

**A BRIEF, BUT ERUDITE EXAMINATION OF THE
RENAISSANCE *ARTES*
HISTORICAE: GRAFTON'S *WHAT WAS HISTORY?***

Anthony Grafton, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ISBN 978-0-521-69714-9, pp. ix + 319

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It is hard not to agree with Grafton's concluding remarks; that *What Was History?* offers a "rich, complex, and compelling history of historical thought in the centuries before historicism" (254). Grafton is, of course, not referring to his own monograph, but rather to the early modern *artes historicae*, and the varied intellectual contributors who constitute the heart of this all too often overlooked tradition. But what makes this little book such a compelling history of historical thought is Grafton's own considerable authorship; both the fluidity of his writing and his exacting grasp of the content. It is a quick, but plentiful read in which Grafton's wit and intelligence animate both the obscure and the surprisingly modern in the art of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century historical scholarship. From Jean Bodin's belief that witches could physically remove the genitalia of their male victims to analogies that play on P.G. Wodehouse's Jeeves and Wooster, Grafton's *What Was History?* may be short, but it is a study that makes one want to know more about the *artes historicae*.

The product of his expanded George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures, Grafton's exploration of the nascent discipline of the *ars historica* is an attempt to tease out some of its central features. What one ultimately acquires is a window into the complexity, but also the significant uniformity, of the ways in which early modern historians began to perceive their collective past. As a result, *What Was History?* is best understood, not in terms of rigid date-ranges, but rather inasmuch as the *ars historica* can be framed by intellectual values: that is, from the emergent belief that history formed a distinct discipline from rhetoric, on the one hand, to the fact that it had been entirely forgotten by the time of Christian Gottlob Heyne and the *ars critica*, on the other. Indeed, the work begins with a chapter on the debate between Jean LeClerc and Perizonius over the elimination of those values – largely political and rhetorical – that the humanists had so cherished, and whose abandonment the advance of a 'new history,' the *ars critica*, decried. The fact that the *ars historica* remains obscure is likely the result of the Enlightenment's proclivity to

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forgetfulness inasmuch as its own intellectual heritage is concerned. Yet, as Grafton persuasively argues, the *ars historica* was a prosperous and long-lasting attempt to facilitate the vast amounts of information that flooded early modern Europe, and contributed no small part to the maturation of a distinct genre of historical scholarship.

In the second chapter, entitled “The origins of the *ars historica*: a question mal posée,” Grafton reconfigures the widespread, academic perception that the art of history originated in a “new, humanistic approach to Roman law” (70). While not denying that François Baudouin drew upon his own considerable legal expertise in shaping the *Prolegomena*, Grafton contends that this approach has situated the origins of the *artes historicae* within too narrow a context. Grafton instead emphasizes the impact of the coalescence between antiquarian interests, ecclesiastical history, and the proliferating genre of travel literature. For example, he focuses on Baudouin’s insistence that the humanist penchant for textual interpretation required adjudication through comparison with “things that talk” (94): or rather, that the historian should legitimate his text-centred approach through linking it to cultural artefacts. In another way, the mounting literature dedicated to travel, Grafton argues, suggested to historians the idea of the “convertibility of time and space” (121): the notion that ancient barbarians could be better understood if compared to the Amerindians of the New World thus dramatically broadened the historical horizon. As a result of such efforts, the *ars historica* developed, as Grafton demonstrates, into a “*historia integra*” through the novel methodological insights of Baudouin, Patrizi, Bodin, and their contemporaries (118).

The third chapter, which is dedicated to three case studies of the *artes historicae*, focuses on the differences, but perhaps even more on the shared values, of Patrizi, Bodin, and Reineck. The narrative transitions from the largely medieval view of the past as a text inscribed by God to Bodin’s rejection of such providential “time maps” (179); from the common practice of legitimating aristocratic families through the creation of “fantastic lineages” to Reineck’s call for a critical chronology as the core of historical enquiry (152); and from the variations inherent within the *artes historicae* to the reasons why it came to be viewed as the “cutting edge” of humanist thought until the Glorious Revolution. Indeed, Grafton contends that the *ars historica* survived so long because it “provided a shell, a portable house and carapace, which any hermit crab of a humanist could inhabit and move about in, safely, as he explored strange and dangerous intellectual spaces” (181). In other words, that it allowed the humanist to dip his wick into more than one disciplinary pot, and in doing so, to boldly exhibit his individual talent. On another score, the *ars historica* succeeded because it was able to cross the boundaries between the Protestant and the Catholic, the cleric and the layman, and the jurist and the polymath; it became a universal, European endeavour (123-4).

The last chapter details the decline of the *ars historica*, with particular attention to the strain that an increasing abundance of new information placed upon the genre. As a whole, the intellectual values that constituted the heart of the *ars*

historica were abandoned: the humanist view of *historia* as a *magistra vitae*, a teacher of political, ethical, and authorial instruction was lost; the “lessons of history were no longer moral and political but purely intellectual” (254). *What Was History?* leaves the reader concluding that much research is still required to detail all the nuances of the *artes historicae* – but that this is ultimately a good thing. If it disappoints, it does so only because it fails to cover ‘*historia*’ in all its early modern manifestations: sixteenth- and seventeenth-century history, it inadvertently suggests, was concerned more or less with humans. Natural history is mentioned in passing, but is spared no genuine attention. All the same, *What Was History?* leads one jubilantly down the seldom-trodden path of the *artes historicae*, and leaves one wanting more.