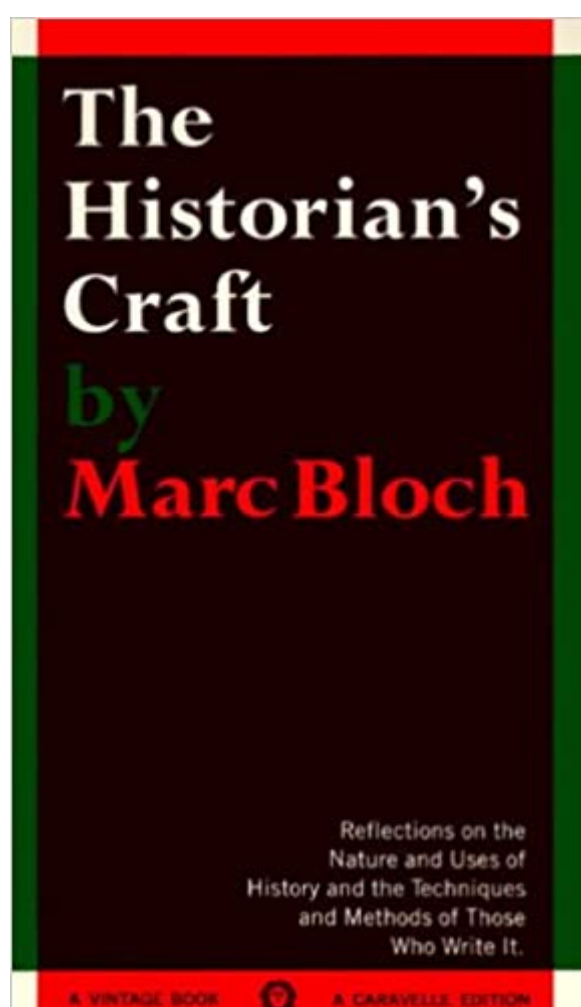


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The Historian's Craft: Reflections On The Nature And Uses Of History And The Techniques And Methods Of Those Who Write It.



Synopsis

In this classic work, distinguished French economic historian, Marc Bloch, discusses the techniques of historical observation, analysis, and criticism, and the reestablishment of historical causation in assessing events. What is the value of history? What is the use of history? How do scholars attempt to unpack it and make connections in a responsible manner? While the topics of historiography and historical methodology have become increasingly popular, Bloch remains an authority. He argues that history is a whole; no period and no topic can be understood except in relation to other periods and topics. And what is unique about Bloch is that he puts his theories into practice; for example, calling upon both his experience serving in WWI as well as his many years spent in peaceful study and reflection. He also argues that written records are not enough; a historian must draw upon maps, place-names, ancient tools, aerial surveys, folklore, and everything that is available. This is a work that argues constantly for a wider, more human history. For a history that describes how and why people live and work together. There is a living, breathing connection between the past and the present and it is the historian's responsibility to do it justice.

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Customer Reviews

Reflection on the nature and uses of History and the Techniques and Methods of those who write it.

Marc Bloch was a French historian who cofounded the Annales School of French social history. He

was captured and shot by the Gestapo in 1944 for his work with the French Resistance.

Everyone, at least once in their life, has questioned the usefulness of their career. Marc Bloch, a French economic historian, discovered that this moment could be inspired by a mere inquiry: "Daddy, what is the use of history?" Bloch's answer to his son's innocuous question provides the intellectual back-bone to his study: *The Historian's Craft*. In this book, Bloch's analysis provides students and professional historians alike with a how-to guide to history, but also, probably most importantly, a poignant defense of the craft itself. Bloch attempts to lift history from its tradition of romantic storytelling, excessive specialization, and its preoccupation with politics, by re-aligning its practices within the broad realm of intellectual inquiry, most importantly science. "There is then," Bloch writes, "just one science of men in time. It requires us to join the study of the dead and of the living." While Bloch concedes that "human actions...elude mathematical measurement," Bloch argues that any intellectual endeavor that explains change over time is historical in its essence. Geology, for example, explains the processes of erosion and plate-tectonics, within the context of time. Thus, understanding the nature of the earth's crust, in relationship to the deteriorating effects of time, is the purpose of studying geology. In contrast to geology, Bloch explains, "it is men that history seeks to grasp." History like many other sciences, are tools for intellectual inquiry. When man is determined to be the subject in question, history, according to Bloch, is the most appropriate tool. The creation of a lake by a man-made dam serves as an excellent example. The inquisitor who is interested in understanding the events that led to the creation of the man-made lake would be better served by analyzing the economic, political, and social phenomena that led to the creation of the dam, rather than the invisible natural geologic processes that led to the creation of the lake. In this sense, history, in comparison to the highly respected intellectual pursuits of hard science, remains an important fixture in intellectual inquiry. So Bloch has decisively argued that the subject of history is men. But what context should historians study men? Time, according to Bloch, "is a concrete and living reality with an irreversible onward rush." The harsh reality of this constant, influx-producing force provides the logic behind all major historical events. Thus, history cannot merely be a "science of men," or the "science of past," but is instead the "science of men in time," or man's evolution within the context of time. In relation to this, Bloch additionally believes that historians should "join the study of the dead and of the living." While many world leaders would like to make changes to certain contemporary societies, the cultural traditions of a civilization, which pull against reform, are deeply rooted in the fabric of the past. Thus, Bloch argues that man, "remains a more or less willing prisoner," to human institutions that developed throughout history. A historian or even more

importantly a world leader that remains unaware of the controlling function of the past, will fail miserably in his or her attempts to improve the future. Likewise, Bloch argues that historians must also be aware of how the present influences our understanding of the past. Bloch believes that "the knowledge of the present bears even more immediately upon the understanding of the past." Bloch states that since historians do their work "backwards," from present to past, a false understanding of the present could lead a historian on a fool's errand in his analysis of the past. Thus, the past and the present, both functions of time, serve as the foundational reference points that all histories should be written from. Marc Bloch, before *The Historian's Craft* was released, was captured, tortured, and executed by invading German forces in 1942. His contribution to historical literature and historiography has been immense and influential. The final intellectual testament of his tragically shortened life and the answer to his son's question: "What is the use of history?" has fascinated modern historians and students alike. Ultimately, Bloch left his historiographic masterpiece to future students of history as inspirational guide that acknowledges the characteristics and tactics of history as an intellectual endeavor.

This book of reflections by a master historian (and victim of the Nazis, which cut short his illustrious career), is not of the same order magnitude of a philosopher-historian like R. G. Collingwood (who made use of Bloch's work on France in the medieval period), but it contains many insights and historical remarks that make it interesting and informative. I have read and enjoyed this book for years and think you will find it well worth reading and re-reading. The following famous lines from the book illustrate the zest and love he has for the subject: "The good historian is like the giant of the fairy tale. He knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies." I have it in French, and the English translation, and highly recommend it.

"*The Historian's Craft*" was recommended to me for a book discussion and I found it to be quite an enlightening read. I obtained a Bachelor's degree in History back in 2006, and not once was I suggested to read this little book by Bloch nor did I ever hear of his name. It really should have been an essential reading for all history major and for those who are serious about any fields of subject because it provides techniques of historical method. Marc Bloch lived in France when the Second World War occurred and during the war, he wrote this book about the use of history and the historical craft - but this work was not completed because he was shot and killed by the Gestapo on 16 June of 1944 for his involvement in the French Resistance. He was known for his work on French history and feudal societies to which I had little knowledge of. After reading his last book, I

feel compelled to read the rest of his works. "The Historian's Craft" is a strong influence in the field of historiography, though I wouldn't limit it to just history because the "craft" can be applied to other scientific fields. There are five chapters in this book and I can understand why it would be a little hard to read, but that didn't repel me from reading further. For those of us with a serious mind, this book provides a system of reasoning and criticism that would allow one to determine what is true and what is false. I most certainly felt that the "what is use of history" section is an important discussion and what really interested me was the chapters on criticisms and observations. This is a challenging book that gives one a much food for thoughts for any field of research. It's to be recommended.

Written by the author during WWII, he was in the French resistance when France was occupied by the Nazis. He was summarily executed by them after getting captured, but copies of this manuscript survived and were published years later. Written in near-prose, translated from French, it's not an easy read. For the critical mind however, this book proposes a system of logic that allows one to discern true from false. It's a beautiful, challenging read that anyone who has an interest in history or current events should pick up. Highly recommended.

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