumptions that have arisen because the alternative

narratives were not freely told in the past due to prevailing political, economic or social imperatives.

I am not suggesting that every therapist, carer or clinician should take a history course, nor am I denying the effectiveness of many modern western medicines or modes of health care, but I am pointing out that history runs as an invisible thread informing our connectivity to the world around us. It is in this covert, but tenacious, manner that history influences our decision-making processes about our health and our journeys to feel better or make others feel better. An awareness of this universal – albeit often hidden – evocation of earlier temporal contexts can be helpful to understand what motivates people, institutions and societies. Recognition of this elemental urge to connect with the past (or sometimes to actively disconnect from it) allows us to integrate history purposefully and carefully into our caring practices and to better understand our needs when we feel unwell or are unable to cope.

As we start this exploration, it is important first to define our parameters. What exactly do we mean when we talk about history? Who can be a historian? Where can we find history? And is it a reasonable assumption that its usefulness to modern society today can be (or should be) quarried and quantified? Finally, why might historians and health practitioners work so well together?

WHAT IS HISTORY?

At its simplest, history is the study of the past, and the historian is the interrogator of the past who aims not only to understand events and people in their own rights, but also to map and explain the complex paths of circumstances that have led to the present. As a mode of exploration which can be undertaken with scholarly precision or more casually as a hobbyist, the central investigative urge of history mirrors its original Greek etymological root, *historia*, which meant inquiry.

Even in its earliest incarnations, however, the spirit of inquiry about the past was recognised as never being entirely neutral. It was susceptible to different biases dependent on the teller. The existence of different versions or stories has long been central to

the conception of the past. In Greek mythology, Clio – one of the nine muses – was upheld as the patron of history. Her job was to guide and inspire mortals to be responsible scholars and not to forget the stories from which they evolved. Herodotus, the so-called ancient Greek ‘father’ of history, whose nine-volume anthology *The Histories* was published in the fifth century bc, understood the importance of writing history in a way that was both engaging and securely grounded in facts. In short, Herodotus had a knack for storytelling, but he also recognised that others might have competing stories to tell, and to this end, he highlighted the importance of questioning sources and interpretations.

Storytelling as the core element of *history* can be traced through the word’s journey into Middle English via France. When it first arrived in England in the late fourteenth century, as a version of the French word *estoire*, no linguistic differentiation from *story* was initially made in the English language. It took until the end of the fifteenth century for the word *history* to differentiate itself from fictional storytelling and to become associated specifically with a kind of storytelling about the past which should present a view of what *actually happened* – if possible, by citing some sort of proof.

However, although early historians used evidence and cited it to give their stories authority, it was not until the nineteenth century that this was routinely stressed as an absolutely essential requirement. It was Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), a German historian, who led this charge and in the process has established himself as the founding father of modern professionalised history. Ranke emphasised the necessity of a sound evidential base for good history, ultimately implying that any historical subject could be studied scientifically, free from subjective bias, so long as evidence was available.

Ranke did much to ensure that the scholarly history we respect today is built on empirical data. However, the swing Ranke advocated to bring history to the lofty position of a discipline capable of being entirely neutral and always scientifically verifiable seems reductionist and simplistic to us these days. All professional historians now agree on the need for evidence, but as was argued by Herbert Butterfield in his seminal *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), they also accept that the writing of history is often

(usually) coloured by presentist values; sometimes purposefully, sometimes unwittingly. This means that, even if historians actively try to mitigate against it, a certain degree of subjectivity comes into all historical judgements, not least those stemming from the pen of the historian as the author. It is a thorny, perhaps even impossible, challenge for even the most hyper-vigilant historian to judge events entirely on their own terms and to avoid judgements based on today's standards (Butterfield, 1931).¹ The way historians' work is coloured by our preoccupations as individuals and members of society need not be a problem. In fact, I would argue that recognising subjectivity as inherent and unavoidable is part of the intellectual fun embedded in the work of the puzzle-solving historiographer. Furthermore, conceding those bias-free interpretations of the past are impossible points to another avenue via which to study history. Ergo, historical accounts, essays, books and oral testimony become important sites of evidence for analysis in and of themselves. They are not just informative because of the facts they contain, but they are windows into the historical attitudes and preoccupations of the historians who wrote them.

From history's earliest etymological links to inquiry and story-telling to modern debates about the inevitability of subjective bias, the central tension of history can be seen, but so can some of its potentialities. It is a discipline fundamentally tied to a quest to uncover truth (even if my truth isn't necessarily your truth) through the collection and interpretation of evidence and, as such, it can ground people and reassure them. Yet, history also acknowledges, and sometimes celebrates, its capabilities as a narrative and creative practice which can entertain, mythologise, manipulate or even erase.

WHO CAN BE A HISTORIAN?

Historians can be professionals educated to apply historical methods in scholarly pursuit, or students studying in schools, colleges or universities which are enfolded in the pedagogy offered by these professionals. However, historians can also be self-taught or self-directed, working within the amateur sphere. Bearing this in mind,

there tends to be differentiation – and certainly, this is so within the scholarship – between history as pursued in the academic domain and history done by ‘the rest’. The latter category is usually grouped in the literature under the umbrella heading of public history.

Public history is a broad category which captures history consumed by the public, such as through popular history books and films and as displayed within museums, galleries and other public spaces. Public history also refers to the pursuit of history by members of the public actively researching history themselves. This could involve going to an archive or a library, but also might happen in private or domestic settings where individuals seek out and contextualise family artefacts or their stories. The findings from these personal investigations may well be recorded in some way (for example, in a family memoir or photo album), but they might also be experienced momentarily and retained without formal record as social memory within personal or familial contexts (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 2012).²

At times, the objectives of scholarly and public history can be seen to clash. One of the major pitfalls of social memory, for example, is that it can be selectively deployed to justify the teller’s presentist preoccupations, or to politically mobilise groups such as those who have long endured historical invisibility. For example, a feminist might be more inclined to see feminist activism within the historical archive. For sure, oftentimes these histories can be innovatively uncovered, but sometimes, they might seem an interpretative stretch. Such an approach can sit uncomfortably with the professional historical objective to present an interpretation that gets things *right* and shows how situations happened, or how an individual or group of individuals actually felt or acted at the time. This tension sometimes puts scholars at odds with those who for valid reasons prefer nostalgic or massaged versions of the past that help to fulfil their social or political priorities in the present day. In short, there can be a fine line between uncovering a forgotten or systemically overlooked history and willing such a history into existence because it validates a current societal agenda.

Yet, despite the potential for social memory to be a site of discordance, and while it is neat and tidy to separate history into two major domains of activity, the boundaries between scholarly and

public history are, in reality, blurred. Each realm informs the other, and their similarities and overlaps are more obvious than their differences. For example, there is much history that goes on in the non-academic domain which is carefully and meticulously analysed. Hobbyist historians often refer to scholarly published texts and frequently have become adept and enthusiastic in their sleuthing for historical evidence, as the craze for family history has demonstrated. Furthermore, since the boom in the 1960s in the study of social history, everyday experiences have been as interesting to many professional historians as seminal moments of nationally celebrated importance. Subsequently, public history has become an important branch of history, worthy of academic analysis in its own right. Historians working within this sub-discipline often cite social memories within their scholarly publications. In fact, although the academic historian should not give up on the centrality of evidence for historical narratives and reconstructions, it is recognised that one of their analytic jobs is to unpick and contextualise nostalgia and retrospective meaning-making. Studying how people create a scaffold which gives meaning to them, their families and/or their communities is therefore now an important part of professional history. It allows historians to better understand personal motivations which in turn often reflect the social experiences of the age in which they are created.

WHERE CAN WE FIND HISTORY?

At a specialist level, history continues to be one of the most popular humanities degree programmes offered at universities in the UK. It provides skills in argumentation, presentation and problem-solving which make it a common route into law, teaching and management as well as into heritage-related jobs. The field of history remains a buoyant area for academic publishers. Professional historical societies, such as the Royal Historical Society and the Historical Association, can boast large memberships supporting their campaigns to promote the scholarly importance of the discipline. National, local, charitable and private archives, libraries and online repositories house the evidence of the past, be that in documentary, oral

historical or material cultural forms. Very few of these repositories are closed to the public, which is part of the reason why even the most scholarly history can be regarded as an inherently democratic enterprise which can usually be accessed by those with an interest.

As for public history, we don't have to look far to find it. We only have to look around us to see that history saturates cultural and civic space and to understand why history is a mass activity as well as the profession of a few. Our cities and villages are full of architecture, statuary and commemoration which remind us of our past. Britain retains innumerable rituals and institutions which were started in periods long ago. But aside from living in a landscape that continually refers us to the past, we consume history hungrily, and in a variety of ways, as a leisure activity. History books regularly appear in the non-fiction bestseller lists; historical films and documentaries form the basis of a booming entertainment industry. Museums and heritage sites from the London Dungeons to (the rather more niche) Cuckooland Museum in Cheshire, England, draw in audiences from the UK and abroad. It appears that there is something for everyone. Popular cultural production involving history is immense, from the humour of *The Flintstones* (1960–1966) and *Blackadder* (1983–1989) to the glamorous intrigues of *The Crown* (2016–present) and *Bridgerton* (2020–present).

As will be discussed in Chapter 2, the history of health has a strong presence in this proliferation of representations – especially via popular and specialist books and articles, but also through TV shows, podcasts and blogs. As discussed in Chapter 4, many museums also deal principally with health historical issues, and a number of successful temporary exhibitions touching on health and wellbeing have confirmed the depth of the public appetite. We will discuss the implications and importance of these tangible areas where health and history are presented together for public consumption. However, the broader point to be made here is that history has moved a long way from being a specialised subject that was exclusively studied by elites. In the UK, the popularity of family history is a good case in point. Societies such as the Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies and the Federation of Family History Societies act as important representative bodies nationally,