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palgrave advances in intellectual history

edited by

richard whatmore and brian young

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introduction

brian young

What is intellectual history? It is the purpose of this volume to answer that question, and also to demonstrate how answering it is affected by its relations with other disciplines. The relationship between intellectual history and other disciplines matters fundamentally because intellectual history, rather more than is the case with many other branches of historical enquiry, is itself a supremely interdisciplinary enterprise. This volume demonstrates that intellectual history has pioneered and will continue to promote much interdisciplinary activity, both among historians themselves, and also in the practice of allied disciplines, especially in the congruent field of literary studies. It ought to come as no surprise, therefore, that several of the contributors to the present volume are scholars of English literature. As the chapter by Abigail Williams demonstrates, however, literary history has its own distinctive characteristics, which are allied to, but are not identical with, those attached to intellectual history.

This volume is centrally concerned with the complementary aspects of those disciplines that most clearly and fruitfully employ the techniques associated with intellectual history rather than with justifying the ready reduction of all such enterprises to a tendentiously, all-encompassing, pseudo-Hegelian form of intellectual history. As John Burrow warns in his scene-setting chapter, it is tempting to adduce all human thought to the province of the intellectual historian, but this, like most temptations, is a temptation to be resisted, however reluctantly. Disciplines exist precisely in order to instil intellectual rigour; all reputable interdisciplinary activity has, therefore, to be conducted with exemplary finesse. The chapters in this volume are dedicated to promoting just such attention to nuance and an allied attentiveness to the distinctiveness discernible when one is working within differing intellectual and disciplinary conditions.

As John Burrow intimates in his chapter, intellectual history might most readily be defined with reference to a series of volumes published by Cambridge University Press under the title of 'Ideas in Context'. That is, intellectual history is concerned with understanding how ideas originate and evolve in specific historical contexts; it is also concerned with tracing their histories within the broader histories of the societies and cultures which they have helped to shape, and which have also shaped them. There are, of course, hermeneutical difficulties with the composition of such histories: how far, for example, did the revolutionary political thought of John Locke serve to enact such later events as the American War of Independence, and how far was the subsequent history of those ideas shaped by the assumption, not to say presumption, that they had somehow been a contributing cause of those events which we identify as the American War of Independence? Similarly, modern apologists for Jean-Jacques Rousseau insist that his models of a transformed political society were specifically *not* designed for the revolutionary transformation of France; how, and why, though, were they subsequently adopted and shaped by such ideologues as Saint-Just and Robespierre to precisely such allegedly inappropriate ends?¹ At what identifiable point do textual ideas, embodied in treatises, become doctrinal ingredients in political society? These and allied difficulties plainly complicate the resolution explicitly made by the locution of 'ideas in context', but complication is not the same as refutation, and intellectual (and cultural) historians have refined their practice in ways that attend to precisely such a collection of difficulties. Robert Darnton, for example, has shown how one disciple of Rousseau read his hero's books and sought to bring up his children according to what he took to be Rousseau's ideals; unfortunately (or fortunately?), we do not know what the eventual results of this educational experiment were.² As the chapter by Brian Cowan contends, a richly suggestive cultural history of ideas is developing that can begin to address such problems, a mode of historical understanding in which Darnton, alongside such scholars as Roger Chartier, can be seen as a pioneer.

'Ideas' necessarily take many shapes, not all of which, as Burrow argues, are readily identifiable with the forms created and enforced by modern disciplines. As Burrow also shows in this connection, the world that we dismiss as that of 'magic' flowed into what we all too easily identify as science, but it did so neither simply nor definitively. Perhaps a cultural history of current 'New Age' beliefs might account for the continuing presence of such phenomena, but few, if any, modern scientists would be happy to make any accommodation for them in their own worldviews. As the chapter in this collection by Deborah Madden demonstrates, the history of medicine incorporates a decidedly critical analysis of the cultural contexts of a medical universe promoted by suitably qualified practitioners in an increasingly professionalised field of human endeavour. The history of medicine, as instanced in the work of Michel Foucault, whose work Madden analyses, is very much a history of a series of disciplinary interventions imposed by a powerful cadre of modernising

specialists. The chapter by Jim Livesey likewise draws our attention to the professionalising disciplinary ethos in the history of science, of which he is properly and productively critical, discerning in its stead the continuing need for the cultivation of a culturally critical history of science. The chapters by Madden and Livesey demonstrate just how attractively complex a disciplinary history now has to look in the wake of the contributions of such seminal thinkers as Foucault.

In proceeding in this disciplinary manner, two missing elements in this volume have to be explained. The first is the absence of a chapter concerning 'philosophy and intellectual history'. The study of philosophy, after all, centrally involves study of what previous philosophers have written, and it often does so historically. There is, however, such a phenomenon as philosophers' history, which is a history very much concerned with elucidating what modern philosophers find to be of continuing interest in the work of dead philosophers; this can produce illuminating and suggestive work, but, at its worst, it can also turn into a somewhat one-sided dialogue. For three fairly recent and culturally significant examples of how a distinguished philosopher can prove a poor intellectual historian, one might instance the short and deeply unsatisfactory studies of Hume, Voltaire and Paine written by the late A. J. Ayer.³ Excellent historical practice in the field of the history of philosophy, on the other hand, can be found in the newly established series 'Studies in Early Modern Philosophy', published by Oxford University Press, and in the work of such established scholars as Knud Haakonssen and such younger contributors to the field as James Harris.⁴ Philosophy is, necessarily, a deeply reflexive practice, and it has naturally played a major role in the evolution of intellectual history as a discipline. The major practitioner of such enquiry in England was the late Sir Isaiah Berlin, whose contribution is discussed in the present volume in the chapters by Brian Young and Duncan Kelly. One can also point to the plea for the world of thought in the practice of historical enquiry made by another philosopher with an interest in history, R. G. Collingwood, who famously argued in his influential study *The Idea of History* that 'All history is the history of thought.'⁵ In seeking to develop that claim, however, we are in some danger of becoming the megalomaniac historian against whose potentially disastrous example Burrow rightly warns us.

Where, in short, does the practice of philosophy take over from that of intellectual history? This is a difficult question which cannot be resolved with any degree of precision. It is, however, one to consider seriously when reading the contributions to this volume. Is intellectual history, even more than history *per se*, 'philosophy teaching by example'? If so, exactly what sort of history is it? Quentin Skinner has recently argued for a politically aware practice of intellectual history, eschewing in the process what he calls antiquarianism in favour of a relevant and sustaining historical practice which deepens contemporary understandings of political problems.⁶ Is this modern form of historical humanism the sort of marriage between intellectual

history and philosophy that would bring intellectual history centrally into modern life? Just how this variety of intellectual history is beginning to look can be seen in the work of such disparate philosophers as Alasdair Macintyre, Susan James, Charles Taylor and the late Bernard Williams; it is a rich and provocative literature that vitally links intellectual history with contemporary philosophy.⁷

The other field that is missing from the present conspectus of chapters and themes is music. Musicology has defiantly come of age intellectually, and its attention to the disciplinary problems attendant on its practice has proved exemplary. To give but one instance, the desire to play pre-modern music 'authentically' has raised a plethora of problems of a decidedly historical kind, and these have their parallels in the pursuit of a hermeneutically sophisticated intellectual history.⁸ The work of John Butt in particular has taken these problems to new heights of articulation, and intellectual historians would do well to consider his thoughts on this deeply important matter.⁹ As Tim Blanning has recently demonstrated to great effect, the history of music is a vital part of the cultural history of the modern West; it is a sign of the professional philistinism of much historical enquiry, however, that classical music continues to be ignored in assessments of modern culture, despite the exciting work that musicologists have recently undertaken when thinking about such composers as Alban Berg and Benjamin Britten in their historical and intellectual contexts.¹⁰ After all, an intellectual history of modern Europe that failed to register an interest in Richard Wagner would be a somewhat barren exercise. There are, of course, technical matters which make such discussions difficult for lay readers, but, as with philosophy, the history of music makes interpretative demands of non-professionals which musicologists are beginning to address. It is well to consider, albeit momentarily and fleetingly, what such reflection might contribute to the future practice of intellectual history.

Lucy Hartley shows in her chapter how the neighbouring field of art history has long related to the territory more usually surveyed by intellectual historians. The history of art emerged as a subject at much the same time and in similar ways to intellectual history, and it is remarkable how many of its mid-twentieth-century practitioners were refugees from racial and political persecution, a humbling demographic component it also shares with intellectual history. As the chapters by Hartley, Young and Kelly demonstrate, the intellectual diaspora that followed the rise of Fascism and Nazism contributed in no small way to a new degree of intensity and richness in British and North American scholarship. Peter Gay's moving memoir, *My Germany*, for example, charts how this leading historian of Enlightenment Europe and Weimar culture made his way from a secular childhood in Berlin into a new American life, from which, influenced by his reading of another Jewish exile, Sigmund Freud, he was able to analyse the immediate prehistory of the sophisticated European culture that all too quickly gave way to racial hatred and the unspeakable

horrors of genocide.¹¹ His is an experience shared with John Clive, whose work on Victorian intellectual history is exemplary for its literary sensitivity and pervasive love of culture; it is as if the horrors of his early experience had deepened his appreciation of the high culture of a past that was largely (but not entirely) unblemished by the atrocities which followed.¹² We still have much to learn from this heroic generation of scholar refugees. Some refugee scholars, notably Isaiah Berlin, instinctively became historians of exile, and it was the example of Berlin's work in this connection that led to Tom Stoppard's stunning trilogy of plays about nineteenth-century Russian intellectual exiles, *The Coast of Utopia*, replete with a telling scene involving Ivan Turgenev in conversation with a doctor in Victorian Ventnor.¹³

The politics of intellectual history is the subject of Duncan Kelly's chapter, which surveys the discipline's fortunes during the deeply troubled twentieth century. In the course of his survey, Kelly shows that intellectual historians could and did serve a persecuting tyranny, as the troubling example of Carl Schmitt testifies. How such men managed to justify such a betrayal of the life of the mind let alone a basic sense of humanity remains mysterious, but for some sense of the peculiar horrors attendant on it one can firmly recommend a reading of a powerful poem on the theme by Geoffrey Hill, 'Ovid in the Third Reich'. As well as helping to shape the experience of the twentieth century, intellectual history was shaped by it, and that has negative as well as positive implications for those assessing the consequent fortunes of the discipline.

One of the more positive intellectual and cultural products of the twentieth century was feminism, and Rachel Foxley demonstrates in her chapter how feminist scholarship has begun to deepen our appreciation of the intellectual history of Europe and North America. Taking a number of case studies, Foxley makes an eloquent argument regarding the consequences for the history of political thought in particular of applying some of the categories and questions that feminist scholars have importantly begun to ask of the past. Her chapter details a significant advance in the practice and principles of intellectual history from a committed perspective. Commitment of an allied kind marks Richard Whatmore's analysis, in his chapter, of the revival of republicanism as a dominant theme in the recent history of political thought, the register that has enjoyed a peculiar dominance in the practice of intellectual history in Britain. It is worth asking why political thought has long enjoyed such a privileged position in the history and practice of intellectual history in Britain.¹⁴ Is it related to the importance of constitutional history in Britain, the sense that the strength and continuity of its political institutions, particularly when compared with those of other European countries, guarantees its historians a fascination with its own past? The fortunes of Thomas Hobbes, James Harrington and John Locke in the history of the history of political thought might provide an interesting lesson in themselves. It is certainly a significant fact that the revival of republicanism as a topic for research seems to indicate some unease with the current constitutional settlement in Britain,

a debate which surely merits much more public discussion than present socio-political conditions would seem to allow.

The ventilation of the issues raised by republicanism relates very centrally to perceptions of the public intellectual, still a relatively unfamiliar concept in Britain. The public intellectual is a much more familiar manifestation of what Pierre Bourdieu called '*Homo academicus*' in mainland Europe than it ever was in modern Britain.¹⁵ As Mishtooni Bose's chapter demonstrates, the ideal of the public intellectual has strongly affected recent conceptions of the 'intellectual' in the Middle Ages. Allied to this is the centrality of religion in medieval studies, perhaps the only genuinely interdisciplinary field at present practised by historians and other scholars. The presence of Bose's chapter in this volume precluded the need for a separate chapter on theology and intellectual history, so deeply imbricated are the two in medieval studies. The example of medieval studies is indeed an optimistic one for interdisciplinary scholarship, not least in the form of intellectual history, whose procedures are especially well suited to the sort of nuanced, precise and attentive scholarship that it is dedicated to achieving. Bose's concluding endorsement of an embedded, materialist intellectual history (rather like Cowan's culturally inflected form of intellectual history), provides one understanding of how 'Ideas in Context' must continue to be at the core of intellectual history.

Medievalists have also been amongst the foremost intellectual historians seeking to relate positively to postmodernism in history. Whilst such modern intellectual historians as Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob have sought to resist the advances of postmodernism in history, students of late antiquity such as Elizabeth A. Clark and medievalists such as Gabrielle Spiegel, whom Bose also takes into account, have called on historians to be more critically receptive to postmodernism as an approach to the past.¹⁶ In so far as intellectual history is supremely concerned with texts, and to understanding 'texts' as taking a variety of forms – literary, cultural, ritualistic – then it has to be attentive to postmodern calls for acute self-consciousness on the part of ourselves as interpreters of such texts. Without explicitly adopting such language or approaches, it is hoped that the chapters in this volume show a level of receptivity to these developments that bodes well for future advances in intellectual history.

notes

1. For a fascinating discussion of these issues, see Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: the language of politics in the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 1986).
2. Robert Darnton, 'Readers Respond to Rousseau: the fabrication of Romantic sensitivity' in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French cultural history* (London, 1984), pp. 209–49.
3. A. J. Ayer, *Hume* (Oxford, 1980); *Voltaire* (London, 1988); *Thomas Paine* (London, 1989).

4. Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: from Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1996); James Harris, *Of Liberty and Necessity: the free will debate in eighteenth-century Britain* (Oxford, 2005).
5. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), p. 115.
6. Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998).
7. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory* (London, 1981), and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London, 1988); Susan James, *Passion and Action: the emotions in seventeenth-century philosophy* (Oxford, 1997); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the making of modern identity* (Cambridge, 1989); Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: an essay in genealogy* (Princeton, 2002). Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor were also contributors to an important collection of essays by philosophers and historians which can still be consulted with profit: Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner, eds, *Philosophy in History: essays on the historiography of philosophy* (Cambridge, 1984).
8. For an argument which seeks to integrate these parallel histories in a preliminary way, see Brian Young, 'The Tyranny of the Definite Article: some thoughts on the art of intellectual history', *History of European Ideas* 28 (2002), 101–17.
9. John Butt, *Playing with History: the historical approach to musical performance* (Cambridge, 2002).
10. T. C. W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture, 1660–1789* (Oxford, 2002); Anthony Pople, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Berg* (Cambridge, 1997); Mervyn Cooke, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* (Cambridge, 1999).
11. Peter Gay, *My German Question: growing up in Nazi Berlin* (New Haven., Conn., 1998); *The Enlightenment: an interpretation* (2 vols, New York, 1966–69); *Freud, Jews, and other Germans: masters and victims in modernist culture* (Oxford, 1978); *Weimar Culture: the outsider as insider* (New York, 1968); *The Bourgeois Experience: from Victoria to Freud* (5 vols, New York, 1985–98).
12. John Clive, *Scotch Reviewers: the Edinburgh Review, 1802–1815* (London, 1957); *Macaulay: the shaping of the historian* (New York, 1978); *Not by Fact Alone: essays on the writing and reading of history* (London, 1989). For a moving appreciation, see the memoir in Susan Pedersen and Peter Mandler, eds, *After the Victorians: essays in memory of John Clive* (London, 1994).
13. See the acknowledgements to Tom Stoppard, *The Coast of Utopia* (3 vols, London, 2002), which declare his indebtedness to the work of Berlin and also to E. H. Carr's *The Romantic Exiles*.
14. On the remarkable and powerful longevity of the history of political thought within the practice of intellectual history in Britain, see for its inception, Mark Goldie 'J. N. Figgis and the History of Political Thought in Cambridge' in Richard Mason, ed., *Cambridge Minds* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 177–92, and, for its current standing, Anthony Tuck, 'History of Political Thought' in Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 2001), pp. 218–32, and Annabel Brett, 'What is Intellectual History Now?' in David Cannadine, ed., *What is History Now?* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 113–31.
15. Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Cambridge, 1988).
16. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (London, 1994); Gabrielle Spiegel, *The Past as Text: the theory and practice of medieval historiography* (Baltimore, Md, 1997); Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: historians and the linguistic turn* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

1

intellectual history in english academic life: reflections on a revolution

john w. burrow

Just under 20 years ago I gave a lecture in the University of London Senate House on the state of Intellectual History in England in my academic lifetime. It consisted of two themes. The first was the lack of recognition, as it seemed to me, accorded to the subject. The second was a number of caveats about the forms that such recognition, in a better world, might take.

Of course we all tend to think our subjects undervalued and under-resourced, but the improvement of the academic standing of Intellectual History or the History of Ideas (I use the terms interchangeably here) has been dramatic and scarcely precludes the use of the term 'revolution'. I may, of course, have been unduly surly in 1987. It depends on one's expectations, though I can cite a high authority who did not, we know, feel personally undervalued, in support. Isaiah Berlin, who was present, wrote to me afterwards saying he recognised the situations I had described. The remarkable improvement in status and recognitions achieved in the past two decades also seem to me indisputable. I can mention just a few symptoms, beginning with the existence now of two reputable English journals devoted to the subject, apart from the more specialised *History of Political Thought*. The high standing of the latter subject in Cambridge, in particular, is well known and the Regius Chair of History is now held by the scholar who has done more than anyone to promote it there. The immense number of valuable monographs published by Cambridge University Press in its Ideas in Context series is another impressive symptom. The establishment in Oxford in 1994 of a chair of European Thought seemed a portent, though for extraneous reasons it has proved

abortive. Majors in Intellectual History have been established since one was founded in the University of Sussex in 1969, as have various MAs and M.Phils. Impressionistically it seems to me that there is more interest in the subject among postgraduate students than there has ever been, including, at last, an awareness that it is not co-extensive with the history of philosophy.

My 1987 lecture, therefore, is in some respects happily out of date, though an historical retrospect of how things were is perhaps not without interest. The caveats, however, I see no reason to withdraw. On the contrary, the more self-confident we become, the more they seem likely to be relevant.

i

I began the lecture with a quotation from A. E. Houseman in his 1892 Inaugural lecture as a Professor of Latin at University College London. As a quip it was rather successful, as Houseman's quips usually were, and I warned the audience that I proposed to spend the next hour labouring the point of a century-old academic joke. Their patience was admirable.

'Richard Bentley', Houseman told his audience, 'was born in the year 1662 and he brought with him into the world, like most men born near that date, a prosaic mind.'¹ It was something to have had the history of ideas recognised by Houseman, even if somewhat obliquely and parenthetically.

What we might perhaps have induced Houseman himself to say, more directly and less ironically, about the subject of the history of ideas I admit I cannot say, but the question is not quite an absurd, in the sense of anachronistic, one. In fact it occurs to me that the teasing reference to the Bentleyan *Zeitgeist* could have been prompted by a work which had appeared a few years earlier, which had better claims than any other I know to be called the first really extensive and detailed work of English intellectual history; I mean Leslie Stephen's *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, published in 1876. Stephen, his first biographer Maitland tells us, 'was ... impressed by the interdependence of all kinds of thought – theological and metaphysical, political and poetical, scientific and fanciful'. It is indeed, I think, the sense of that interdependence which makes Stephen's book really a history of past thought, compared with the more jejune exercises we find in what might perhaps be called the prehistory of the history of ideas in England, earlier in the last century: works such as, for example, James Mackintosh's *Progress of Ethical Philosophy* or George Henry Lewes's *Biographical History of Philosophy*. As it proceeds, I have to admit, Maitland's account of Stephen's views becomes, from my point of view, less encouraging: 'Later on I have heard him maintain that philosophical thought and imaginative literature can have no history, since they are but a sort of by-product of social evolution, or, as he once put it, "the noise that the wheels make as they go round".'² It is a view we are accustomed to hear more ponderously expressed in terms of 'historical materialism', rather than of 'social evolution', but it is, of course,

as Stephen's case reminds us, and as we shall see later, by no means confined to its professed devotees.

But why bother to raise the question of the bare existence of the history of ideas? Surely its existence is a matter of common knowledge and common sense. We know that we do not think in important ways exactly as our immediate forebears did, nor they like theirs; ergo it exists. Indeed yes. But also, alas no. For we have to speak not only of common sense but of academic consensus, which is not invariably the same thing, not of what every schoolboy knows but of what his syllabus requires him to know about. In speaking of the existence of the subject of my lecture as debatable I spoke not, indeed, sensibly, but I spoke academically. I was, of course, exploiting that ambiguity by which we may sometimes speak of an academic subject both as a form of knowledge and as what it knows, and of 'history' both as the practice of historians and as the matter of the past. Not that I at all wanted to deny that in the history of ideas much distinguished practice went on, though not all of it by professed historians. But my subject was not the distinction between the substance of the intellectual past and the practice of scholars in dealing with it but with a remoter one, between the practice of a subject and the academic self-consciousness which demands recognition of it *as* a subject, a form of scholarly practice.

I think it is true that the consensus of professional historians has not always readily allowed such recognition to the history of ideas, at least as their kind of business, nor, I dare say, do all those who, to my eye, practice some form of it, always claim or perhaps see any virtue in such recognition. It is in that sense that I speak of its existence as debatable. Of course, a precondition of recognition is the academic or scholarly self-consciousness that claims recognition, and here, in fact, I want to enter a caveat. I shall argue for such self-consciousness on behalf of the history of ideas, but I do not think of it, especially when it takes the form of a demand for an overarching theory or a distinctive scholarly vocabulary for the subject, as by any means an unmixed blessing. Such demands, in the case of the history of ideas, I shall argue later, may be not so much 'premature' – always a tempting evasion – as actually misconceived or in some respects mischievous. History is notoriously a relatively piecemeal and untheoretical discipline – rightly and inevitably, I am sure, given what historians attempt to do – and I see no reason for thinking of the history of ideas differently in this respect. So, in endorsing awareness of the alienness, the otherness, of the intellectual life of the past, under the name of the history of ideas, or intellectual history, I am anxious not to be suspected of saying more than I mean or of forgetting that the solemnities of academic self-definition have often more to do with public relations than with practice, and that academic labels are better thought of as flags of convenience than as names of essences.

But we need initially, of course, to make the case for self-consciousness and recognition, and to suggest what forms that awareness may desirably take.

Perhaps it will be as well to begin somewhat crudely with a definition. The history of ideas or, intellectual history attends, as I take it, to the reflective communal life of human beings in the past; to their assumptions, arguments, enquiries, ruminations about the world and themselves, their past and their future and their relations to each other, and the various vocabularies and rhetorics in which they conducted these. This sounds an ambitious programme, but less so, after all, than simply 'History'.

Incidentally, I myself mildly prefer 'intellectual history' to the perhaps more familiar 'history of ideas', as registering, by analogy with 'political' or 'economic' history, an attention to forms of human activity rather than to some historical encounter of abstract categories. In this chapter, however, I shall use the two phrases interchangeably. Why the activity so described should be thought more obscure, more puzzling or more perverse, as a way of spending one's time in the library and the classroom, than looking at how people ran their public affairs, got their livings or pursued power or wealth is not self-evident. But it would be naive to pretend that it has not been felt to be so: that a label saying 'intellectual history' could be passed off as casually as if the adjective were 'political' or 'economic' or even, more mysteriously, 'social'. To take only one, admittedly rather trivial, example of the relative English inhospitality to the concept of intellectual history there are, of course, the resonances of the word 'intellectual' itself, which sometimes used to be an embarrassment to my pupils at Sussex whose choice of subject designated them as 'Intellectual Historians'. I consoled them by pointing out that it is only an adjectival quirk of the language which makes it seem more obligatory on intellectual historians to be intellectual than on economic historians to be thrifty or social historians to be gregarious, and I also asked them to consider how much worse off they would be if their metier obliged them to call themselves criminal lawyers. Some, nevertheless, give me the impression that in England the balance of advantage between being intellectual and being criminal remained debatable.

ii

This relative inhospitality of English culture to the idea – and I think it is the idea as well as the phrase – of intellectual history would itself make an interesting subject for an essay in English intellectual history. I stress 'English' because on the Continent matters have been different, with the impressive German traditions of *Kulturgeschichte*, successfully transplanted in England in the Warburg Institute, and where also the history of 'philosophy' has tended to be interpreted more widely than in English philosophy departments. In the United States too, the history of ideas took root earlier. We could narrow the question of the relative English coldness to it, I think, to more manageable proportions by looking at the ways the historical profession, in particular, developed and the influences under which it did so. One way, in which

the concerns of English historians have been conditioned, is by the early emergence of England as a strong and unified state, and by the continuity of its institutions. The contrasts with Germany, particularist, federal, unified as a nation-state only in 1871, with Italy and her somewhat similar history, and with the rupture in French history made by the first French Revolution, are very marked. When European historiography developed into a profession in the nineteenth century, under the influence of powerful nationalist sentiment and urged on in part by the quest for national identity, the English seemed to have an identity already apparent, which was overt, practical, political and institutional, rather than primarily cultural or intellectual, and in so far as the latter was attended to it was academically focused as 'English', that is English literature, rather than history. It was otherwise in Germany, which could claim a culture long before it was a state; German identity was necessarily initially the identity not primarily of institutions, except at the most local level, but of '*Geist*' or '*Kultur*', the subject of the philosophic or cultural historian, and was early acclaimed as such. In France, at least for the good anti-clerical republican, the continuity and identity of modern France lay not in a constitution or polity, which had suffered many vicissitudes since 1789, but in a secularist and revolutionary republican ideological tradition which traced its roots to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

In England, the disposition to assume that the stuff of history was how institutions worked or what politicians had done – a predisposition natural in any case to an historical profession inclined to adopt research in public archives as its badge of professional distinctiveness and respectability – had no such uncomfortable historical circumstances to accommodate. Fifty years ago, when I began to read history as an undergraduate, much conspired to reinforce the confidence of the English political and administrative historian. It was, after all, an era then hailed, in one of the less fortunate historical guesses of the century, as 'the End of Ideology'. For the aspiring young historian an often tacit but powerfully influential metaphysics distinguished sharply between the real and weighty and the unreal or vapid. There were real historical questions – usually about how the apparatus of government worked or who, in running it, fixed what, or whom, and how. And there were unreal or 'irrelevant' questions, chiefly what anyone, in a general way, thought about it all, or indeed about anything, and the more general and coherent the thoughts the more the occult quality of reality was deemed to have leaked from them. In implying, as I may perhaps have done, that I found this metaphysics uncongenial, as I now find it dogmatic and unpersuasive, I do not, of course, want to reverse its terms – to imply that what was thought important is not, indeed, important, but only to suggest that it was unjustifiably restrictive in its exclusions. And of course in so describing it I simplify and caricature and to at least some of my seniors I appear to do injustice. Among my own teachers, Duncan Forbes, Peter Laslett and Noel Annan were very honourable exceptions.

Well it may be said, much changed even in the ensuing 30 years or so. Fewer historians explicitly subscribed to the anti-intellectualist rigours of the metaphysics I have spoken of, then so powerfully exemplified and propounded by a remarkable scholar and ideologue, Sir Lewis Namier. Yet I would hesitate to claim that the history of ideas benefited as much from the change as one might have expected. For the one presupposition has been joined or partly supplanted by another, but neither was one I was anxious to embrace. The older one was that an historical subject derives weight and reality from the concept of power, explanation of whose exercise was at the centre of the historian's trade. It made room for ideas, if at all, only on terms which made their irrelevance the more starkly apparent. The one kind of intellectual history one could normally study as part of a history syllabus was something called the history of political thought or theory; indeed, the power of habit is such that I teach it. But it sometimes struck me, I think, even at 21, as an odd restriction. The seventeenth century, it seemed, contained Hobbes and Locke but not Bacon, Descartes or Newton. The eighteenth century held Montesquieu and Rousseau, but not – unless one was lucky enough, as I did, to do a Special Subject on the Enlightenment – Voltaire or Adam Smith, who belonged respectively to French and Economics. Moreover, of course, one read Locke on government but not Locke on human understanding, Rousseau on the Social Contract but not on religion or education. Given that History was largely past politics, was it perhaps that we were learning about the relation of theory to practice? Perhaps Whig politicians had sat at the feet of Locke, authoritarian ones at those of Hobbes, Revolutionists presumably consulted their Rousseau, administrators their Bentham. But since in many cases it seemed that this had not been so, and since the rugged simplicity of the implied relationship between language and culture and political action more or less ensured that it would not have been so, the emancipation of the historian from attention to past thoughts seemed actually endorsed by the one form of attention given to them, and the visits to Hobbes, Locke and Company often seemed a matter of courtesy, a perfunctory leaving of visiting cards with no intention of closer acquaintances.

That was the old wisdom. The newer historical wisdom typically accommodated ideas on rather different terms. Something like a democratic revolution sometimes seemed to have taken place: ideas are important to the historian in proportion to the number or the height of their social position. Again it is not a criticism of a form of history to say that it is not intellectual history as I understand it; myself I merely wanted to claim that it is not a compliment to it either. To each kind of historical enquiry is its own appropriate sources and criteria of relevance, and they are not in competition just as ideally they should not be considered in isolation from each other. And so – to be still more platitudinous – not every question about ideas held in the past seemed best addressed by asking what the population at large thought about them more by reference to the increasingly long and complex annals

of the poor. The Renaissance was not made the subject of a referendum. Fear of intellectual snobbery can be as limiting to the historical imagination as intellectual snobbery itself, and, to quote the words of two historians for both of whom I have a great respect, 'it is not only the poor and inarticulate who suffer from "the enormous condescension of posterity"'.³

But, surely, it may be said, speaking only of history and historians was too parochial. Surely some of the most distinguished contributions to our understanding of the intellectual life of the past came in the mid-twentieth century not from professed historians, but from philosophers, literary critics, theologians, scientists. And is that not both what we should expect and as it should be? The student who is likely to have the keenest response to, and even understanding of, some past intellectual activity, may be presumed to be one who has himself or herself felt the pressure of the same kind of question and knows what it is to attempt to give an answer. Hence the metaphysician or epistemologist will be our best guide to past metaphysical ideas, the biologist to the history of biology, and so on; indeed, the technicality and durability of some intellectual pursuits may make this virtually a tautology; he who writes the history of logic must himself be a logician. And so we arrive at a conception of the academic division of labour, as applied to the intellectual life of the past which conveniently coincides with corresponding divisions in the present, leaving each academic concern bottling its history on its own premises or premisses. All of what I have just said seems to be true until we try to generalise it as I have just done. That is, it seems to be true as far as it goes, but neither exhaustive nor devoid of certain characteristic dangers when its results are considered as history. I do not wish to deny either that a lot of what I have described went on and perhaps always will. But it cannot plausibly or safely be regarded as exhaustive of what can and should be done in the name of the history of ideas. This is not said in the spirit of the closed shop, implying that to write illuminatingly about the intellectual life of the past one needs a membership card from the Amalgamated Society of Intellectual Historians, Cultural Historians, Historians of Ideas and Allied Trades, or, more practically, that I think that it would be desirable that all practitioners of the history of ideas should be gathered together in departments of that name. There might be gains in this, but there would be losses, in terms of intellectual introversion and the loss of certain kinds of stimulus to, and ability in, the interpretation of the past, even if it were practicable.

Nevertheless, there was and are obvious objections to the present academic division of labour as the basis for our investigation of the intellectual life of the past. It might seem academically convenient. The appropriate departments, supposedly, already exist, and all that is needed is for them to display the necessary tolerance towards those of their members of an antiquarian turn of mind. The position can even be regularised with specific appointments, so that the department acquires a kind of trial bard, embodying the folk-memory, and recording *ex officio*, the great deeds of the heroes of old. I nearly, I think,

began my own career in such a role. But once one has accepted such a picture, doubts and awkward questions begin to intrude. What of subjects which have emerged only recently into some kind of academic recognition, like sociology or psychology? Is it necessarily or even typically the case that the modern social scientist is our best guide to the 'social theories' of the past – and what, as one presses further back, is to count as such? And if there are subjects which lack a determinate ancestry, what of those which seem to lack an identifiable academic progeny? Must we leave the history of the influence of astrology, that subject so profoundly important to some of the most interesting minds of the Renaissance, to be written for us by gypsy ladies in tents? What, again, *counts* as continuity? Theology, philosophy and jurisprudence once divided up between them far more of the intellectual world than they do now. To whom, then, does that rich past now belong?

iii

It may seem only as we press back further into the past that the questions become awkward or absurd, but that means only that the more recent past may be more subtly and less obviously elusive if approached in this way. Disciplines are unstable through time, and confidently to superimpose the academic map of the present – itself, in places, a contentious matter – over the often very different ones current in the past is already to have taken a large step towards systematic historical misunderstanding. And if the academic map is not stable, it is also not exhaustive of everything we may think of as constituting the intellectual life of a society; a survey of modern intellectual concerns and debates which confined itself to rehearsing, *seriatim*, the state of play in the various academic disciplines, would, I suggest, strike us as both restrictive and over-rigid. It is for similar reasons that we employ, as part of the larger coinage of history, such familiar terms as 'Renaissance', 'Enlightenment' and 'Romanticism'. However much these need further analysis, as they clearly do, they do not necessarily need breaking down into academic disciplines, even those of the past, and certainly not into those of the present. It is a futile and absurd exercise to try to decide to which of our disciplines a work like Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* or Bernard de Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* 'belongs'. It does not now belong at all, and if we choose for our own purposes to incorporate it, as we may, that in no way affects its original meaning and status. For better understanding of it we need as a mere starting point, to transpose the question into concepts of genre appropriate to the time in which it was written.

Moreover, it is not only a question of inappropriate categories. Sympathies and intellectual habits conditioned in the analogous modern discipline, supposing there to be one, may not place historical understanding high among their concerns, nor is there any reason why they should do so. It is only an obligation to do history if history is what one purports to be doing,