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# SIR GEOFFREY ELTON AND THE PRACTICE OF HISTORY

By Quentin Skinner

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A REVEALING metaphor runs throughout *The Practice of History*, Sir Geoffrey Elton's first and fullest consideration of the methods and purposes of historical study.<sup>1</sup> The aspiring historian is pictured as an apprentice—at one point specifically as an apprentice carpenter (p. 214)—who is aiming to produce a first piece of work to be inspected and judged by a master craftsman. Elton repeatedly speaks of the need for the young scholar to undergo 'a proper apprenticeship' (p. 103). He must acknowledge that 'his life is that of an apprentice learning a craft', and that he requires to be 'instructed, guided, and trained'.<sup>2</sup>

Two aspects of this image seem especially worth spelling out. One is that teacher and student are both assumed to be male, an assumption sustained throughout Elton's later writings on history, up to and including his final thoughts on the subject in his Cook Lectures of 1990, published in *Return to Essentials* in 1991.<sup>3</sup> (I mention this because I shall sometimes find myself obliged, in the course of laying out Elton's arguments, to follow him in writing 'he' when what I mean—and what he means—is 'he or she'.) A second and pivotal assumption is that teachers and writers of history are best viewed as practitioners of a *techné* who have mastered a distinctive set of skills and are thus in a position to pass on what Elton describes as 'the truths of practice and experience'.<sup>4</sup> This commitment is strongly reinforced by the authorial voice we hear throughout Elton's writings on historical method. The tone is very much that of someone who has rules to impart, rules that an apprentice will do well to read and mark if he is to 'train himself to his trade' (p. 113).

The first important lesson the apprentice learns from the opening Chapter of *The Practice of History* is that 'history deals in events, not

<sup>1</sup>G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (Sydney, 1967). My quotations are taken from the revised edition published in the Fontana Library (1969). Page references are hereafter given so far as possible within the body of the text.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 213, 221. Cf. 144, 159, 215.

<sup>3</sup>G. R. Elton, *Return to Essentials* (Cambridge, 1991), 5 *et passim*. Again, page references are hereafter given so far as possible within the body of the text.

<sup>4</sup>Elton, *Practice*, 19. Cf. 34, 160, 187.

states; it investigates things that happen and not things that are' (p. 22). From this it is said to follow that historians must think of their analyses 'as steps in a chain of events, as matters explanatory of a sequence of happenings' (p. 22). They must therefore 'concentrate on understanding change, which is the essential content of historical analysis and description' (p. 22). Subsequently this activity is equated with providing explanations of events. The historian's basic duty is to explain,<sup>5</sup> and this ability is in turn identified with the process of 'deducing consequences from disparate facts' (p. 129).

I am not sure how much headway we are to imagine that the apprentice may already have made in his historical studies. But he will not need to have read very much to know that all these contentions are somewhat questionable. Suppose he has at least turned the pages of some works in the history of art or philosophy. In that case he will know that by no means all historians are preoccupied with explanation, especially if by that process we mean the deducing of consequences. Some are concerned with the provision of interpretations, and thus with the process of placing texts and other such objects within fields of meaning from which their own individual meanings can arguably be derived. If, in addition, the apprentice has read anything on religious or economic history, he will know that even historians concerned with explanation are by no means always interested in explaining events. Some are interested in explaining such matters as the prevalence of particular belief-systems or the ways in which past economic systems have worked.

I suppose we are not to imagine that the apprentice will have read any works in the philosophy of history. Certainly he will not have done so if he has been following the lessons of the master, for Elton explicitly assures us in the Preface to *The Practice of History* that 'a philosophic concern with such problems as the reality of historical knowledge or the nature of historical thought only hinders the practice of history' (p. vii). Nevertheless, our imagined apprentice might surely be a sufficiently reflective person to wonder how it can possibly be the case that, as Elton maintains, the way in which historians explain events is by 'deducing consequences from disparate facts' (p. 129). It is true that a knowledge of consequences may sometimes lead an historian to reconsider the significance of an event. But the result of doing so will not of course to explain it; it will merely be to re-identify what stands to be explained. When it comes to explanation, the historian surely needs to focus not on the outcome of events but on the causal conditions of their occurrence.

These considerations might lead one to conclude that Elton must

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 128. Cf. 37, 166.

simply have made a slip at this point, and that what he meant to write was that historians explain events by way of assigning their causes. He insists, however, that 'events are not the product of simple causes' and that 'to suppose that causal relationships are the main content of history is an error'.<sup>6</sup> So he evidently has no wish to be rescued in this way. But in that case I am bound to confess that I cannot make sense of his view of historical explanation, simply because I cannot see how the act of tracing the consequences of an event has any bearing upon the explanatory task of giving an account of why it occurred.

If we turn, however, to Elton's second book on the study of history, we encounter a more sophisticated and extended analysis of historical explanation in which the emphasis is placed entirely on causes rather than on consequences. I am referring to *Political History: Principles and Practice*, which Elton originally published in 1970.<sup>7</sup> The first three chapters are largely given over to a more genial if less incisive development of a number of claims already advanced in *The Practice of History* about the alleged primacy of politics in historical studies. But in chapter 4, entitled 'Explanation and Cause', Elton breaks a considerable amount of new ground. He also breaks a considerable number of lances, tilting at the entire philosophical literature on historical explanation with exhilarating self-confidence.

While the outcome is polemically spectacular, the argument seems to me weakened by Elton's insistence that good theory in this area amounts to nothing other than a reflection and restatement of practice.<sup>8</sup> Since it is historians who provide historical explanations, he repeatedly proclaims, it is for them to tell us what what makes a good explanation, rather than listening to what he describes as philosophers' nonsense (p. 129). What is needed is an account of 'what the historian does', an analysis of 'the historian's concept of cause', an investigation into 'what the historian might mean by talking about causes'.<sup>9</sup>

Elton may well be right to stress the pragmatic element in the notion of explanation, an element perhaps best captured by saying that good explanations are those which succeed in removing puzzles about the occurrence of facts or events. But it hardly follows that good historical explanations consist of anything that practising historians may care to offer us in the way of attempting to resolve such puzzles. Historical explanations cannot be immune from assessment as explanations, and the question of what properly counts as an explanation is inescapably

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 129.

<sup>7</sup> G. R. Elton, *Political History: Principles and Practice* (1970). Once again, page references are hereafter given so far as possible within the body of the text.

<sup>8</sup> See *ibid.*, esp. 135, and cf. Elton, *Return*, esp. 3, 34, 51, 54, 61.

<sup>9</sup> Elton, *Political History*, 125, 136, 145.

a philosophical one. The question cannot be what historians say; the question must be whether what they say makes any sense.

This is not to deny that Elton may be justified in claiming that the philosophers he discusses imposed too stringent a model by making it a requirement of good historical explanations that they be nomological in form, such that the task of the historian is held to be that of deducing facts and events from covering laws of which they can be shown to be instances.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the philosophers in question were surely right to insist that the provision of causal explanations in history must to some extent depend on our capacity to relate particular instances to wider generalities. Elton strongly disagrees, arguing that generalizations are 'no help at all' in the search for historical explanations, since historians are always concerned with 'the particular event'.<sup>11</sup> But the *non sequitur* here is blatant: even if it were true that historians are only concerned with particular events, it certainly does not follow that they are under no obligation to investigate causal uniformities in order to explain them. Despite Elton's assurances, moreover, I cannot myself see how historians can hope to solve any puzzles about the occurrence of facts or events without making some attempt to relate such particulars to a broader explanatory background.

If we now return, however, to the point at which we left Elton's argument in *The Practice of History*, we find that none of these considerations matter much after all, since these are not the problems that Elton really wants the apprentice to address. At the end of chapter 1 he suddenly introduces a new and different claim about the objectives of history. The apprentice is now told that history, 'to be worthy of itself and beyond itself, must concentrate on one thing', namely the extraction from all the available evidence of what Elton later calls the true facts.<sup>12</sup> This is not perhaps a very felicitous way of introducing the argument, since it subsequently emerges that, for Elton, a true statement is a statement of fact, so that the concept of a true fact turns out to be a pleonasm. Nevertheless, the new and contrasting claim he wishes to advance is not in doubt: it is that historians are basically engaged in what he describes as 'a search for the truth' (p. 70).

Elton's later pronouncements about historical method admittedly involve some shifting back and forth between these two perspectives. His first Inaugural Lecture of 1968, reprinted in *Return to Essentials*, begins by reverting to the claim that 'the essence of all history is change' (p. 80). The second Inaugural of 1983, reprinted in the same

<sup>10</sup> For Elton's attack on attempts to apply hypothetico-deductive models of explanation to history, see *ibid.*, esp. 125-8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 132, 151-2. Cf. 127.

<sup>12</sup> Elton, *Practice*, 68, 86.

volume, speaks even more emphatically about 'the inadequacy of any historical analysis which is not predominantly directed towards an understanding of change through time' (p. 120). But on the whole it is the idea of extracting the truth from the facts that wins the day. The first Inaugural demands that historians must 'consider all the evidence', adding that this is because they are 'concerned with one thing only: to discover the truth'.<sup>13</sup> Chapter 3 of *Political History*, which is actually entitled 'Evidence', speaks again about the bodies of material studied by historians and promises that 'something like the truth can be extracted from them' (p. 84). The second Inaugural ends by repeating once more that the sole aim of the historian is that of 'telling the truth about the past'.<sup>14</sup> Finally, these are precisely the 'essentials' to which Elton recalls us in his *Return to Essentials* of 1991. The apprentice must acquire 'a professional training' in 'the treatment of the historical evidence' about every event he investigates, with the eventual aim of arriving at 'the truth of the event and all that surrounds it' (pp. 30, 54).

The second chapter of *The Practice of History* adds some examples to clarify what Elton means by speaking about items of historical evidence.<sup>15</sup> The sort of thing he has in mind, he says, is something like a financial account, or the record of a court case, or one of the material relics of the past, such as a house. These are 'far and away the most important and common' types of evidence that the apprentice can expect to meet, and these are the sorts of relics and documents from which he must extract the truth (p. 101).

I imagine the apprentice exhibiting a certain surprise at this point. Perhaps these forms of evidence are the most common, but is it so obvious that they are 'far and away the most important'? What about the major works of theology, philosophy and science that adorn our libraries? What about the heritage of great paintings and other works of art that fill our museums and galleries? Elton gives his answer in the concluding chapter of *The Practice of History*. The apprentice must learn to distinguish between optional aspects of historical study and 'real' or 'hard' history.<sup>16</sup> The 'hard outline' of historical research and teaching 'must consist of the actions of governments and governed in the public life of the time', this being the only theme 'sufficiently dominant to carry others along with it'.<sup>17</sup> But as long as this forms the backbone of

<sup>13</sup> Elton, *Return*, 86n. and 91.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>15</sup> The points are repeated in Elton, *Political History*, 12–13.

<sup>16</sup> Elton, *Practice*, 190, 197, 199. On 'real' history see also Elton, *Political History*, esp. 22, 32.

<sup>17</sup> Elton, *Practice*, 172, 199. The same point is even more emphatically made in Elton, *Political History*, esp. 7, 65, 157, 177. He recurs to it yet again at the end of his second Inaugural lecture. See Elton, *Return*, 123.

our historical studies,<sup>18</sup> there is no harm in adding such optional extras as intellectual history or the history of art, although the latter admittedly encourages 'woolliness and pretence' (p. 190). Elton even allows that some kinds of intellectual history—for example, the history of political thought—may have a positive value, since this type of investigation 'bears directly on a main part of the student's "hard" history' through its connection with 'political organization and action'.<sup>19</sup> By the time Elton came to publish *Return to Essentials*, however, he had noticed that in the meantime the history of ideas had been 'suddenly promoted from the scullery to the drawing room' (p. 12). To cope with this impertinence, he takes more care in this later work to warn the apprentice that intellectual history is not 'real' history at all. 'By its very nature' it is 'liable to lose contact with reality', and is indeed 'removed from real life'.<sup>20</sup>

The apprentice is thus left with some very definite instructions about what to study and how to study it. He must concentrate on 'hard' history, and thus on the type of evidence originally singled out in chapter 2 of *The Practice of History*: the evidence provided by such things as the record of a court case or a material relic such as a house. He should then make it his business to extract the facts, and thus the truth, from such forms of evidence. He must remember, as chapter 2 later puts it, that 'historical method is no more than a recognised and tested way of extracting from what the past has left the true facts and events of that past' (p. 86). Nor need he have any doubt 'that the truth can be extracted from the evidence by the application of proper principles of criticism' (p. 97). He can be certain that, properly approached, the evidence will 'tell him the truth'.<sup>21</sup>

By this stage I imagine the apprentice beginning to feel slightly bewildered. Elton has offered him the example of a house as an instance of the type of evidence from which he is expected to extract the facts in such a way as to arrive at the truth. But how can one hope to go about seeking the truth, *simpliciter*, about such a thing as a house? Won't it be necessary to approach the study of the house with some sense of why I am studying it, why it might be of interest, before I can tell how best to set about examining it?

Elton has of course foreseen the worry, and offers an interesting response. The opening chapter of *The Practice of History* introduces a

<sup>18</sup> Elton, *Practice*, 197. Cf. Elton, *Political History*, insisting (p. 73) on the 'primacy' of political history and singling it out (p. 68) as 'the most important' subject of historical research.

<sup>19</sup> Elton, *Practice*, 190. For a repetition and enlargement of this argument see Elton, *Political History*, 43–53.

<sup>20</sup> Elton, *Return*, 27, 60.

<sup>21</sup> Elton, *Practice*, 101. Cf. 117.

distinction between 'real' historians and amateurs.<sup>22</sup> Amateurs such as Lord Acton or G. M. Trevelyan (who was 'a really fine amateur') intrude themselves and their enthusiasms upon the past (p. 31). By contrast, real historians wait for the evidence to suggest questions by itself. As Elton later puts it, the questions a real historian asks are never 'forced by him upon the material'; rather they are forced by the material upon the historian (p. 83). The real historian remains the servant of his evidence, of which he 'should ask no specific questions until he has absorbed what it says' (p. 83). The distinction recurs in chapter 3, in which we are again told that the questions we ask as historians must 'arise out of the work' and 'not be sovereignly imposed on it' (p. 121).

This kind of injunction has been central to the German tradition of hermeneutics, and is prominent in the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer, especially his *Wahrheit und Methode* of 1960.<sup>23</sup> It is true that Gadamer makes no appearance in *The Practice of History*, and that when Elton later invokes him in *Return to Essentials* it is only to dismiss him as ponderous and confused (pp. 29, 38). It seems to me, however, that Elton is not only echoing one of Gadamer's most characteristic themes, but that the argument they are both putting forward embodies a salutary warning about the need to avoid fitting the evidence we read as historians into pre-existing patterns of interpretation and explanation. Moreover, the reminder seems all the more valuable in view of the fact that the premature consignment of unfamiliar evidence to familiar categories is so hard to avoid, as even apprentice historians know.

There remain some difficulties, however, about applying this rule in practice. Gadamer would certainly not approve, in the first place, of the positivistic confidence with which Elton asserts it. Consider again Elton's example of a house as an instance of the sort of evidence that an apprentice might confront. Gadamer would point out that Elton has already begged the question by characterizing the object under investigation as a house. It will be unwise for Elton to retort that the object must be a house because it is described as such in all relevant documents. The House of Commons is described as a house in all relevant documents, but it is not a house. Nor will Elton fare much better if he replies that the object must be a house because it looks like a house. On the one hand, an object might look nothing like a house and nevertheless be a house. (Think of Martello Towers now used as houses.) On the other hand, an object might look very like a house and nevertheless not be a house. (Think of the mausoleums designed by Vanburgh.) As Gadamer always stresses, but Elton scarcely acknow-

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-36.

<sup>23</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen, 1960).

ledges, we are already caught up in the process of interpretation as soon as we begin to describe any aspect of our evidence in words.

A second and more intractable problem arises as soon as we ask how far we can hope to carry Elton's idea of confronting something like a house and allowing it, as he repeatedly asks, to force its questions upon us. I can see that, if we found ourselves confronting a very odd house, some questions might spontaneously arise. ('If that's a house, why are there no windows?') But I cannot see that this approach will take us any great distance. More broadly, I cannot see how the basic idea of seeking 'the truth' about something like a house can be rendered intelligible. Elton is adamant that 'the only proper ambition' for an historian is 'to know all the evidence' that 'may conceivably be relevant to his enquiry'.<sup>24</sup> Historians must begin by acquiring 'total acquaintance with the relevant material' if they are to end up with the truth.<sup>25</sup> But what would it be like to acquire total acquaintance with an item of evidence such as a house? Consider, for example, the project of acquiring total acquaintance with Chatsworth House, and thereby arriving at the truth about that principal residence of the dukes of Devonshire. A complete study of all the facts about Chatsworth would be literally endless. It would take a lifetime for the apprentice to accumulate a full description (whatever that may mean) of the house itself, without even entering its muniment room and staring glassily at the scores of manuscript volumes relating to the lives of its owners and the process of building it.

As Elton's discussion proceeds, however, he evidently begins to see this difficulty, or at least he undoubtedly begins to shift his ground, although admittedly at the cost of introducing some contradictions into his argument. In chapter 3 of *The Practice of History* he is still assuring us that we can hope to reach 'the truth' about the objects of our research (p. 117). But in chapter 4 he replaces this contention with the very different and rather more modest claim that we can hope to arrive at some particular truths. Whereas chapter 2 had spoken of recovering 'the truth' about 'past realities', chapter 4 instead speaks of the historian's capacity to 'establish new footholds in the territory of truth'—that is, to find out new truths.<sup>26</sup>

It subsequently turns out that this more modest account of the historian's task is what really matters to Elton. It is because of his sense that, as he puts it in chapter 3 of *The Practice of History*, there are many

<sup>24</sup> Elton, *Practice*, 87.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 96. Cf. 88, 92, 109.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 74, 177. Cf. 207. But at some points Elton continues to insist that the aim must be to discover 'the truth' and not merely particular truths. See *Ibid.*, 179, 205–6, 221, and cf. Elton, *Political History*, 105.

things that historians 'know beyond doubt' and 'can say with certainty' that he later savages the Deconstructionists and their scepticism about facts with such extraordinary confidence (pp. 107, 111). Elton knows beyond question 'who the eldest surviving child of Henry VIII was'; this is one of an 'enormous number' of historical facts 'on which no dispute is possible'.<sup>27</sup> It follows that, when he finds himself obliged to confront such deconstructionist critics as Dominick LaCapra with their claim that 'there cannot be any ascertainable certainties in history', Elton is in no doubt about how to respond.<sup>28</sup> Although he does not know how to spell Professor LaCapra's name, he knows for a fact that LaCapra is merely exhibiting 'the mindless arrogance of the self-satisfied' if he is attempting 'to deny the existence of facts' (pp. 58-9).

It is true that Elton's confidence betrays him into some further contradictions. In *Return to Essentials* he informs us that the historian 'must be a professional sceptic',<sup>29</sup> and in *The Practice of History* he similarly asserts that the historian's function must be 'to cast doubt upon the possibility that in historical studies anyone will ever be finally "right"' (p. 206). Yet he is even more emphatic that that 'some historical writing is simply and obviously right', his reason being that 'increasing knowledge genuinely produces increasing agreed certainty', giving rise to a body of knowledge which cannot possibly be called in doubt.<sup>30</sup>

Elton's restatement of his ideal is far from coherent, but his ideal itself is surely clear and unexceptionable. If we now return to Chatsworth with no higher ambition than to say a number of true things about it, we can surely hope to succeed. We may be able to determine such matters as its overall height, the size of its grounds and perhaps even the number of its rooms with absolute finality, so long as we take care to avoid any problems of an interpretative kind (such as, for example, what is to count as a room). If this is all that is meant by the quest for the truth—that is, the capacity to find out and state a number of things that are true—it can certainly be granted to Elton that, as he puts it in chapter 3 of *The Practice of History*, historians are often able to end up by offering statements 'of manifest and incontrovertible truth' (p. 176).

Unlike his initial demand, Elton's more modest proposal at least has the merit of suggesting a research programme that could in principle be carried out. It is not clear, however, that this will necessarily alleviate the anxiety originally expressed by our imagined apprentice. He now knows that his job is to find out a number of facts about Chatsworth

<sup>27</sup> Elton, *Practice*, 80.

<sup>28</sup> For the discussion of LaCapra's views see *Return*, 58-61.

<sup>29</sup> Elton, *Return*, 23-4. Cf. Elton, *Practice*, 55, 103, 205.

<sup>30</sup> Elton, *Practice*, 81-2, 123.

with the eventual aim of stating a corresponding number of truths about it. But he also knows that the facts about Chatsworth are so numerous that he will never be able to find out more than a fraction of them. (If he stupidly decides, for example, to start by finding out how many stones went into its construction, he will certainly never finish his thesis on time.) Moreover, since every fact he discovers will have to be expressed in words, and since Foucault has by now familiarised even apprentice historians with the thought that all classificatory schemes are subject to endless challenge and revision, he may even begin to wonder how many genuinely incontrovertible facts he can hope to enunciate. Suppose, for example, he decides to catalogue the works of art contained in Chatsworth. He wants to know whether he should include the furniture. The correct answer, obviously, is that he should include only those items of furniture which are also works of art. But what is it for something to be a work of art? On the one hand, the question clearly has no simple answer, perhaps no answer at all. But on the other hand, the apprentice needs to answer it if he is going to be able to state as a matter of incontrovertible fact how many works of art Chatsworth contains. Perhaps there are fewer incontrovertible facts than he has been led to believe.

The apprentice need not despair, however, for Elton is on hand to reassure him that (as he remarks in speaking of my own writings on this subject) these are unduly high-falutin doubts.<sup>31</sup> But even if the apprentice feels duly reassured, he is still in need of some advice about how to start work on his thesis about Chatsworth. What sort of incontrovertible facts should he be looking for? What sort of things should he be trying to find out?

One obvious way of replying would be to revert to the somewhat Socratic approach I initially suggested. What first attracted you, one might ask in return, to the idea of studying Chatsworth? What made you think that a thesis on Chatsworth might be of any interest? I think this would certainly be my own response. I would expect the apprentice to have some views about why it might be of some value—here and now, to himself and others—to know more about Chatsworth and its history. I would urge him, in other words, to solve the problem of how to approach his study of Chatsworth by first asking himself what might be the point or purpose of studying it at all.

If our imagined apprentice is expecting some such answer from Elton, however, he is in for a rude shock. It is Elton's view that asking such questions is the quickest way of revealing that you have failed to understand the nature of the historian's craft. He insists in *The Practice of History* that our historical studies must be kept entirely separate from

<sup>31</sup> Elton, *Return*, 42.

any such personal concerns (p. 65), and in *Return to Essentials* he reiterates the point with even greater vehemence. 'The fundamental questions we put to the evidence' must remain 'independent of the concerns of the questioner' (p. 55). We must recognise that Chatsworth—or any other relic of the past—must be studied 'for its own sake', and that this constitutes 'the first principle of historical understanding'.<sup>32</sup> What distinguishes a true practitioner of history is a willingness to 'cultivate a respect for the past in its own right'.<sup>33</sup>

It might be supposed that what Elton means is that, once we have selected a topic for investigation, we must be sure to treat it in its own terms, even though the topic we initially select will of course have been chosen on the grounds that it seemed to us to possess some inherent value and importance. This would be to say—to cite an epigram of John Dunn's—that the historian should be Whig as to subject-matter, Tory as to truth.<sup>34</sup> But to assume that this is Elton's position would be seriously to underestimate the sweep of his argument in *The Practice of History* about the need to approach the past 'in its own right, for its own sake, and on its own terms' (p. 86). It is Elton's view that we must take the greatest care *not* to select our topics on the grounds that they seem to us to have some current interest or (worse still) some contemporary social relevance or importance. The point is made with the utmost firmness, and with Elton's habitual repetitiousness, in every chapter of the book. To proceed in this way is to commit 'the cardinal error' (p. 86). The historian must avoid any attempt 'to justify his activity as a social utility' (p. vii). He must recognise that his entire pursuit 'involves, above all, the deliberate abandonment of the present' (p. 66). The same point is made yet again, with even greater assurance, in *Return to Essentials*. The entire project of historical research ('all of it') must be completely divorced from the 'needs and concerns of the present' (p. 72).

By this stage I imagine the apprentice becoming seriously bewildered, perhaps even a touch desperate. Does this mean that all the facts I might discover about Chatsworth are of equal interest? Am I just to go there and start making a list of anything it occurs to me to say about it? If this is all I am expected to do, might I just as well be studying something else, perhaps anything else?

If the apprentice is insolently attempting a *reductio ad absurdum* he is in for another rude shock, for it turns out that this is exactly what Elton believes. When he addresses the question of teaching in the

<sup>32</sup> Elton, *Practice*, 18, 86. Cf. 65, 66.

<sup>33</sup> Elton, *Return*, 24. Cf. 9, 52.

<sup>34</sup> See John Dunn, 'The Identity of the History of Ideas', in *Political Obligation in its Historical Context* (Cambridge, 1980), 13–28.

closing chapter of *The Practice of History*, he goes so far as to declare that the actual content of what we teach, and *a fortiori* what we study as historians, 'matters in essence very little' (p. 188). True historians, as he had earlier put it, are not marked out by 'the problems they study' but by 'the manner of their study' (p. 69). Their problems may indeed seem 'narrow or petty', but they gain their importance from 'the techniques of study' they teach (p. 34). This is a truth that needs to be grasped not merely by teachers of history but by 'anyone concerning himself with historical studies in any form' (p. 186). The purpose of our studies must be sought 'in the intellectual training they provide' (p. 186). And it is because 'all history, properly deployed' can supply this training that 'it matters in essence very little what particular sections of it are taught' (p. 188).

I imagine the apprentice stunned at this point into incredulity. Surely Elton cannot want to say that all the ideas and information we might acquire from a study of the past are irrelevant to the basic reason we have for studying it? But this is exactly what he does want to say. 'The University', he patiently explains, 'must train the mind, not fill the untrained mind with multi-coloured information and undigested ideas, and only the proper study of an identifiable discipline according to the rules and practices of that discipline can accomplish that fundamental purpose.'<sup>35</sup> But what of our ability to learn from the past about unfamiliar social structures, about the development of art, religion and philosophy, about the conditions and mechanisms of economic change? Some of these examples are Elton's, but they leave him unmoved. 'This is nothing to do with the framing of courses for study and examination, with the real work of intellectual training.'<sup>36</sup> But what about his earlier insistence that it matters very much what kind of history we learn and teach, since 'the actions of governments and governed' alone provide us with a backbone of 'real' or 'hard' history? Here I do not know what to say, for as far as I can see Elton makes no effort to reconcile the apparently blank contradiction between this argument and his no less strongly voiced belief in the supreme importance of technique.<sup>37</sup>

It is surely worth pausing at this sensational moment to reflect on the completeness of the disjunction that Elton eventually draws between the content and the justification of our historical studies. What could

<sup>35</sup> Elton, *Practice*, 199.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>37</sup> One possible reconciliation might take the form of saying that the required technical skills can best be gained from studying certain types of document, and that the most suitable types on which to practise are those concerned with English central government. So far as I am aware Elton never explicitly suggested this reconciliation, although he arguably hints at it in G. R. Elton, *England 1200-1640*, Sources of History (Cambridge, 1969), 33. I owe this suggestion to Glenn Burgess.

have prompted so great a scholar to paint himself into such a dark and dismal corner? The clue lies, I believe, in considering the nature of the intellectual crisis so painfully reflected in the pages of *The Practice of History*. By the time Elton came to publish this manual in 1967, he had issued some of his best-known technical scholarship as well as two of his most widely used textbooks. As *The Practice of History* makes clear, he not only thought highly of this *œuvre*<sup>38</sup> but had managed to persuade himself that the kind of research in which he himself specialised called for the exercise of exceptional human powers. He speaks of the need for a searching intelligence, for sympathy and judgement, for 'imagination controlled by learning and scholarship'.<sup>39</sup> He even speaks in an uncharacteristic moment of pomposity of the historian's 'obligations as an artist' as well.<sup>40</sup>

Elton was acutely aware, however, that a number of prominent historians had meanwhile ceased to believe in the validity or importance of the sort of administrative and political history in which he had made his name. Among those particularly singled out in *The Practice of History* for arguing that such preoccupations have 'ceased to be valid' are Richard Southern and Keith Thomas.<sup>41</sup> As Elton concedes, both acknowledge that political history retained its importance so long as the teaching of history in British universities remained closely tied to the training of a political elite and of a civil service capable of running a great empire. With the loss of these social conditions, however, Southern and Thomas were led to conclude that the justification for singling out this kind of history had come to an end as well. Both accordingly enter what Elton describes as unacceptable pleas for a new sense of why history might matter to our society, together with a call for the cultivation of new forms of historical enquiry—a call for more intellectual history in the case of Southern, more social history in the case of Thomas.<sup>42</sup>

A surprising feature of *The Practice of History* is that Elton makes almost no attempt to respond to these arguments by seeking to vindicate the social value or cultural significance of his own very different kind of research. He could surely have attempted—as several of his obituarists did—to convey some sense of why the study of administrative and constitutional history might still be thought to matter even in a post-imperial culture dominated by the social sciences. It is true that, a couple of years later, he offers some gestures in this direction in his

<sup>38</sup> See for example Elton, *Practice*, 174–6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 112, 177. On the exceptional skills needed to write political history see also Elton, *Political History*, esp. 108.

<sup>40</sup> Elton, *Practice*, 158–9. Cf. 124.

<sup>41</sup> See *Ibid.*, 17–18, 185.

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of these claims see *Ibid.*, esp. 17–18, 185–6.

first Inaugural Lecture. But it is striking that he almost instantly stops short, apologizing for starting to speak in such a 'very vague and rather vapoury' way.<sup>43</sup> Faced with the question of how a knowledge of history might help the world, he preferred to advise historians to 'abandon and resign' such aspirations altogether.<sup>44</sup>

Why was Elton so doubtful about assigning any social value or utility to his own brand of history? I confess that I am not altogether sure, although the answer must certainly be connected with his curious but persistent belief that any attempt to vindicate the usefulness of studying the past must include a demonstration of the historian's capacity to issue predictions.<sup>45</sup> This is particularly a theme of Elton's first Inaugural Lecture. 'We are told', he confides, that what historians must do if they are to be socially useful is to answer the question 'What help can the past offer to the future?'<sup>46</sup> But who tells us this? It is hard to think of any contemporary historian or philosopher of history who has advanced this argument, and Elton himself mentions no names. He can scarcely have in mind his two *bêtes noires*, Southern and Thomas, both of whom are exclusively concerned with the question of how the past might be made relevant to the present. Nor can he be thinking of the Marxist historian he most frequently attacks, Christopher Hill, for while it was undoubtedly an aspiration of classical Marxism to make use of historical materials to formulate predictive social laws, Christopher Hill has never exhibited anything more than a passing interest in that aspect of Marxist philosophy.

There remains something of a mystery surrounding the sources of Elton's scepticism about the broader educational value of his own studies. About the fact of his scepticism, however, he leaves us in no possible doubt. His second Inaugural Lecture robustly declares that 'we should not trouble ourselves too much' about the alleged lessons of history, since this would be to study the past for an 'inappropriate and usually misleading purpose'.<sup>47</sup> Eight years later, in the version of his Cook Lectures published in *Return to Essentials*, his mood had become even more dismissive. He begins by stigmatizing the nineteenth-century belief in the lessons of history as little more than an influential absurdity, and goes on to warn us against the 'temptation' of believing that the study of history is of any essential relevance either to our future or our present state (pp. 4, 9).

Elton clearly recognised, however, that these commitments left him

<sup>43</sup> Elton, *Return*, 93.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>45</sup> The same anxiety afflicted J. H. Hexter at much the same time, but he responded by attempting to vindicate the historian's predictive powers. See *The History Primer* (1971), esp. 36–42.

<sup>46</sup> Elton, *Return*, 84.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

with only two possible ways of convincing us—as he always remained anxious to do—that the study of history should nevertheless be recognised, as *The Practice of History* puts it, as a vocation ‘appropriate to the highest abilities of the human reason’ (p. 16n). One alternative would be to abandon any attempt to vindicate the social value of his own kind of history in favour of claiming that the value of the subject somehow lies in the study of the past as a whole. This is the line he begins to follow in *Return to Essentials*, and especially in the three Cook Lectures included in that book. The first lecture opens by informing us that ‘history teaches a great deal about the existence of free will’ (pp. 7–8). The second adds that a professional assessment of the past can be used to demolish a number of comfortable myths (pp. 45–6). The third concludes that history can tell us about the unexpected and, again, about the reality of human freedom (p. 73).

These are not perhaps very promising lines of thought, and it seems to me to Elton’s credit that he never makes any effort to explain or develop them. He was undoubtedly aware that the past has always been studied for a myriad of changing reasons, and that any attempt to summarise them will almost inevitably degenerate into just such a string of clichés. But this leaves him with only one means of vindicating the importance of his own studies. As we have already seen, he is forced into arguing that any attempt to offer a social justification of history is an irrelevance, the reason being that what matters in history is not the content of our studies but the range of techniques we deploy in practising them. This is the conclusion which, in effect, supplies him with the theme of both the Inaugural Lectures reprinted in *Return to Essentials*. The second proclaims that the value of historical study lies entirely in the ‘mind-training capacity’ it provides (p. 108). Even more bluntly, the first concludes that what historians ‘are here to teach the world’ is nothing other than ‘the proper assessment and proper study of evidence’ (p. 89).

We can now see what makes Elton’s image of the historian as a master carpenter such a deeply revealing one. What matters, he believes, is not whether we are engaged in making tables, chairs or wooden spoons; what matters is the nature of the craft skills equally required for engaging in any of these activities. The discoveries made by historians are of less importance than the techniques by which their discoveries are made.

By now I would expect the apprentice to have given up his thesis on Chatsworth, perhaps devoting himself instead to a career in retailing (as Elton appears to advise at one point in his second Inaugural Lecture).<sup>48</sup> I fear that some such feeling of discouragement would

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

certainly have been my own response, although it is important to add that Elton's outstanding success as a teacher, especially of graduate students, suggests that there must be some way in which I am failing to respond with adequate appreciation to his advice to neophytes. Be that as it may, I should like to summon my imagined apprentice back once more to ask Elton if he does not fear that something of broader educational significance may have been forfeited by his unrelenting insistence on technique at the expense of content. It turns out, however, that Elton has no regrets, since he is not sure about the value of a broader liberal education in any case. This darkest vein of scepticism surfaces—without preamble or explanation—in his first Inaugural Lecture, in the course of which Sir Richard Morison, one of Henry VIII's propagandists, is approvingly cited for the view that education is a great cause of sedition and other mischiefs in commonwealths. Elton follows up the quotation with a disconcerting flurry of questions. 'Should we', he suddenly asks, 'really be practising education? Are we not overestimating it as a power for good, or possibly underestimating it as a power for evil? Ought we not sometimes to stand away from the whole question of education?' Even more disconcerting is his response. Education 'is a livelihood', he concedes, 'but it may be a folly', and it is undoubtedly a cause of mischief in commonwealths.<sup>49</sup>

Elton's fundamental reason for wishing to emphasise technique over content appears to have been a deeply ironic one: a fear that historical study might have the power to transform us, to help us think more effectively about our society and its possible need for reform and reformation. Although it strikes me as strange in the case of someone who spent his life as a professional educator, Elton clearly felt that this was a consummation devoutly to be stopped.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>50</sup> For commenting on earlier drafts I am deeply grateful to Susan James and John Thompson.