Excerpts from essay by James Axtell

"History as Imagination"

1492: Encounters in Colonial North America…

I recently took the opportunity to reread one of my favorite books from graduate school: James Axtell's classic, 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America, a collection of lectures and essays he delivered on "Post Columbian themes." His comments about "history as imagination" made a lasting impression on me, so I have decided to offer some of his main points here in a few excerpted passages…

…On the one hand, most historians turn to the National Endowment for the Humanities rather than the Social Science Research Council for funding. They regard their writing as a species of literature, and recognize their assumptions about humankind, time, and the cosmos as philosophical. And the major statements on the humanities in the past thirty years have spoken of history's centrality to the human enterprise. Howard Mumford Jones's One Great Society: Humane Learning in the United States, the 1959 report of a thirteen-man Commission of the learned Societies, regarded history as the "essence" of the humanities because they depend for their very existence upon perspective in time. Two decades later, the Rockefeller Foundation commissioned thirty-two distinguished men and women to conduct a study subsequently entitled The Humanities in American Life. They, too, concluded that "while the medium of the humanities is language, the turn of mind in toward history."

At the same time, in most colleges and universities, history is listed with the social sciences for the purpose of satisfying distributional or "liberal arts: requirements. And many historians are happy with that placement because the dominant mode or fashion in history is social history, which relies heavily on the techniques, methodologies, and jargon of the social sciences.

Another obstacle to thinking of history as one of the humanities is the widespread lay opinion that history is a dull, lifeless pile of cold, objective facts about the past, without social significance or human interest. Such a bad press is partly the fault of historians, for their huge audience, throughout its schooling, has been subjected to an unrelenting dose of objective-sounding, fact-ridden textbooks, and bombarded with so-called "objective" tests on an assortment of scarcely related names, dates, and events.

If they manage to survive that obstacle course with any interest in history intact, their search for good books of history will be frustrated by the current book market. The number of true histories that make their way to the revolving-door shelves of the be-*malled* chain stores and on the long tables of college alumnae book sales, without question the dullest, least attractive section is marked, "History," not because good histories don't exist even in used form, but because the shop owners and alumnae sorters still regard history as those ponderous, dull-brown or faded-blue textbooks of yesteryear, double-columned, pocked with puerile subtitles, and studded with grainy black-and-white pictures of dyspeptic diplomats, stolid soldiers, and purse-lipped presidents. "Factual" books go under History; anything lively or interesting about the past goes under Biography, Ethnic Studies, Literature, Religion, Anthropology, or Travel. Even the History Book Club gravitates toward biographies, geographies, and military campaigns, as if its readers couldn't cope with – or wouldn't buy – riskier interpretations of larger and messier subjects.

Against such odds, can anyone argue persuasively that history in essence is one of the humanities, one of those artful disciplines that explore, explain, and celebrate human beings in their full collective and individual humanity? I would like to make that argument by suggesting that a major component of the historian's equipment, indeed his most important tool, is his imagination, not unlike the poet's or the novelist's.

….I prefer the notion of history dropped as an aside by George Steiner and supported by a host of practicing historians, past and present. In a review of a book by a French medievalist, Steiner characterized history as "exact imagining," and I know of no better encapsulation….

While most people will have no trouble accepting that historians pursue facts – the "exact" half of Steiner's "exact imagining." That's always the first phrase (and, unfortunately, often the last) of what we are taught in academic history courses, certainly as freshmen and as first-year graduate students. Perhaps without ever saluting the tattered flag of positivism, we learn that history is a kind of science, or at least a rigorous methodology, for the collection and verification of facts about the past and their logical and chronological relations. We learn to pray at the altar of Research, as John Livingston Lowes catechized, with "rigorous exactness in both the employment and the presentation of one's facts; scrupulous verification of every statement resting on authority; wise caution in drawing inferences; [and constant] vigilance which overlooks no evidence." We learn to arrange events in strict temporal order so as to be able to distinguish cause from effects. We learn that total accuracy is a duty, not an option, particularly when putting words in dead men's mouths. We learn to rely on primary sources from participants and eyewitnesses, but also to distrust those with crossed eyes, forked tongues, and interests to serve. We learn to circumnavigate a subject from all sides and angles, seeking closure and comprehensiveness of vision. And while we're at it, we look for contrary evidence, in hopes of finding the gaps in our armor before a deadly reviewer does….

While the historian does rummage around the past for his facts, he is not an indiscriminate pack rat. Some facts are worth more than others, some may be worth nothing. The reason is simple: History – what historians write – is not a three-dimensional reproduction of all that transpired in the lives of all people from the beginning of human time; that's the past. "History is not the past," Henry Glassie reminds us, "but a map of the past drawn from a particular point of view to be useful to the modern traveler." In their collection and use of facts, historians are very selective, not only by choice but also of necessity. For the remains of the past are fragmentary, flawed, fugitive, and fragile.

Our best evidence about human history, people's words, have almost wholly vanished into thin air because they were spoken and not written down. The fortuitous fragment that did reach paper has suffered from the cruel and largely random action of vermin, dampness, heat, wars, fires, floods, rebuilding, stupidity, venality, absentmindedness, acid paper, taste, and fashion. The record that survives is often seriously flawed and one-sided. Institutions, the literate, and the upper classes leave the heaviest documentary tracks. And most written documents were produced by myopic, careless, self-interested, or insensitive observers or by indifferent *factota* in great impersonal bureaucracies. Nor are the records of the past equally accessible. One-of-a-kind books, manuscripts, and

paintings are buried in exclusive libraries and private collections; governments, heirs, and principals restrict access and use; fads and fashions of scholarship consign whole genres of documents to limbo until the winds change. And if the ravages of the past were not enough, the record is continually being lost: archaeological and historical sites are bulldozed for condominiums and parking lots; frescoes are flooded, paintings slashed or stolen; documents are burned or shredded; languages die out with native speakers; stone monuments disintegrate from auto emissions and acid rain.

For most historians, the major problem is not research into the past, which despite its myriad enemies always seems to yield an excess of useable facts, but writing about it. "Research is endlessly seductive," as Barbara Tuchman knew, " but writing is hard work." The reason writing is so hard is that it calls upon the historian's imagination at literally every stage.

After our research has been completed and our note cards piled high, the mute data must be summoned to life through active acts of imagination. The first task in writing history is to reanimate the known facts which come lifeless from the page. We must revivify, resurrect, and re-create the past for ourselves, in our mind's eye, before we can ever hope to transmit that vision to others. We must take the raw materials of our searches, as Paul Horgan has said, "through the crucible fires of our own achieved awareness." Like poets and novelists, we must seize the opportunity and take the courageous step – to imagine what we know. For "without that intuition which we call 'historical insight,' but which is really a specially controlled exercise of the creative imagination," Garrett Mattingly noted, "most of the past can never be said to exist as history but only as the unorganized material from which history can be evoked."

Lest this be thought a peculiarly romantic or modern notion, listen to the Reverend Ezra Stiles, Puritan president of Yale in the eighteenth century and a man deeply versed in history. "Fidelity in narrating Facts is a great and principal thing," he said,

> But then only is this species of writing perfect, when besides a well digested series of authenticated Transactions and Events, the motive and Springs of Action are fairly laid open and arise into view with all their Effects about them, when characters are made to live again, and past scenes are endowed with a kind of perpetual Resurrection in History.

The main reason we must constantly seek to resurrect and reanimate the past is that, as the novelist L.P. Hartley noticed, "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." While people in the past bore familiar human shapes and responded to essentially the same human needs we do, their minds and sensibilities were very different from ours. We simply cannot assume that "human nature" is unchanging and universal, except in the most uninteresting and uninformative generic sense, because cultures and what used to be called Zeitgeists – "spirits of the times" – mold and fashion the relatively plastic givens of human psychology and even biology into different species. Without a strenuous act of imagination, how could a modern historian, who has never known hunger for more than a few hours or been wracked by paralyzing fear of the plague or the devils of absolute, pitch-black night, possible understand the intellectual and emotional climate of a sixteenth-century peasant or a seventeenth-

century Huron? How else could a white female historian from one of the Seven Sister colleges come to grips with the alien lives of male slaves in the eighteenth century, or black historian, born and raised in a northern city, get inside the heads and hearts of white slave owners in the Antebellum South?...

….Imagination has three major functions: 1) to originate, 2) to re-create, and, equally important, 3) to relate diverse elements of life to each other. Without imagination, historians would never see the woods for the trees – or the trees for the leaves; their meticulous minds would remain mired in the minutiae of their natty note cards…

…What the historians should be preoccupied with are the qualities of good historical writing: accuracy, clarity, conciseness, disinterestedness, and vigor. Perhaps, above all, vigor. Jack Hexter is right to charge that "dull history is bad history to the extent to which it is dull." Like his ideal reader, the historian should be a great lover of words. "A perfect writer," said Walt Whitman, "would make words sing, dance, kiss, do the male and female act, bear children, weep, bleed, rage, stab, steal, fire cannon, steer ships, sack cities, charge with the cavalry or infantry, or do anything that man or woman or the natural powers can do." He could even be as persnickety about punctuation as Oscar Wilde, who claimed that he had spent Saturday taking a comma out of something he had written and Sunday putting it back in again.

When all the elements of style have received the necessary attention, the well-written history, like all good literature, should be a book that can be satisfactorily read aloud. If it cannot, it should be passed one more through the writer's imagination.