

Fact and Imagination

History tells each of us the story of our present and future through the eyes of the past. We read the always fragmentary record of past events to find insights into a present we do not fully understand and to reassure ourselves about a future we cannot know. History, then, is an art form, not a science, and each generation must reinvent its past to speak to the present and foretell the future.

We who study history seek in the materials and the methodology of our disciplines a secure footing for the artful stories of the past that we tell, for we recognize the special obligation that sets history apart from fiction. Historians, in telling and retelling the story of the past, must always find their truth within the boundaries of fact. Fact itself, of course, tells us nothing of the meaning of the past, but a history constructed outside of fact has no meaning. It is in the imaginative reconstruction of the past, within the structure of fact, that we make our fundamental contribution to our generation's understanding of itself.

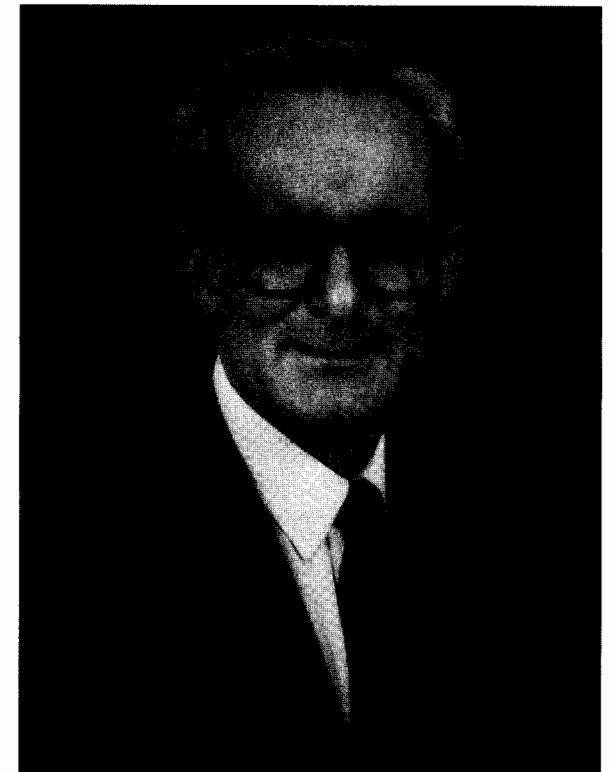
Graduate school, that period of apprenticeship when each of us learns the craft of history, moves us from being consumers of history to becoming producers of history. We participate in the rituals of a graduate education not only to learn the mores and peculiarities of our intended profession but more usefully to learn the methodology of fact and the structure of a history's story. We learn to recognize the primacy of fact as the frame of reference for all historical interpretation, we learn how to find, verify, categorize, and understand fact as the material for our story, and we learn how to tell the story so that it transcends a mere reporting of the facts to become a history that gives meaning to our generation and informs our future.

History, then, is an art form based on a prosaic but powerful artisanry of facts. In graduate school we learn mostly the skills of the historical artisan, trying

them out on small artistic pieces such as master's theses. When we finish our full apprenticeship, we demonstrate our mastery of the historical artisan's craft by inventing an original work of art, a dissertation, built out of the fundamental materials of history, the facts, that tells a story about the never changing past in a new way that speaks to our time and our future.

Because historical training teaches the skills of creativity within the boundaries of fact, historians often find themselves doing things in the present rather than reconstructing the past. Some of us end up doing history, what our graduate school apprenticeship implied, but others of us find that our training applies equally well to a variety of other arts and crafts from politics to law, from business to public service. Wherever we are, and whatever we do, we historians keep returning the fundamental skills acquired in graduate school: the creative combination of fact and imagination.

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