

## HISTORIOGRAPHY AS THE WRITINGS OF HISTORY BY HISTORIANS

**Nwosu Chukwuemeka Ph.D**

Department Of History/International Studies

Imo State University, Owerri

08037112023; [barrchukwuemekanwosu@yahoo.com](mailto:barrchukwuemekanwosu@yahoo.com)

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.12616.55046

### **Abstract**

*History, it should be borne in mind is indeed a subject matter of historiography and it's definition has remained controversial among historians. Different scholars of different background and persuasions and climatic opinion of the times have defined it in different ways. In the academy, history is used in the strictest sense to mean what those who are professionally trained to think, and speak and write about the past on the basis of information culled from it actually do think and speak and write about the past. This paper do intend to discuss the history of historical writing and philosophy of history which are indeed indispensable. The need for historiography courses for the vocation of historians cannot be overemphasized as it marks the underlying proposition in post-graduate training of historians as well as undergraduates because it marks the idea of progress in history.*

**Keywords:** History, Historiography, Historians

### **Introduction**

If there is an academic discipline that has ever received as many diverse and controversial definitions in its meaning as well as development, it has been history. More often than not, these controversies may have arisen out of curiosity on the part of observers or sometimes they may have arisen as a demonstration of sheer denigration of the subject. On the contrary, scholars of great and progressive dimension have however, remained consistent in asserting that the subject is a condition precedent for any human society that has assigned the task of progress and development to itself.

History, it should be borne in mind is indeed a subject matter of historiography and it's definition has remained controversial among historians. Different scholars of different background and persuasions and climatic opinion of the times have defined it in different ways. In the academy, history is used in the strictest sense to mean what those who are professionally trained to think, and

speak and write about the past on the basis of information culled from it actually do think and speak and write about the past.<sup>1</sup> Put differently, in the academy history means the intellectual construct of those ivory-tower merchants of intellection found mainly in the departments designed to teach as well as supervise training in that discipline. In that context history is a snapshot of the past usually taken from as many vantage points as there are schools of thought (or warring intellectual gangs) or even from vantage points as there are individual historians.<sup>2</sup>

Arthur Marwick, for example, has defined history on three categories. Firstly that history connotes “the entire human past as it actually happened”, that history secondly, and more importantly “connotes man’s attempt to describe and interpret that past”, and thirdly, that history is a systematic study of the past.<sup>3</sup> Whereas Professor G. Barraclough defines history as “the attempt to discover on the basis of fragmentary evidence the significant things about the past, he however cautions that “the history we read, though based on facts, is, strictly speaking, not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgements.<sup>4</sup> Also E. H. Carr defined history as “a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past”.<sup>5</sup> Infact interpretation is the life-blood of history.

In another genre, an informed appreciation of the practice of history down the ages, would reveal that there are three modes in which the discipline is studied. First, it can be studied for no other purpose than to understand the past on its own terms, that is without relating the theme or matter studied to what went before or what came after. This mode of historical studies could be labeled antiquarianism.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, history can be studied for the purpose of enlightening the scholar and his contemporaries as well as for entertaining them and using it to improve their understanding of contemporary currents and events in society.<sup>7</sup> Although this mode does not necessarily compel the historian, or his contemporaries to take action in any particular direction. However, its end may just be the acquisition of the ability as well as disposition to respond with a knowing nod as well as smile to the problems which the individual encounters as he pursues his path across the corrugated terrain of his society and times.

This mode of historical study may be described as history for “enwisdomisation”<sup>8</sup> - that is, history for inculcating wisdom, that is knowledge, understanding, balance as well as serenity. It is against this backdrop, that this

mode that most historians seem to be anchored, particularly historians pursuing their craft or science in societies as well as state-systems whose construction may be described as more or less finished and which are already sailing in fairly good weather on a sea whose smooth as well as singing currents keep moving them on and on towards an ever-beckoning goal and an ever-widening horizon. If these definitions are critically analysed, each of them has its merits as well as demerits. What is more, when completely interpreted and broken down, they point to the fact that history is fundamentally, a study of man and his various institutions over a period of time.

However, defined, the issue for consideration is the fact that the controversies as well as lack of consensus among historians with respect, to the exact definition of history obfuscate historiography, leading to diversity of definition of the concept by various scholars of history. The chambers 20<sup>th</sup> century dictionary defined historiography as “the art or employment of writing history”.<sup>9</sup> Marwick argued that its definition can be gleaned from his second and third definitions of history given above whereas Lewis Gottschalk perceives historiography as constituting “in their entirety the writings of History, or historians”.<sup>10</sup> But even so, he acknowledges the important fact that historiography does not just relate to written history but also to spoken history.<sup>11</sup> The concept of historiography is associated with three dimensions such as history of historical writing, the challenges in the theories and methods as well as the philosophy of history. Furthermore, it is significant to reiterate that some historians do not appreciate the concept of historiography neither do some understand the scope of the concept while some scholars avoid it completely due to not knowing what it is all about. Some have taught something that has no bearing with respect to the concept of historiography. The typology as has been elaborated above is not rigidly followed by scholars, to the extent that the common trend has been for many to dwell on the philosophy of history with problems in the theories as well as the methods of history. This paper do intend to discuss the history of historical writing and philosophy of history which are indeed indispensable. The need for historiography courses for the vocation of historians cannot be overemphasized as it marks the underlying proposition in post-graduate training of historians as well as undergraduates because it marks the idea of progress in history.

The idea of progress has been an issue of interest among scholars of different persuasions. E. H. Carr contends that “History is progress through the transmission of acquired skills from one generation to another”; that progress

has no “finite beginning or end” and “does not and cannot mean an equal and simultaneous progress for all”; and “that the acquired assets which were transmitted include both material possessions and the capacity to master, transform and utilize one’s environment.<sup>12</sup> The idea of progress is coterminous with historiography in the training of historians. What is more, Marwick contended that:

If history is worth studying at all, such study should be firmly integrated with teaching in the nature, methods and purposes of history, regarded not simply as a set of background assumptions, but as something fundamental to any intelligent discussion of history at any level.<sup>13</sup>

For this role, history was regarded as being specially suited. A visitation Panel to the University College, Ibadan, in 1952, which recommended the introduction of an Honours School in History based its argument on the perceived strength of history in the area of man power production for political, administrative and many other purposes. Said the Report of the Visitation Panel:

An Honours Course in History would be a good preparation not only for students who become specialist teachers in training colleges and schools, but also for students who will later enter political life, the administrative and government services, the churches, journalism and broadcasting, commercial and industrial work and many other fields of public life.<sup>14</sup>

History, better put, refers to an academic discipline, possessing its own rules of study and methodological approaches, studied anywhere in the academy. This is what we call historiography and both history and historiography are interwoven and therefore they are inseparable.

### **Historiography As The Writing Of History By Historians**

Historiography as the writings of history by historians is one in which overtime has attracted the attention of scholars who see it as a crucial aspect of the study and writing of history. Harry Elmer Barnes work titled “A History of historical Writing,<sup>15</sup> is one of the Locus classicus. Yet it was Arthur Marwick, not Barnes who stressed on the need to study the history of historical writing when he contended that:

Seeing where our predecessors were entrapped by the fallacies, of their own age, we are that little better equipped to avert the fallacies of our own age. Only the ignorant or the very lazy among historians refuse to read the work of their illustrious predecessors...<sup>16</sup>

History as a modern intellectual activity dates back to antiquity. It reached an era of sophistication as well as crescendo during the period of classical antiquity and however, declined during the Roman era. It equally witnessed recrudescence during the period of Renaissance and by this period its methodology and rational perspicacity have advanced considerably. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, history as a scholarly discipline has emerged via the endeavour of Ranke as well as other German scholars from which it metamorphosed into the contemporary period. It is significant to note however, that each of these periods had its unique features and it was those characteristics that formed the body of knowledge of historiography as the writings of history by historians and from which history students and historians at the post-graduate levels learn. Against this backdrop, we shall endeavour here to assess the significance as well as the contributions of the various periods of historiographical writings by historians for the benefit of young emerging historians.

Thus, the Western historical tradition dates back to Herodotus (c.484 BC-c.425 B.C.), Thucydides (c.455 BC-c.400B.C.), Polybius (198B.C. - 117 B.C), all Greeks; as well as Livy (59B.C - A.D. 17), Tacitus (A.D. 55-120) and Plutarch (A.D. 50-120), all Romans. The interest of these historians in the main, was the recording of important as well as memorable deeds about families, nations and communities. Thucydides main interest, for example, was the Peloponnesian war, while Livy on his own part engaged in the glorification of Rome. Although in the main, the essence of their writings was the same, the Greeks (especially Thucydides and Polybius) were, nevertheless, more sophisticated and original in their work than the Romans.<sup>17</sup>

Another epoch-making period was that of Christian historical writing. Its hallmark as would have been anticipated, was a rejection of paganism with a contemporaneous glorification of God as well as heavenly things. In the medieval times most historians were monks as well as in most cases officials of monasteries. Their writings, in the main lacked analysis and reflection and there was always an inability to distinguish between sacred and profane matters as events were easily explained or interpreted as judgements of God.<sup>18</sup> In this

respect, they generally by the works of St. Augustine, particularly his City of God in which he portrayed the history of the World as the long unfolding will of God. "Though often themselves expert forgers, medieval chroniclers were quite uncritical in their treatment of documentary evidence. They accepted in full the sanctions of tradition, and since they believed in divine intervention they were inhibited in their analysis of historical causation.<sup>19</sup> It was with regards to this period that Heinrich Von Sybel said:

Possessed no idea of historical judgement, no sense of historical reality, no trace of critical reflections. The principle of authority, ruling without limitation in the religious domain, defended all tradition, as well as traditional dogma. Men were everywhere more inclined to believe than to examine, everywhere imagination had the upper hand of reason. No distinction was made between ideal and real, between poetical and historical truth. Heroic poems were considered a true and lofty form of history and history was everywhere displaced by epics, legends or poetical fiction of some kind. A course of slow historical development was traced back to a single great deed, a single personal cause...<sup>20</sup>

Some of the acclaimed and well known medieval historians were Gregory-Bishop of Tours (538-594) as well as Venerable Bede (672-735).

The Renaissance period also known as the Humanist era came after the medieval era. Indeed the humanist era could be referred to as a revolution against medieval historiography as man instead of church became the main focus. While humanists extolled princes, medieval historians glorified martyrs. Thus it was a revivalist endeavour to recapture classical literature. Scholars as well as writers of the period adopted a rational as well as secular approach to issues which were formerly explained away as divine. Historical studies during the period under review were majorly influenced by exploration as well as the invention of printing. Leonardo Bruni (1369-1444) is one of the best known humanist writer and who wrote the Twelve Books of Florentine History. He rejected the role of miracles but engaged in analysis of events.

However, it was during the enlightenment that the theological grounds of historical writing which had persisted although through the renaissance period was finally laid to rest. In this respect, French and Scottish historians contributed immensely to its development. Although up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century the history that

was written were still deficient in some respects. First, there seem not to be the notion of human development as well as change in these writings. Secondly, there was no where in the 18th century where history was being taught except in the palaces of princes as well as statesmen and there was a general lack of details. By the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, all these were to be abandoned mainly as a result of the works of people such as Leopold Von Ranke. Be that as it may, it was the concurrent attack on these three defects that modern history as an academic discipline evolved. Therefore, the 19<sup>th</sup> century revolution in historical scholarship provided the impetus for the modern day study of history. Besides, the 20<sup>th</sup> century also experienced new trends in historical scholarship and advancement. Thus such trends ushered in among others, a general advancement in the methods of historical research and efforts at using computers in historical explanations, as well as a shift of research emphasis from the hitherto political dimensions to such other aspects of human development as economic, social as well as cultural institutions.

Of greater value is the contributions made to history of historical writing in Africa. Arab geographers and historians such as Al-Masudi, Al-Bakri, Ibn Battuta and others left extensive records on Africa. This is very important because the tendency has been for western scholars to pretend that it does not exist,<sup>21</sup> even though as is well known, “the writing of African history is as old as the writing of history itself”.<sup>22</sup> Also, significant in this regard are the records of Africans who were muslims and wrote within the moslem tradition, among them Rahman Al-Sadi, author of *Tarikh-al-Sudan*, Muhmud Kati, author of *Tarikh-al-Fettach*, Usman Dan Fodio, Sultan Bello, to mention just a few.

### **Philosophy Of History**

What is history suggests that the ‘facts of history are invariably those which historians have selected for scrutiny. Thus, millions have crossed the Rubicon, but the historian tells us that only Caesar’s crossing was significant. All historical facts come to us as a result of interpretative choices by historians.<sup>23</sup> There would always be as many definitions of the term history as there are historians. I do not intend to border my readers with the definition of history, rather, I would prefer to delve into the subject matter or vortex of the philosophy of history which is our main concern in this segment.

The concept of “philosophy of history” came into the Limn with Voltaire in the 1760’s, although it is most closely related with German philosophers of the

Enlightenment as well as Post Enlightenment periods: Kant, Harder. F. Hegel as well as Karl Marx. "Historiosophy", is the term coined in 1838 by August Cieszkowski to describe his understanding of history within the philosophical context.<sup>24</sup> Simply put, it means philosophy of history. Historiosophy is a philosophical reflection on the historical processes itself, or it can mean philosophical reflection on the knowledge we have about the historical process.<sup>25</sup>

Philosophy of history is an aspect of philosophy relating to the eventual significance of human history. However defined, philosophy of history should not be confused with the History of philosophy which is the study of the development of philosophical ideas in their historical context while Philosophy of History is the theoretical aspect of history.

More often than not when historians discuss methodological approaches in their research they usually refer to the term historiography. The appropriate question in the circumstance is: what is historiography? The term historiography refers to the study of historians methods and practices. It is basic to state that any intellectual pursuit must be guided by a set of standards as well as heuristics about how to proceed and historians evaluate the performances of practitioners based on their judgements of how well practitioners meet the laid down standards and rules of engagement. Invariably, one obvious task we always have in considering a historians activity is to attempt to identify these standards as well as criteria of good performance and this is true for historical writing. Historiography is an aspect of ethical standards and criteria for historical writing.

Thus, a major aspect of the study of historiography has to do with defining the ideas of evidence, rigor as well as standards of reasoning for historical inquiry. In this context, we presume that historians want to discover empirically supported truths about the past, and we also presume that they want to offer inferences as well as interpretations that are somehow regulated by standards of scientific rationality. In other words, discovering these stylistic and aesthetic standards that guide the historians craft is itself a significant task for historiography. Put differently, this suggests that the historian of historiography will naturally be interested in the conventions of historical writing that are characteristic of a given period.

Besides, a historical school may be defined as a group of interrelated historians who share a significant number of specific assumptions about evidence,

explanation and narrative.<sup>26</sup> Thus, historiography becomes in fact historical when we recognize that these frameworks of assumptions about historical knowledge and thinking change over time. Nevertheless, on this assumption, the history of historical thinking. Knowledge and writing is in itself an interesting subject. The question that readily comes to mind is, how do historians of diverse background and diverse periods in history, conduct their study and presentation of historical knowledge? In this respect, we find books on the historiography of the ancient Greeks; Renaissance historiography, or the historiography of German romanticism. The writings of Arnaldo Momigliano on the ancient historians fall into this category. He surveyed the various traditions of ancient historical writing as a set of normative practices that can be examined and understood in their specificity as well as their cultural context or milieu.

In another genre, the use of the term historiography is more present-oriented as well as methodological. It deals with the study and analysis of historical methods of research, inquiry, inference and presentation used by more-or-less contemporary historians. In this context, we can think of the historiographical problems that face Phillip Huang as he investigated the Chinese peasant economy in the 1920s as well as the 1930s; or the historiographical challenges raised in Robert Darnton's investigation of the Great Cat Massacre. In some cases these questions have to do with the scarcity or bias in the available records, for instance, the fact that the much of what Huang (Huang 1990) refers to as the village economy of North China was gathered by the research teams of the occupying Japanese army. In some cases too, they have to do with the challenges of interpreting historical sources, for instance, the unavoidable necessity Darnton hard to face in providing meaningful interpretation of a series of documented events that appear significantly irrational in the circumstance.

Also, another dimension that arises in historiographical study is that of the status of the doctrine or the conceptualization of the "global history". In this regards, one significant reason for thinking globally as a historian stems from the fact that the history discipline since the early times in Greece and with the Europeanization of African history by European historians tended to be Eurocentric in its choice of topics, framing assumptions as well as methodological approaches. Economic as well as political history more often tended towards industrial revolution in Europe as well as the prevalence of the modern beaucratic states in Germany, Britain and France, as reflecting development models in politics and in an economy. This development has

relegated other countries development as less developed and certainly out of standard. The extension or diversification of historical research by practicing historians to other civilizations outside Europe or western civilizations as opposed to the character of the preceding period when the study and writing of history was confined to Eurocentric approach. Thus, this development expanded the scope of history by drawing attention to the study of the entire world history. In fact, this development indeed liberated other world civilizations from the superiority complex demonstrated by the western civilization over other forms of civilizations.

Thus, the adoption of critical approach in the analysis of findings or works by historians through the corroboration of findings with existing facts or evidence for the sole aim of establishing the authenticity of the new information. In fact, this is a critical approach adopted to ensure that objectivity, or something close to it is achieved in the reconstruction of historical evidence. Thus, this methodological approaches has somewhat liberated historians of the age from being mere compilers of chronicles and documentary evidence. It has also liberated them from being mere palace recorders who paid attention only to dogmatically compiling the biographies of leaders as well as great men without critically scrutinizing their roles in taking society forward or backward. Put differently, there has been a dramatic shift of emphasis from narrative history to analytical history, that is, a shift from speculative philosophy of history to critical philosophy of history.

Apart from the various dimensions discussed in the foregoing, it is also significant to state that each nation of the world developed its historiography. This development was indeed shaped by the diverse views attached to history, the societal value system or ideology, the dominant socio-political as well as economic considerations, the climate opinion of the time, among others. Note however, while ancient Greek historiography focused on city states, ancient Roman historiography was contained in the works of Roman statesmen such as Julius Caesar (100BC-AD17). Whereas Livy is believed to have recorded the rise of Rome from city-state to an empire, the first two statesmen produced numerous political works covering warfare.

In conclusion therefore, and from the foregoing discussion, it has been laid bare for historians to know that the eventual emergence of the concept of historiography metamorphosed through a number of stages. Each stage carried

along with its definite orientation based on its conception of the nature of historical evidence as well as how such data can be obtained or retrieved and the quantum for the purpose of reconstructing the historical past of any given society. Furthermore, and in fact, we cannot lay claim to the fact that the process is conclusive in view of the way and extent of the body of knowledge of historiography is advancing because history as a discipline is progressive as earlier stated in this work as well as the ever increasing approaches being developed on a regular basis in historiography as the writings of history by historians in the pursuit of knowledge.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Adiele E. Afigbo, *History As Statecraft* (Okigwe: Whytem Publishers, 1999) 2.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, (London, 1970), 15.

<sup>4</sup>G. Barraclough, *History in a Changing World*, 1955, 20-30.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (London, Penguin, 1916), 3.

<sup>7</sup>Adiele E. Afigbo, *History As...*, 3.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid* 4.

<sup>10</sup>The Chambers 20<sup>th</sup> Century Dictionary, (n.d.) 595.

<sup>11</sup>Lewis Gottschalk, *Understanding History*, (New York, 1969), 205.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>Paul Njemanze, "Major Historians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: An Assessment of the themes, Methodology, and Response to changing world Historiography in *Journal of the Academic World (JAW)*, Volume 2, No.2, 2014, 3.

<sup>14</sup>Arthur Marwick, *the Nature...*, 10.

<sup>15</sup>Adiele E. Afigbo, *History As...*, 18.

<sup>16</sup>Harry E. Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing*, (New York, 1962); See also J. J. Jusserand et al., *The Writing of History*, (New York, n.d.)

<sup>17</sup>Arthur Marwick, *The Nature ...*, 21.

<sup>18</sup>Harry E. Barnes, *A history...*, 36

<sup>19</sup>K. Lowith, *Meaning in History*, (Chicago, n.d.) 160-173.

<sup>20</sup>Arthur Marwick, *The Nature...*, 27.

<sup>21</sup>Cited in Allen E. Anita, "Humanist Versus Medieval Historiography: A Departure or a Continuation Historian?", Vol. X April, 1987, 37.

<sup>22</sup>Western Scholars pretend that it does not exist but there is manifest writing of African history. The exception to this rule is North Africa, where European writers were often as interested in Southern Europe.

<sup>23</sup>J. D. Fage, "The Development of African Historiography" in J. Kio-Zerbo (ed.), *UNESCO General History of Africa 1: Methodology and African Prehistory* (California, 1981), 25.

<sup>24</sup>H. J. Blackham, *Six Existential Thinkers*, London, Routledge, 1983, 67.

<sup>25</sup>Cited in Everistus Chinenye Obioha, *Historiosophy: Understanding Philosophy of History* (Owerri: Uzopietro Publishing Co., 1918).11.

<sup>26</sup>Evaristus Chinenye Obioha, *Historiosophy: Understanding Philosophy of History*, (Owerri: Uzopietro Publishing Co., 1918) 11.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*