

## **EASING INTO HISTORY: A CHILDHOOD INTRODUCTION TO THE PAST**

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Once as a graduate student in history I found myself making small talk with the husband of a high school friend. He was a junior executive with a big corporation, which he said “is treating me pretty well.” He asked me how I liked being “in history.” I ad-libbed, “Well, there’s more of it every year.”

I had stumbled onto something that’s true even beyond the obvious literal sense. For each of us, there’s more history every year — not just because more things have happened, but also because, as we age, we constantly see more ways of understanding them. Each generation of professional historians raises a host of “revisionists” who challenge us to look at the some segment of the past in a new way. And all of us, historian and non-historian alike, do the same thing with our own personal histories. We play with our own memories and draw new meanings from them.

In this essay I play with my memories of childhood. I try to trace the ways in which I encountered “history” — and, more broadly, the past — inside and outside of the public-school classroom. For the most part, the memories are warm ones: of fairy tales and Bible stories and Westerns and baseball history and two

earnest teachers who cared about their subject matter and made classroom history a match for these other ways of encountering the past.

If we understand “learning history” as a process of accumulating facts which we eventually forget, then it can bring little but boredom. A scrap from a 1950s popular song, “Don’t know much about history...,” often passes through my mind as I think about the scores of history books whose factual content I’ve long forgotten. But if “learning history” means an ongoing process of reflecting on our memories and the stories we’ve heard about the past, then it can be a lifelong treasure hunt. That’s how I’ve come to see it.

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## **ONCE UPON A TIME: THE BEGINNINGS OF A PAST**

We have different kinds of memory. One kind tells us how to drive (or walk) without crashing, another tells us that two plus two equals four or that George

Washington was the first American president, and another tells us what we ourselves did and felt a few minutes ago or fifty years ago. The third kind is called episodic memory. It's an amazing capacity when you think about it. It affords merriment, pain, humiliation, joy, fear, guilt, anger, lust, pride, hunger, resentment, and every other emotion, even shock.

The actual images that it affords are fleeting: jumbled bits and pieces that have somehow stuck in our mind. A whole encounter is typically stored as a few bits of dialogue set in a particular emotional landscape — or perhaps no words at all are recalled, only a split-second opening to what was around us, as with the clicking of a camera. I remember walking up a stairway and thinking, “This will be my fourth birthday.” That's all — nothing about the birthday itself. That memory is nothing more than a micro-second. Placed on a movie reel or videotape, the memories of even an eighty-year-old might take no more than a few minutes. But those bits and pieces can be endlessly rich.

I tried to remember my whole life once. I was maybe four years old, which makes it around 1945. I lived with my mother and my two older sisters in Wethersfield, Connecticut, just south of Hartford. It was wartime and my father was overseas. One night I lay awake, trying to fall asleep but finally giving up, killing time by running over in my mind the things I could remember about my life. The most frustrating thing was trying to push back the veil of my early childhood — I'm sure I wasn't coming up with anything earlier than age two, or maybe even three.<sup>1</sup> Still, I was coming up with something. It was important to me to hold on to the memories I had, even the embarrassing ones. It scared me to recall the time long before when I'd thrown pebbles at the back of a passing truck. Thinking about it, tossing on the bed, I hoped the driver hadn't gotten a good look at me.

As the past recedes, memories take on new meanings. When I lay awake that night in Wethersfield, trying to collect my memories, I wouldn't have thought there was anything unusual about those years. “The war” — World War II — was the natural order of things. Only afterwards could I see how many of my early memories had to do specifically with that time in history. They included the jeeps that excited me whenever I saw one, the helicopter that practice-landed a few

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1. A co-worker in a printshop once told me, “I can remember being born.” Of course she was wrong, but I still felt jealous.

blocks away, the fuss when Mrs. Hart got a whole pork chop apiece for me and her son Hankie (my sisters kept asking if we didn't want to leave a few bites). I remember flattening tin cans to save metal, I remember seeing the Hudson River filled with warships when my mother took us to New York. I remember being surrounded by soldiers in a dream. I remember my father's absence.

Other memories change as time passes and we learn more. My best friend in those years was retarded, but I didn't know it then. He once hit me on the back of a head with a soft-drink bottle even though I was running as fast as I could — a great throw, I thought, even through my tears. After we moved in 1947, I saw him a couple of times on family visits back to Wethersfield. Then, on a visit after sixth grade, I saw him only at a distance after church, wearing thick glasses and looking somehow different. I had never heard the word “retarded,” and only years later did I hear it applied to him. He lived with his parents until they died, then lived with his much-older brother, whom some people wrongly think was his father. As I play with old memories, I can see little signs that he was “different.” Mainly I remember a foot race between the two of us, when the adults all rooted for him.

My memories were all set in Wethersfield. We had moved there from western New York state, when I was less than a year old, so I knew only Wethersfield. With its ancient pastoral name — a wether is a neutered male sheep — Wethersfield was one of the two oldest towns in Connecticut. The great English Puritan migration to Massachusetts Bay in the 1630s had quickly spilled over to the Connecticut River valley, site of New England's best farmland. Breakaway Puritans led by Reverend Thomas Hooker traveled overland on foot to what is now the Hartford area. Wethersfield offered some of the best land.

Wethersfield rises from the river in a series of parallel north–south terraces. The first and lowest landmark is the Green, which stretches for long blocks not far from the river. A little farther back, safer from flooding, stand the historic old houses of Main Street, some of them dating from the early 1700s. This is Old Wethersfield. The Congregational church, with the old cemetery which faces it across Church Street, anchors this swatch of history. Parallel to Main Street, perhaps a half-mile west, the Silas Deane Highway bustles with new stores and offices; even in my day it was the main thoroughfare from Hartford through our town. The stores on Silas Deane were known as the “New Center” in my day, those on Main Street the “Old Center.”

A half-mile uphill from Silas Deane, Wolcott Hill Road offers another, less hurried route to and from Hartford. Some of its houses go back to the eighteenth century as well. Then the terrain dips a bit before rising again toward the modern houses on Ridge Road. We lived on the downslope just off Wolcott Hill Road, at the far end of Church Street from the church. A few houses past ours, Church Street dead-ended in a meadow and woods.

Two especially charming novels describe Wethersfield — one set in its colonial past and one in my time, during World War II. Elizabeth George Speare's *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, for teenage readers, tells the story of a girl who grew up in the Bahamas then came to Wethersfield as an orphan to live with relatives around 1690. She finds a good-hearted but stern and repressed people who are constantly on guard against their own playfulness. In the book's climactic scene, she stands in the Congregational church accused — and then dramatically acquitted — of witchcraft.

Tom Tryon's novel *Lady*, written by a movie actor and novelist who grew up on Wolcott Hill Road, shows Wethersfield (under the name Pequot Landing) at the time I lived there. The narrator is a young boy who lives with his family in a house facing the Wethersfield Green. The lady of the book's title is a lively, middle-aged Yankee neighbor who captivates the narrator and his siblings. Toward the end of the story, she is ostracized in the town when it turns out that the black man who has passed as her servant is actually her husband.

The Congregational Church, which we attended when my mother wasn't too tired or busy, still loomed large in Wethersfield when we lived there, but it didn't dominate the town. There were no witches, or accused witches. I suspect there were no black people either. We were an anomaly, I'm sure — a Protestant family with a Catholic-sounding name — but our part of Church Street even had some real Catholics. My mother once told me about the sour-faced older couple who looked at our house when we put it up for sale. They grilled my mother on the names of all the families on the block; when she mentioned the Euriccios across the street, they visibly lost interest.

None of that would have meant anything to me. I could see the markers on some of the big houses, proclaiming they had stood for more than two hundred years,

but I couldn't read them. I was more interested in the mill pond at the far end of Wolcott Hill Road where you could go wading, the meadow and woods at the end of our street, and the Good Humor truck that came by now and again. The giant Wethersfield Elm, on the Green, was older than the houses. I don't remember the tree, but my favorite childhood photograph shows an older boy holding me (with one hand) against its trunk, which dwarfed both of us.

My memories were bound to a particular time and place. They were also bound to a particular family. Few of the memories included my father, because he was away. At age fifty, he volunteered for the armed forces not long after Pearl Harbor and I knew him only through pictures and short visits. My mother said later that on one of his visits I told her, "Go away and don't bodder us." A short, balding, shy public health doctor, he had grown up in Missouri. He held a master's degree in chemistry from Kansas University and an MD from the University of Michigan (where he played on the football team, but only because wartime military training engulfed nearly all the male students outside the Medical School). He also had a degree in Public Health from Johns Hopkins. He'd spent seven years in Thailand as a medical missionary, four of them with my mother after they married; I think he wanted to stay as a missionary but she demurred. He never made much money and he never spent much.

My mother was a young widow (her first husband, her high school sweetheart, died of tuberculosis) and society editor of a Dayton newspaper when she married my father after a short courtship in 1926. She had never lived outside Ohio until she went to Thailand. They had one child overseas (my sister Martha Jane) and one in Oberlin, Ohio (my sister Susan) when he was a county health officer. Seven years separates Sue from me, and the only two people who know whether I was an "accident" are both dead. My mother was forty-four when I was born. She told me several times in later years, always in the same words, that "I wasn't prepared for such an active little boy."

My father's being away so long made her life all the harder, especially since she didn't drive. Many years later I read her wartime diaries and appreciated how strenuous her life had been — what it meant to walk a half-mile or a mile with heavy bags of groceries. As she made friends, she also put demands on herself as a humorous speaker to women's and church groups. The summer after we all got back together, my father took my sisters and me on a three-week trip to Nova

Scotia. Not until three decades later did I realize whose vacation that had actually been.

I had little sense of what had happened in my family before I arrived, and even less sense of how my family stretched backward in time. Only one grandparent was still living when I was born — my mother's mother, who lived in Cincinnati with my unmarried aunt. They lived in a big house near one of Cincinnati's prettiest spots, Eden Park, and we had some long mid-summer vacations there which I remember fondly. "Mommom," a doctor's widow, was a devout Methodist, descended from small-farming families that had settled in southwest Ohio in the early nineteenth century.

It was my father's side of the family that linked me to Old New England. We had our own accused witch, Rebecca Nurse, dead by hanging in the Salem witchcraft hysteria of the 1690s. Another ancestor, failing less spectacularly, had left Massachusetts for newly opened farmland in Nova Scotia in the late eighteenth century. This was after English troops had expelled the French settlers — the Acadians or later "Cajuns" — from Nova Scotia in 1755. Scotch-Irish Protestants came to Nova Scotia too, and one of them, named O'Brien, married a daughter of the former Massachusetts family. The O'Briens farmed small plots near the Bay of Fundy; my great-grandfather died in an ox-cart accident when my grandfather was ten days old. My grandfather came to the United States in the 1880s to study theology at Oberlin College, in the strip of northern Ohio settled by New Englanders, and married the daughter of another Congregational minister.

None of this ancestry meant anything to me as a child. During their lifetimes my grandparents saw the advent of the electric light, the automobile, the airplane, the radio, the phonograph, the elevator, the motion picture, but I knew almost nothing about their lives. My introduction to the past came through stories, read to me from books. It was a make-believe past, but there is no way for young children to make the distinction, and I wouldn't have cared. I thrived on the books. I knew I wouldn't see these characters walking down the street (especially the talking animals), but they were still real to me. This was in the days before TV. The stories were a treasure trove of excitement and warmth.

Some of the stories just floated in time. They could have taken place yesterday or years ago or never: Katy No-Pockets, for example, the story of a kangaroo who

didn't have a pouch to carry her babies until a railroad worker gave her his overalls with their big pockets. Or "The Little Engine That Could," chanting "I think I can, I think I can" while laboring up a steep hill (I have owned cars that used almost the exact same words). Or the Uncle Wiggily stories, featuring the kindest of all talking rabbits.

Other stories, though — the fairy tales — were anchored firmly in the distant past by the formula "Once upon a time," four plain words that take on the richest of meanings when combined in that way. "Once upon a time" was when Hansel and Gretel got lost in the woods, stumbled on a house made of gingerbread, and ended up killing the evil witch who wanted to eat them. Little Red Riding Hood met the wolf dressed up as her grandmother "once upon a time." That's also when Cinderella overcame the jealousy of her wicked stepmother and stepsisters and met the handsome prince. Those words set the stories in some mysterious, remote past, a past when things were different. I never wondered just when that past might have been. The idea wasn't to establish a chronology but to appreciate a time when the world was magical. Strange as it may seem, fairy tales were my first real introduction to a past that involved people other than myself.

All the stories had happy endings — the protagonists might suffer, but in the end they prevailed. Their suffering was redeemed. Cinderella's humiliation in her stepfamily made her triumph as the handsome prince's chosen bride all the sweeter. Redemption is a powerful theme that has cropped up time and again in my encounters with the past. It is a way of making sense of the past and of giving hope for the future.

Other stories ended with the triumph of the moment, but the fairy tales were a special case because they were set in the past. They typically ended by saying that the heroes "lived happily ever after," as if to preempt a child's natural question, "Then what happened?" The stories were self-contained units: if a story had a happy ending, it was a happy ending without qualification. There were no loose threads, only a pure redemption.

Stories helped make a complex world comprehensible to me in two ways. First, the very narrative form of the stories was a way of organizing reality. A story describes a progression of events: first this happens, then that happens, and so forth. For all the emotional content, a children's story contains, inescapably, a



bare-bones chronological structure. Our own memories are prone to jumbling: we may remember a number of related events, but not the order in which they happened. Stories give us a model for assembling the raw materials and putting them in order. They drill into us a rudimentary sense of chronology.

Second, the stories, as I remember them, made the world comprehensible by offering an implicit set of moral values. The redemption of suffering came, not randomly, but as a reward for virtue. Depicting characters as “good” or “bad” is a way of making us care about their fates, and therefore care about the story. In my childhood stories, virtue was rewarded and evil was punished. Cinderella, not her selfish stepsisters, landed the handsome prince; the witch, not the innocent Hansel and Gretel, ended up in the oven. The stories powerfully reinforced my mother’s (and my sisters’) admonitions about how to behave. They thereby helped to make the world seem, not only nicer, but more predictable.

A final point about stories is that they depend for their emotional impact on making us care about the protagonist(s). In doing so, they bring those people (or animals, or whatever) to life for us. That is true even if we know with absolute 100% certainty that these characters do not exist. I still have a vivid image of Goldilocks, another of Cinderella, another of Snow White. This character of stories becomes important when stories, after childhood, concern real people. Stories can make us care about certain people, or groups of people, and not care about others.

In real life, my memory of the war’s end on V-J Day in August of 1945 has made me feel part of world events. I put a Siamese gong on my tricycle and rode to the corner of Wolcott Hill Road, where adults were sitting in lawn chairs and (I now believe) drinking.<sup>2</sup> But victory over Japan did not change my family, any more than victory over Germany had earlier in 1945. My father stayed overseas, with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, doing public health work in refugee camps in the Middle East and Far East. Finally, he came home, to take a job with the US Public Health Service in Washington. He lived in an apartment

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2. Many years later, when I read the V-J Day scene in Tom Tryon’s novel *Lady*, describing a boisterous celebration on the Wethersfield Green, I felt cheated. Had we gone to the Green (had my mother been able to drive, in other words), I’d have been part of the novel.

there while we got ready to move (except for Martha Jane, who was off to college) and he looked for a house. He found one in Chevy Chase, Maryland, on the edge of the District line. As our car pulled out of the driveway on Church Street in Wethersfield, neighbors gathered to say goodbye while (according to my mother's later story) I sobbed and said, "I've lived here practically all my life."

One of those who said goodbye, I'm sure, was Gretchen Geyer, my first playmate and second-best friend after the boy who aimed the soft-drink bottle so well. I next saw her forty-seven years later. In the fall of 1993 my sister Sue Bowman, a Disciples of Christ minister in California, reserved rooms in a bed and breakfast in Old Wethersfield for herself, my sister Martha Jane Fenn (a widow and hospital librarian in Vermont), and me. A friend of mine in Boston had known Gretchen in college and helped me track her down. She arranged to come to Wethersfield at the same time, from New York City, and the four of us got to talk about old times. Gretchen and my sisters had much more to say than I did — my sisters because they were older when we lived there, and Gretchen because her family didn't move. How little I knew about our life in Wethersfield! I loved the visit, but it reminded me of how slender are our earliest memories.

## **BIBLE STORIES**

Chevy Chase, Maryland, founded in the late nineteenth century by two U.S. senators who dabbled in real estate, took its name from the Cheviot Hills of Scotland. It is a maze of gentle, irregular hills. The only flat ground lies in the floodplain of Rock Creek, where I spent many long summer days at the Meadowbrook recreation area. The name "Chevy Chase" didn't actually correspond to any political unit. It contained separate "villages" — we lived in one called Martin's Additions — and the next higher governmental unit was Montgomery County. Nearby parts of Northwest Washington, D.C. were sometimes called Chevy Chase too. We lived on a sloping street within easy walking distance of Chevy Chase Circle, which was half in the District, half in Maryland.

I could see suburbanization all around me, but I took it for granted. When we moved to Quincy Street in 1947 the Hughes family next door had a garden the size of a small softball field directly behind our back yard. Rented horses plowed the garden, and the Hugheses — a Baptist family with eight children, most of them grown by the time we moved there — kept chickens as well. The next year Billy and Donnie Hughes persuaded their father to stop the plowing so they could organize us younger boys into softball teams. Soon the chickens were gone too. (In the interim, one of the softball rules that Billy and Donnie laid down was that you couldn't use the chicken house as a bathroom.) The vacant lot at the bottom of our street — so vacant that trees grew in it — was soon a house lot. Construction sites were common around there, and they were fun to play in.

In suburbia, the wild-animal symbols of Cub Scouting (devised in England with advice from Rudyard Kipling) were just names denoting ranks: Bear Cub, Wolf Cub, and I forget what else. I joined the Cub Scouts when I turned eight, at the end of second grade. The “den” that we met in was the den of a Chevy Chase ranch house. Even the term “ranch house” was a throwback to another time and place.

My most important frame of reference for my first few grade-school years was the knot of boys (and one girl) in my neighborhood. For the first three years, until they moved away, the most important were my gangly best friend Davey Fix and his lean, intense brother Bobby, three years older than us. Their mother had died when Davey was quite young, and they lived with their father and a succession of housekeepers. Bobby took it on himself to instruct us in everything from baseball to cigarette smoking (the first puff at age seven tasted so terrible I've never taken another). He once sat Davey and me down for an assessment, telling us that “Jimbo here is smarter when it comes to school learning” (pause while I beamed with pride), “but Davey has more common sense.” Bobby's own common sense needed some work when it came to baseball teams — he made us into Washington Senators fans after they started the season well in 1949. We were stuck with our misplaced loyalty even after the team fell into dead last. But our own softball playing benefited from Bobby's tutelage — he made us into good players for our age.

We played sports and talked about them, we told jokes (“Why did the moron tiptoe

past the medicine cabinet? He didn't want to wake up the sleeping pills.”), we made fun of each other. Bobby instructed us in the ways of the world, such as yelling “Safety!” if you farted. Sometimes if Bobby was bored or annoyed, he beat up Davey.

TV was not yet part of our world. When my second grade teacher, Mrs. Pogue, told us to watch a special program, it meant she had to divide us up among the few families that had sets. In our neighborhood the Cunninghams had one. At Bobby Fix's instigation the other boys all taunted Bobby Cunningham, accusing him of watching Howdy Doody. “It's How-dy Doo-dy Time,” we would sing, our voices dripping with contempt. By sixth grade, 1952–53, nearly every family had a set except mine.

Our lack of a TV set bespoke my father's discomfort with modern ways. He'd grown up as a minister's son and seemingly had never rebelled. I remember a hilariously earnest compare-the-fathers conversation with Davey Fix:

Him: My father drinks and yours doesn't.

Me: Yeah, I guess that's right.

Him: And your father doesn't smoke, either, like mine does.

Me (by now completely desperate): Yeah, well, my father wears glasses and yours doesn't!

He also didn't believe in commercial entertainment on Sunday. Once in third grade I pleaded hard to be allowed to go to a roller skating rink with friends and he finally agreed in exchange for my promising never to ask again. I didn't. I was 19 before I went to a Sunday movie. When we opened presents on Christmas morning my father would often shake his head and say, “Too much.” We drove a used 1946 Chrysler well into the fifties, then he traded it in for a 1948 Chrysler with the exact same design. New things didn't attract him. Maybe his heart was still overseas — he wasn't at all a radical politically, but he didn't feel completely at home in America. He always tried to get the King's (later the Queen's) Christmas message on the radio because he remembered the broadcasts fondly from wartime. Now the war was long over, and he was back home living with us.

Fairy tales aside, my first real window on the past was the Bible. It's hard for me to isolate the first Bible stories I heard because they were so common later in my childhood and the memories blur. I suspect that I got a few simple ones before we left Wethersfield, mostly about the Baby Jesus around Christmastime. When we moved to Maryland, church became automatic, since my father was fanatical about attending and he could drive. I went to Sunday school every week at the Congregational church in Silver Spring, the suburb just east of Chevy Chase. Sunday school brought me the whole gamut of interesting Bible stories, from King Solomon offering to cut the baby in half to Jesus confounding the "scribes and pharisees."

For the most part I didn't get the stories directly from the Bible. The words of the King James Version, so magnificent at the time of its publication in 1611, were stiff and puzzling after centuries of change in the English language. (My copy of the King James Bible, a gift of the Silver Spring church, is dated September 1949, and it was never replaced with the Revised Standard Version.) I got them instead from modern-day books for children that retold the stories and made them understandable. One of these, a large-format book by Theodora Wilson-Wilson, stands out in my mind, and I'd love to see it again sometime. She ignored all the "begats" and the bloodier Old Testament rampages and gleaned the rest of the Bible for beautiful children's stories, which she presented with lavish illustrations. Looking back, I see them fondly against the backdrop of a summer-camp song I heard years later: "Young folks, old folks, everybody come/Come to the Sunday school and have a lot of fun/Park your chewing gum and candy at the door/And we'll tell you Bible stories that you've never heard before."

And they were good stories. The best of them were at least as interesting as the fairy tales that had preceded them in my education. We learned about Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the Flood, Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac, Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt, Jacob's long wait for his bride, Joseph's coat of many colors, baby Moses hidden in the bulrushes, the parting of the Red Sea, Samson and Delilah, David and Goliath, Daniel in the lion's den, the tongue-tripping Shadrak, Meshak, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, Jonah in the whale, the testing of Job, and all the New Testament stories about Jesus, including the stories ("parables") that he himself told.

Those Bible stories were the very coin of literacy in American Protestantism. They represented a shared set of cultural assumptions, a starting point in making sense of the world. I remember a joke I heard at a Boy Scout banquet. In it, a man asked his son what he had learned in Sunday school that day. The dialogue went something like this:

Boy: Dad, we heard the most wonderful story. Moses and his people were trying to escape from Egypt and then they came to the Red Sea and the Egyptian army was about to catch them so they took off in their PT boats and then called in the air force and the airplanes blasted the Egyptians with their machine guns.

Father: Son, is that really the way you heard that story?

Boy: Dad, if I'd told it to you the way they told it to me, you'd have never believed me.

That joke tickled us because we knew what the Bible said: that God had parted the waters, then closed them up again on Pharaoh's army. The story was part of our culture, part of how we saw the past.

Denominational lines didn't seem to matter much. We all went to the Congregational church at first, then my sister Susan started getting active in the youth group at the Chevy Chase Presbyterian Church, an easy walk from our house. My mother switched too. Then, after my father got back from three months of public health consultation in Ethiopia, he joined the rest of us. He had grown up a Congregationalist and my mother a Methodist. I once asked my father why we went to church and he said, "To teach us how to live." That was more important than the fine points of theology.

The gulf between Protestants and Catholics was bigger. I remember a Reformation Sunday sermon at the Presbyterian Church when the senior minister, an austere, distant figure, recounted the crimes of the Catholic Church that had led Martin Luther to revolt in the fifteenth century. He said he could never find it in his heart to forgive them. I remember the ending of a sixth-grade romance when the best-looking boy in our class "broke up" with the best-looking girl because her family was Catholic. Oddly, Catholics seemed more distant than Jews. I was

never conscious of who was Jewish (my first Cub Scout den mother, for instance, and the pack father). But when a devout Catholic family moved next door they never seemed to fit into the neighborhood.

Like the fairy tales, the Bible stories evoked an exotic past. Everything in them had happened over nineteen hundred years ago, and the illustrations as well as the text emphasized how differently people had lived then. I could see ubiquitous farm animals, especially sheep (which I never saw in real life), dusty unpaved roads, robes and other strange clothing, and, for the men, long beards. Jesus talked in terms that had no resonance with our suburban surroundings: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...” Shepherds were no more familiar than the princes and princesses of the fairy tales. The Sunday school teachers had to scramble to fill us in on the Bible’s background, as best they understood it.

Like the other stories, the Bible stories had happy endings, but they weren’t always as simple. Take the story of David and Goliath. In itself it was pure inspiration: the armor-clad Philistine giant taunting the armies of Israel for forty days, demanding that a champion be sent out to fight him to the death, then finally a young shepherd boy accepting the challenge — running toward Goliath with a slingshot and toppling him with a deadly stone to the forehead. But parts of the full biblical account were left out. I don’t remember our being told, for example, that after David’s exploit came a bloodbath as the Israelites pursued and killed the fleeing, panicking Philistines. Also missing, I think, was David’s careful, repetitious questioning of the Israelite soldiers before he challenged Goliath: he made sure everyone had known King Saul’s had promised fabulous riches to whoever killed the Philistine champion. So the story as we learned it had no moral ambiguity — simply an earnest young shepherd boy who loved his people and had a heart full of courage.

Even the story of Job, which on the face of it is an episode of cruel megalomania, came across as a heartwarming story of devotion and endurance: “the patience of Job.” Consider the story as actually told in the Old Testament. In order to prove to Satan that Job will remain loyal no matter what, God rains death and destruction on Job’s family and servants. They haven’t done anything to deserve it, and they aren’t even the ones who are being tested, but that doesn’t stop God. The focus of the story as we heard it was on Job himself and how much he suffered from the loss of his family, servants, and property.

The New Testament stories, centering on the life of Jesus, were served to us straighter, I think. We learned about the virgin birth (without being told in any detail how it differed from other births!), about the manger and the kings and wise men. We learned about Jesus the carpenter in his early thirties as he became an itinerant who reached out to the poor and outcast. We learned the stories that he told, such as the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, and the seven wise and seven foolish virgins. We learned of his tragic fate: unprecedented acclaim followed by jealousy and betrayal and then slow, painful death nailed to a wooden cross. Most exciting, we learned of his resurrection from the dead — his friends opening his tomb, finding it empty,<sup>3</sup> then hearing Jesus ask, “Why seek ye the living among the dead?” These stories still have life for me today, true or not.

I learned the Bible stories in random order, but that’s not how the Bible presents them. Judaism (and in its tracks Christianity) gives a much more “linear” view of the past than Eastern religions do. The Bible is steeped in chronology: first this happened, then that happened. It starts simply, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” and then moves, step by step, through a narrative of what happened after that. Long genealogies, starting with Adam and Eve, are an integral feature. I remember an improvised Sunday morning service on a Boy Scout camping trip some years later. The scoutmaster handed a Bible to the youngest (and presumably most pious) boy and said, “Read a chapter from the Book of Matthew, okay?” The boy asked which chapter and the scoutmaster said without thinking, “The first one.” It turned out to be a long list of “begats,” each one yielding an offspring with a hard-to-pronounce name. Karl plowed through the whole thing. The second youngest boy than asked, “What does ‘begat’ mean?” and the scoutmaster said, “We’ll talk about that later.”

That the Bible stories occurred in chronological order made them different from the fairy tales. They were different in other ways too. Where the fairy tales faded away as I got older, I met the Bible stories time and again. The basic premise was that, far from being childish fantasies, they were true descriptions of actual events. Thus, I had for the first time an introduction to a past that was cut-and-dried, that

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3. Some care needs to be taken in telling this story. My mother used to tell me about a journalistic mixup in Olean, New York, the town where I was born. The typographers jumbled a report on an Easter sermon with a story on the meeting of the Democratic town committee. She said it read something like “And lo, when they opened the tomb they found Michael Sullivan, Patrick Shaughnessy,…” and cost the typographer or proofreader his job.



was down on paper and could be learned, even memorized. That was a big break from anything I'd encountered before.

But did the truth of the Bible matter to me? I'm not sure. As I look back, I think I always kept a certain distance from the Bible stories, no matter how much I liked them. I think the Good Samaritan felt as real to me as, say, Samson and Delilah, even though he appeared only as a make-believe character in a story told by Jesus. A story was a story. I didn't really make the appropriate transition from fairy tales to Bible tales. As I got older I retained the feeling that the Bible stories were told within a certain context. I wouldn't have said that I didn't believe them, but neither did I say to myself, "That really happened!"

Ours was a modern, diluted middle-class Protestantism: first Congregational and then Presbyterian. I think the dividing line between hot and cool Protestantism is whether you seriously believe in heaven and (the real test) hell. I remember hearing my parents talk once when I was in high school, at a time when they had been married for at least thirty years and my mother was an elder in our Presbyterian church. She was surprised when my father said he believed in hell, which she didn't. The only time I remember hellfire being preached in Sunday school was in Washington, when the father of a junior high student made a speech saying that God would remember on the Judgment Day who'd been paying attention in Sunday school and who hadn't. I lapped it up. Just before that, three other boys had been poking me in the back and laughing. I was happy to picture them in the fiery pit.

In the boys' life of our neighborhood, religion wasn't really part of the picture, either as something to observe or as something to rebel against. Religion was off to the side. The only serious mention of God that I remember was when I narrowly lost in a football throwing-and-kicking game. As we sat down to rest afterwards the other boy told me, "The Good Lord sure was with me on that one."

Still, even if religion was generally absent from the public arena of our neighborhood games, the Bible stories exerted a quietly powerful influence on me. As a set of moral lessons, the Bible stories made a lasting impact. In the softened version that we learned, they were morality plays in which evil was punished and good was rewarded. At a more sophisticated level than the fairy tales, Bible stories (like the stories of other religions) taught lessons about how people ought

to relate to each other. I know for me they encouraged and prodded me in my explorations of what constitutes justice and fair play.

Even though the Bible is set entirely in the past, it offers a grand sweep of history that connects the present with the past. What the Bible offered that the fairy tales lacked was a kind of overarching “big story” that overshadowed all the little stories even as it encompassed them. I’m talking now about the Christian version of the Bible that includes the New Testament. In this version, all the suffering and injustices of this world are redeemed because God came to earth in the form of a human being who allowed himself to be persecuted and killed. Just as Adam and Eve brought suffering and death into the world by disobeying God’s instructions in the Garden of Eden, Jesus’s sacrifice opened the possibility that some people can have an unending, blissful life. If you don’t press too hard for details, it is the happiest of all happy endings.

## **HISTORY AS AMERICANISM**

School became important to me in fourth grade. Davey and Bobby’s father had taken them back to Idaho by then, and Bobby Cunningham was now my best friend in the neighborhood (until his family moved away). But the neighborhood was less important. At home I listened to radio dramas more than I ran around with other boys. My friendships came mostly through school. I was closest to Tysie Botha, whose father was with the South African Embassy. (I’ve kept looking for his name in newspaper stories over the years but, usually to my relief, it’s always been some other Botha.)

“School” was Chevy Chase Elementary, known as Rosemary School for one of the streets that bordered it. Rosemary was smaller in 1950–51 than in earlier years because a new school near the Meadowbrook recreation area had siphoned off many of the students. It was that way all through my time in Maryland: new schools at all levels kept opening to the north and west as Montgomery County’s suburbs mushroomed.

Until fourth grade, school — other than recess — was something to be endured. Davey and I fantasized a lot about playing hooky, though we never acted on it. I remember Dick, Jane, Spot, and Babar from our early reading lessons. From third grade I remember the Hardy Boys mystery series, which I read on the sly while the class was supposed to be learning to play tonettes (flute-a-phones). I remember softball at recess (I was precocious thanks to Bobby Fix's instructions). I remember buying a liverwurst sandwich in the cafeteria in second grade and hating it. I remember accidentally not paying for a half-pint of milk in the cafeteria and confessing it to Davey a year or two later as my most shameful memory. I remember a teacher's comment on a report card, "Jimmy still does not participate in class discussions." But school came temporarily alive in fourth grade.

### **School History as a Fountain of Stories**

My introduction to the word "history" came in Mrs. Phillips's class in fourth grade at Chevy Chase Elementary School. Mrs. Phillips taught everything, not just history, but I think history must have been her first love because it's what sticks in my mind. If she was tired after years of teaching she never showed it. She had a quick mind to go with her red hair. She dominated the classroom in a way that most of my elementary teachers did not: you paid attention both because she made it worth your while and because you could suffer for it if you didn't. I remember being called on once and glancing at the textbook in a desperate stab at an answer; when the class broke out laughing she said, "Don't tell him why that was funny." She also had a boundless store of patience that she showered on us when we did our best. With her encouragement I devoted my brief career as a poet mainly to historical subjects. One about Benjamin Franklin stands out in my mind: it began, "Poet and printer and statesman and stuff/With all of those things you'd think that was enough," and went downhill from there.

Mrs. Phillips traced American history all the way back to Christopher Columbus's boyhood (history in the Americas, as taught in 1950, began with white people) and she made everything seem exciting. On his historic voyage we could share the elation of Columbus's men when they saw seagulls, proof that land was near. The textbook gave us the facts, and we also read Robert Lawson's Ben and Me, a

rendition of Benjamin Franklin's life by a make-believe mouse. History was fun.

Above all else, Mrs. Phillips's history lessons offered stories: Columbus saying to keep pushing on ..... Pocahontas saving Captain John Smith ..... Priscilla Mullens jilting the shy soldier Miles Standish for John Alden ..... Benjamin Franklin flying a kite to study electricity ..... young George Washington chopping down a cherry tree and then confessing to his father ("I cannot tell a lie") ..... Patrick Henry excoriating British rule ("Give me liberty or give me death") ..... Francis "the Swamp Fox" Marion eluding British troops in the Carolinas ..... Betsy Ross stitching together a flag ..... Molly Pitcher (I've forgotten what she did) ..... Nathan Hale regretting he had but one life to give for his country ..... Lewis and Clark and Sacajawea exploring the vast new lands of the Louisiana Purchase ..... young Abe Lincoln writing on a shovel by the light of an open fire ..... General Grant letting General Lee keep his sword ..... Thomas Edison trying hundreds of possible filaments to invent the light bulb ..... Teddy Roosevelt charging up San Juan Hill ..... and on it went. What could be more exciting?

We did very little memorizing in Mrs. Phillips's class. We had to learn the names of Columbus's three ships, the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria — there, I still know them! We also had to fill in the names of Maryland's twenty-plus counties on a map. But for the most part, her approach was to tease our interest with stories, not bore us with lists.

Some of the stories were sidelights. It's not important what the young Pilgrim Priscilla Mullens said when John Alden relayed a marriage proposal from his friend Miles Standish ("Speak for yourself," John, and she became Priscilla Alden). But it piqued our interest. It made the Pilgrims seem more human than they might otherwise have seemed. In real life, we could only have been terrified at their fanaticism — they came here from Holland, not to enjoy religious freedom but to get away from it. They didn't want their children to stray from the fold.

Many of the stories had to do with wars, which helped to give boys more to identify with in these history lessons than girls. Still, I think grade-school history may have been less sexist than what I got later in high school and college. A lot of grade-school history consisted of fluff, which is how people like Pocahontas, Priscilla Alden, Molly Pitcher, and Betsy Ross got included. The more "serious"

history I got later concentrated on statesmen and industrialists and tended to leave women out altogether.

Some of the stories were aimed at us. For example, the cherry-tree episode (if it actually happened) was possibly less significant than some other things in George Washington's life. As a moral lesson, though, it was perfect. It carried the same message as the slogan engraved on a wooden plaque at a Boy Scout camp where I worked one summer: "Don't Wait to Be a Great Man, Be a Great Boy." Or, in Longfellow's words, "Lives of great men all remind us/We can make our lives sublime,/And, departing, leave behind us/Footprints on the sands of time."

In keeping with the genre of childhood stories, the American history stories had happy endings. Even Nathan Hale, hanged by the British as a spy during the Revolution, got a kind of vindication. "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country," he supposedly said, and in fact his side (our side) won the Revolution. His suffering, like the suffering of many Bible characters, found redemption after his death. Only in our unit on Maryland history did we encounter the rankling bitterness of unredeemed social injustice. We learned that Maryland had once been much bigger, but that Virginia and Pennsylvania had both taken big chunks of Lord Baltimore's domain during the colonial era. It wasn't fair! Still vivid in my mind is the story of William Claiborne, who was captured by the hated Pennsylvanians and taken in chains through the streets of Philadelphia. There he shamed his captors forever by exclaiming, "This is the finest city in Maryland."

Still, within Maryland, things worked out pretty well. When the text talked about Maryland's shellfish industry, for example, it made a big point of the fact that "CRABS DON'T FEEL PAIN!" I also remember learning that Lord Baltimore had allowed religious freedom in colonial Maryland, as shown by the colony's pathbreaking Toleration Act. Years afterward I got a shock when I dug out my fourth-grade "Maryland History" notebook to show a friend. This was my summary of the Toleration Act:

The Toleration Act was an act concerning religion. It stated that anyone who did not believe in Jesus Christ should be beheaded and that all christions could go to any church they wanted too.

I'd copied those words into my notebook at the time and then had remembered

only the last part, not the first.

Just as the Bible stories helped make us faithful Christians, the American history stories magnified our patriotism. The fourth-grade stories worked in exactly the same way that Bible stories worked: the little stories (Nathan Hale, the cherry tree, Valley Forge, etc.) both illustrated and reinforced the big story. Mrs. Phillips's stories (except for those that stirred our lust for revenge against the neighboring states) all had the same point. The stories all showed us that our ancestors had sacrificed greatly in order to give us the happy land we were now living in.

Patriotism, which we took for granted, was the cornerstone of grade-school history. In reading about matters like the American Revolution we were all on the same side. Only the Civil War gave us room for divided loyalties. Maryland, a slave state, had remained in the Union, but with dissension. At the outset of the rebellion, early in 1861, troops from Massachusetts had defended themselves from rioters on the streets of Baltimore by firing into the crowd. The episode is commemorated in Maryland's official state song, which we learned in fourth grade. Set to the tune of "O Tannenbaum," it intones, "The despot's heel is at thy shore, Maryland my Maryland." I never thought much about the lyrics, but I loved the tune. Years later, I quoted that line to a friend in Baltimore who said, "You know who the 'despot' was, don't you, Jim? Abraham Lincoln."

The Civil War gave us something to choose sides on. In fourth grade, or maybe a year or two later, I remember boys dividing up into little partisan bands at recess, shouting at each other that we were "Yankees" or "Confederates." I was a Yankee, for reasons that I can't remember. We never talked about slavery.

I recall Mrs. Phillips being pretty even-handed in her state history lessons. I think she spoke kindly of the Baltimore mob, but we also learned about Barbara Freitchie, who kept her Union flag aloft as Confederate troops marched past her house in Frederick. John Greenleaf Whittier immortalized her (for me anyway) by writing a poem with the unforgettable lines:

"Shoot if you must, this old gray head,  
But spare your country's flag," she said.

And Stonewall Jackson bowing to her obstinacy:

“Who touches a hair of yon gray head  
Dies like a dog! March on!” he said.

Both the school and my outside reading offered us plenty of heroes on both sides of the war: Abraham Lincoln and Robert E. Lee above all, but others too such as Jackson, Jeb Stuart, and U.S. Grant. We could embrace them all. The Civil War cost over a million casualties, including well over a half-million dead, and was the bloodiest war in world history up to that point. Somehow, that didn't change the mellow mood in which we learned the history of our country.

My friend Tysie the white South African would have encountered nothing in our history lessons to give him pause. Slavery was a non-issue. All the Civil War heroes were white. We learned nothing about black heroes like the popular anti-slavery speaker Frederick Douglass or the heroic Harriet Tubman, who slipped into the South time and again and led three hundred slaves to freedom; nothing about the black soldiers and sailors who were crucial to the Union war effort. Reconstruction after the war was taught strictly from a white point of view: the story line was that Reconstruction had oppressed southern whites by imposing on them a ruling elite of corrupt northern “carpetbaggers” manipulating newly freed but unqualified Negroes. It wasn't considered important that the Reconstruction made the South far more democratic than it ever had been or would be again for nearly a century.

Grade-school history was set in the past. Current politics only very slowly came into my consciousness. Earlier, the 1948 presidential election (I was in second grade) had pitted Harry Truman against somebody totally unqualified: I knew Dewey as one of Donald Duck's three nephews, along with Huey and Louie. These were the years of the buildup of the cold war, the years of purging thousands of “security risks” from government service. My second-hand memories of the purge have to do with bored FBI agents making routine inquiries about neighbors. Once my sister Martha Jane told them a neighbor was making atomic bombs in her backyard, and when my mother apologized the agents said they were grateful for any little bit of humor. Only much later did I hear stories of lives ruined by the modern-day witch hunt.

My favorite magazine, the *Reader's Digest*, told me all I wanted to know about communism. For the most part we didn't get sermons about it in school. I remember how striking it seemed when a substitute teacher in sixth grade gave us a passionate lecture about the evils of communism: "Tell them to ask the Poles! Tell them to ask the Hungarians!" and so on. Our fourth-grade textbook got in a dig by saying that the Pilgrims tried socialism and it didn't work. But that was pretty mild stuff. Most of the cold-war politics in class were indirect. That is, by building up the United States as a remarkable success story, comparisons with other, less desirable social systems were implied.

My most specific memory of cold-war feelings in school involved several fourth-grade classmates whom I'd recruited for a skit ridiculing the Soviet dictator Josef Stalin. Soon afterwards one of them came up to me and said they had talked it over: "No more political plays." He explained, "You can never tell how all this is gonna end up. The Russians might be here and they'd know who did things like this."

For my part, I wasn't scared of an invasion. The American military was made up of heroes — my favorite movie at that time was *The Halls of Montezuma*, about the Marines. And, as another friend of mine put it, "If we get in a war, all we have to do is call up all the other countries. They're on our side." I also don't remember being scared of nuclear war. Air raid drills — we leaned against the wall and covered our necks — seemed like a common sense way to survive an attack.

Fourth grade was the first full year of the Korean War, which began during summer vacation. It propelled me briefly into the world of the small businessman. The price of old newspapers had gone up to \$1.25 per hundred pounds, and since I already had a little red wagon to carry the papers in, fabulous profits danced before my eyes. (My allowance was ten cents a week.) I made the rounds of the neighborhood every week, and my father took me and the papers to a junk dealer every Saturday. But I wasn't the only one, and the price kept dropping. When it hit thirty-five cents a few months later I got out of the business.

I didn't read much about current events at that time, except in the *Reader's Digest*. But the process of learning about our American heritage through stories fed on itself. In fourth grade I started reading books about the American past. I read



Joseph Altsheler's historical novels as well as the Boyhood of Famous Americans series (it's barely possible that the title was actually Childhood, but it certainly lodged in my mind as Boyhood), and then the Landmark books. Altsheler was a peculiar enthusiasm of mine. He wrote about the Revolution, the Civil War (from both sides, which is how we learned it in school too) and a band of five white Indian fighters on the Kentucky frontier. (I squirm to think how much I admired the Indian fighters.) He may have been popular once, but by the time I read his books they just seemed to sit on the shelf of our local branch library except when I checked them out.

The Boyhood and Landmark books were more widely read in my circles, and I suspect they were the main resources for kids of my generation to read about the American past. The Boyhood books were awfully sappy, some of them — I didn't know any little paragons like the ones pictured in the books. But they were easy reading, and Mrs. Phillips's teaching made me eager to read anything I could about these heroes. The Landmark books were especially ingenious and well-written. They mixed fact and fiction: the book on the Constitutional convention of 1787 had one of the delegates (unnamed) boarding with a family in Philadelphia, thereby bringing an entire family into the story of a convention that of course consisted entirely of adult men. All the books stood or fell on their storytelling qualities, not their literal accuracy.

My father read history as a hobby, and I'm sure he had a lot to do with my receptivity to history in school. We had V. M. Hillyer's *A Child's History of the World* in our home, as great a treasure as Theodora Wilson-Wilson's *Through the Bible*. Given the didacticism of the school stories, I'm sure both my parents had an influence on my receptivity to fourth-grade history. I was absorbing an unusually strong civic conscience in growing up. My parents, both former missionaries, had very strong notions about right and wrong. I took seriously the values I was supposed to take seriously, and as a result, I was ready to find admirable the sufferings and achievements of our American forebears. And not just admirable, but also interesting.

## **The Myth of the American West**

I grew up before the dinosaurs. In my day we had Westerns instead. Movies,

radio shows, comic books, and (in some households, but not mine) television bombarded us with images that were our generation's equivalent of toy dinosaurs. The heroes of the Westerns were a strange medley of the real and the fictional. The genuine historical figures (however mythologized) included the Buffalo Bill Cody, the lawman Wild Bill Hickock, the outlaw Billy the Kid, and the defiant Indian chief Geronimo. Then we had modern-day actors such as Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, Gene Autry, and Tom Mix who played in totally fictional Western movies under their own names (or at least under their own stage names). Finally, we had totally made-up characters like the Lone Ranger, Red Ryder, and the Cisco Kid.

The characters in the Westerns were thus not hard for us to identify with. They were a compromise between the exotic and the familiar. They were white Americans — though probably a majority of real cowboys were Hispanic or black, we didn't know that. They produced no Bible-type miracles, they were just awfully fast with their guns.

The typical Western pitted “good guys” against “bad guys,” with the outcome hinging on raw courage and fancy gunplay. I heard later that the good guys usually wore white hats and the bad guys wore black hats, but I never noticed that at the time. On the surface, the stories didn't have great social significance. As a college student I heard a joke about a grade-school teacher who asked her pupils for a story with a moral. One boy's hand shot up:

Boy: One day Red Ryder was going along and he saw a whole bunch of outlaws in front of him. And then he looked around and there was a whole bunch of outlaws to the right of him too, and to the left of him, and then there was a whole bunch of outlaws behind him. And he killed them all.

Teacher: My, that was a very interesting story, Peter. But you know, I asked if anyone could tell a story with a moral. What was the moral of that story, can you tell us?

Boy: You don't mess around with Red Ryder.

Under the surface, though, the Westerns carried a message. They paralleled the

Bible stories in this respect: little stories that helped convey a much bigger story. They gave us a view of American history that preceded, and then complemented, what we learned in school. The Westerns set forth, in two stages, the advance of white civilization through the American West. First came the Indian wars. The Indians didn't belong: violent, childlike, intrusive, they tried to take away our forefathers' land. Western movies offered no more chilling a scene than the line of mounted Indian warriors suddenly appearing atop a hillside, ready to charge. The Indians had to be tamed by the authorities, through a combination of courage, multicultural understanding ("They never attack before dawn — it's their religion"), and gunpowder.

The Plains Indians, especially the men who wore eagle-feather headdresses, came to stand for all American Indians in the minds of all those who got their images from the Westerns. And the story-line of the Westerns — Indians as wild interlopers — shaped our understanding of the whole five centuries of Indians' displacement in North America. This was history from the winners' point of view. The Indians in these stories were a part of the landscape. They were present, but the stories weren't about them. Stories make people come to life in the minds of children. There were no stories about Indians, and they never came to life.

So civilizing the West, the Westerns told us, meant first of all "taming" the Indians. The second stage was a little more complicated. It had to do with taming the wilder impulses of the whites on the frontier — with establishing a rule of law. "Cowboys and Indians" was a common childhood form of play-acting, whether with pointed fingers or with plastic guns. But as I recall, cowboys and Indians rarely confronted each other in the comics and movies. More often, I think, Indian fighting fell to the army: Who can forget the bugle calls that announced the cavalry to the rescue? Cowboys generally appeared in a different set of Westerns, sometimes as heroes but other times as villains. Trigger-happy, impulsive, filled with contempt for town dwellers and sheep herders, the bad cowboys stood astride the West's path toward law and order. The heroes were men who stood for an orderly society where women and children could live safely, and where court proceedings rather than gunfights would settle quarrels.

Of course, in order to abolish gunfights it was necessary to have gunfights, which was what drew us into the theater. The quintessential Western movie of my grade-school years was the Gary Cooper film *High Noon*, which ended with the sheriff

outdueling three of the meanest ex-convicts you would ever expect to see.

A strange gap divided the American history that we learned from the Westerns from what we came to learn in school. If men like Billy the Kid and Buffalo Bill drew notice in the classroom (I think I do remember Billy the Kid) they appeared only as a kind of footnote, a minor sidelight to the main story. In school we learned about statesmen and soldiers, and we learned much more about the East than the West. Still, the Westerns painted a backdrop for the history that we did get in school. The story that the Westerns told — the creation of a civilized, orderly society under trying conditions — was a way of explaining how the United States had become the stable democracy that we knew it to be. Not only in the details of individual Western movies and comics, but also in the big picture of American history they provided, Westerns taught us that things generally work out for the best.<sup>4</sup>

## HISTORY AS A PENNANT RACE

I remember once riding to church in my parents' car, tuning out their small talk and thinking to myself about baseball. Had anyone bothered to write down the results of all the World Series games that had ever been played? I fervently hoped so. I was maybe eight at the time.

I was ten by the time I really followed a pennant race seriously. The Senators were always back in the pack, or behind the pack altogether. But the New York Giants stirred my imagination in 1951 by coming on strong after trailing the Brooklyn Dodgers by thirteen and a half games in mid-August. The regular season ended in a tie, then the Dodgers and Giants split the first two games of the

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<sup>4</sup> In recent years, a number of “new western historians,” several of whom are friends of mine, have sought to make Indians, Hispanics, Asians, blacks, and white women a part of the narrative of the American West. They have also written about the environmental destruction that came with white settlement in the West. One of them, Patricia Nelson Limerick, told me that she used to watch Western movies as a child and remembers thinking, during shoot-em-up scenes in barrooms, “Somebody’s going to have to clean all that stuff up.”

best-of-three playoff. When Bobby Thompson ended Game Three with his world-historic home run, alchemizing a 4-2 loss into a 5-4 win, I sat with ears glued to the big old-fashioned radio in one corner of our dining room. It's the one historical event prior to 1952 that I can remember where I was when I heard about it.

By this time, baseball had become an obsession with me. I still wanted to be a major-league shortstop, and sometimes idly formulated a letter to Phil Rizzuto telling him about the similarities between us (mainly, we both played shortstop and we both flipped the ball underhanded sometimes). I read the *Washington Post's* baseball stories as seriously as I did the comics. I read baseball magazines. And I read books. Whenever I got the chance, I read about the Senators' glory year, 1924, when they won their only World Series. I still try to visualize the scene in the twelfth inning of Game Seven: a routine ground ball hitting a pebble and bouncing crazily into left field, languishing in the grass while the Senators' winning run charged across home plate.

In reading about baseball, I mingled past and present. I had no trouble taking sides in the debates over "the greatest player of all time" at each position. It pained me no end that some writers called Joe DiMaggio a better centerfielder than the legendary Tris Speaker, who had retired long before I was born. The summer after fifth grade I spent long hours making up all-time teams with players for different letters of the alphabet. Photographs of "old time baseball players" became treasures to me. At first I didn't know anyone who fully shared my enthusiasm. My best friends in fifth grade, Bill Shorrock and Henry Glassie, came the closest. They were in my Cub Scout den, though they went to Chevy Chase's other elementary school. Henry lived in a big, old house on Brookville Road and his mother was the den mother. He and I took a measure of pride in the fact that our shared birthday was also the birthday of George Sisler, one of the greatest hitters of all time.<sup>5</sup>

This browsing in baseball's past opened up a new treasure-house of stories. My favorite baseball book was Tom Meany's collection *My Greatest Day in Baseball*,

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5. I once predicted a bad end for both of them. When they told me (true or not) that they had pilfered a small item from the neighborhood drugstore I said dramatically that they were putting nails in their coffins. Bill Shorrock became a successful university-level history teacher and administrator, while Henry Glassie is a renowned and much-published scholar in the field of folklore.

marvelous accounts bearing the names of some of the proudest names in the history of the sport. I read other books too. *Bob Feller's Strikeout Story* held up well under multiple readings. Instead of tuning in to today's game, I could tune into games played far back in the past, and it felt like the present.

I was reading about these past heroes in the early 1950s, when baseball stars were still heroes. Today's pro athletes play in a goldfish bowl, with their defects — whether drug use, greed, or all-around oafishness — plain for all to see. In the early 1950s, the private lives of the players stayed private. The stories I read about real baseball players rang true with the sports fiction that I read by such masters as John R. Tunis (*The Kid from Tompkinsville*, *The Iron Duke*, *A City for Lincoln*, etc., etc.). In those stories, sports represented idealism, and victory was the reward for hard work, honesty, and unselfishness. Not having much first-hand knowledge of competitive sports, I took those lessons very seriously. In fact, I suspect the readership for those books was on the fringes where I was: boys who liked sports and played all the time in the schoolyard or in vacant lots but who weren't good enough to play in organized leagues.

The difference between pickup games and organized sports came across to me once in junior high school, in an intramural touch football game. Billy Grey was putting on one of his usual dazzling displays of broken-field running. Here was a boy who, except for severe acne, was straight off the pages of one of the sports novels: modest, sincere, profoundly democratic, completely honest. On one play that still stands out for me forty years later, he broke loose for a long run, leaving all the opposing players except one far behind, along with the referee. It looked as if the last defender may have tagged him before he went over the goal line. The following shouted dialogue then took place:

Referee: Did he get you, Billy?

Billy Grey: You have to decide.

Since the referee didn't actually see the play, he ruled it a touchdown.

In a pickup game with no referee, I have no doubt that Billy Grey would have stopped and put the ball down as soon as he was tagged. But this was organized competition and he felt no such obligation. This episode writ large is what I

suspect has happened to juvenile sports fiction in recent years. Sports are more transparent now, and the rough play, egotism, cheating, and cynicism that are obvious on the telecasts make the character-building novels ring hollow. The fictional heroes are no longer believable, and to me that's a shame.

Baseball became an outlet for my first effort to become an expert on the past. I think I had the feeling that by learning enough names I could "master" baseball's history. Even before the computer age, baseball could on one level be measured with statistics: batting averages, won-lost records, home runs, and so on. These statistics were readily available in the *Encyclopedia of Baseball* for what I knew as the "major leagues," going back to the turn of the century. (I knew nothing at all of the Negro Leagues, which flourished because blacks were barred from "organized baseball" until after World War Two; if I had, I would have become confused since their records were so incomplete.) Statistical mastery gave me a way of sharing in the glory that was major league baseball.

In sixth grade I did have a friend who was on the same wave length: Johnny Bassett, a smart and oversize boy who I think had skipped a grade. Through his mother, one of the better local women's tennis players, he knew members of the family of Clark Griffith, who owned the perennially losing Washington Senators. She fondly recalled the parade that followed the glorious World Series win of 1924. More important, Johnny owned a copy of the *Encyclopedia of Baseball*. Pausing only for peanut butter sandwiches and Kool Aid, we pored over this fountain of knowledge to find players who had played for the Senators. At age 12 I felt proud to think that we were the world's leading authorities in our age group on the Senators. Maybe we were!

My interest in baseball peaked in 1953, the year the Senators won two more games than they lost — you can look it up. It was also the year I went from grade school to junior high. After that, I still followed the game but more casually, and I stopped reading about the history (I resumed again when the players of my childhood were the old-timers.) Still, I know that my years of intense interest provided some useful legacies. Baseball statistics made sense to me because they were arranged chronologically. Baseball was organized by "seasons," each one with a specific year attached to it, and I learned them. A sense of chronology is something many people never do develop, but it's a basic tool for historians. It may not get you very far by itself, but without it you'll have a hard time sorting

out what happened at any point in the past. Above all, it's the basis for analyzing cause-and-effect: if Event A happened before Event B, then Event A may have influenced Event B, but not the other way around. Time goes in only one direction.

In addition to a sense of chronology, baseball gave me the message that racial integration was normal. Starting in 1947, blacks and whites played professional baseball together after a half-century of segregation. My 1951 Giants had Willie Mays, Monte Irvin, and Hank Thompson, while the Dodgers' stars included Jackie Robinson, Don Newcombe, and Roy Campanella. I had no idea that integration had ever evoked controversy. (Nor did I notice the Senators' lack of African American players at the time. They did have a number of low-paid pre-Castro Cubans, of various skin colors.) To me, it was natural. And why couldn't blacks and whites do other things together? This was a message I couldn't get from my immediate suburban surroundings, but I got it from baseball.

Still, as I look back, I can see how my passion for baseball and its history was limiting. What was concrete about baseball — what enabled me to visualize everything the radio announcers reported — was its hard-and-fast spatial relations: home plate, the pitcher's mound, the base paths, the fielders. If you'd seen one baseball game, you could visualize them all. Yet this very concreteness was also an abstraction. Each baseball field fit a universal pattern; the cities they were located in meant nothing to me, and I learned nothing about them. The same universal pattern let me ignore the differences between the social setting of baseball in the early twentieth century and the early fifties.

At the same time that my interest in baseball was abstract, it was in another way strikingly concrete. There was nothing bizarre about baseball. It was all played within a well-defined set of rules, enforced by authorities whose word was final. Within that framework, the variations were endless but they were also small. Baseball became a metaphor for the social order generally, which also allowed all sorts of choices within a clear framework of what was permissible and what wasn't. It became a civics lesson. And studying baseball's past (at least the major leagues in the twentieth century, when the rules changed hardly at all) became a lesson, not in how much the past was different from the present, but in how much it was the same.



Baseball made a sharp contrast to Bible stories. Limited as the Bible stories may have been in many ways, they were the closest thing I had (once I was done with fairy tales) to an escape hatch out of the present. Everything about them, not just the miracles, was foreign to my experience. Though I never thought about it, there was a tension between Bible stories and baseball — between an exotic past and a familiar present, between divine whims and rule-bound predictability, between romantic myths and statistical measurement. It was baseball that won out.

## **Baseball and Politics**

The spring of fifth grade was when I gave up on a major league baseball career. By then, though, a new enthusiasm was starting to take its place alongside baseball. It was electoral politics.

Along with the *Reader's Digest*, I was already reading *Time* magazine, which boosted the war hero Dwight Eisenhower as a champion of East Coast internationalism in his campaign for president. “Ike’s” campaign meant excitement and glamour. I rooted for him — first against Ohio Senator Robert Taft in the primaries and then against the Democratic nominee, Governor Adlai Stevenson — in the same way I rooted for baseball teams. I added presidential politics to baseball as something I cared about and read about. I collected campaign buttons. The issues in the campaign were more or less irrelevant to my enjoyment of it. The *Reader's Digest* had helped give me a general preference for Republicans, but if I’d really been interested in the issues as presented by the *Digest*, I’d have rooted for the more conservative Taft.

National politics intruded only slightly in school. Mrs. Gray, my sixth grade teacher, talked to us in distress once about the heckling of Adlai Stevenson by teenagers at a campaign rally in Michigan. (My friend Squeaky Weissmuller said, “Michigan is a Republican state. He should just campaign in Democratic states.”) She later took a straw poll on the election, asking everyone to state a preference and give a positive reason for it, not criticizing the other candidate; nearly all of us spoke up for Eisenhower. One day a substitute teacher gave us a rip-roaring denunciation of Communism. That’s all I remember.

Our first classroom elections, also, in sixth grade, reinforced my fascination with

politics. We elected officers every two months, and I was the first president. My term ended in discredit when we met to decide which two refreshments to serve at a party. I said we would simply take the two items that got the most votes; the result was popcorn and ice cream and an angry speech by Mrs. Gray, who proclaimed that unguided democracy would always fail. She said I should have taken two separate votes, one for drinks and one for other things.

On my way out of office I masterminded a scheme by which the boys, who were a minority, would nominate two popular girls and one boy for every office and then vote as a bloc for the boy. The girls didn't catch on till treasurer. Politics for me was a happy form of competition, with individuals striving to "do well" and with the issues being less crucial (and less interesting) than the quest for office. Tactics had to be used with care, though. Halfway through sixth grade the position of Second Lieutenant of the School Safety Patrol became vacant and I accepted a draft. But the girls had learned their lesson: on a strictly gender-line vote, they used their majority to elect Phoebe McConaughy. It didn't seem fair, since I had attended the boys-only Safety Patrol training camp that summer and she hadn't. Later we became sweet on each other, but when we got to junior high school we were in separate homerooms and that was the end of it.

Growing up in suburban Washington gave me a peculiar exposure to national politics. One of my sixth-grade classmates was the granddaughter of Sam Rayburn, the Speaker of the House. Once during the 1952 campaign, I sat next to the Democratic vice-presidential candidate, Senator John Sparkman, in the dentist's office. Two Congressmen from Alabama had sons in my Boy Scout troop. When Phoebe told me her grandfather had been governor of Connecticut, it was no more surprising than if she had said he owned a store. Politics had for me a combination of awe and near-familiarity. Reading the *Washington Post*, whose pages brimmed with news of the federal government, had the same effect. In Chevy Chase, local politics was national politics.

We had some history in sixth grade. We were encouraged to read Landmark books, much to my delight. I think sixth grade was also when I learned the names of the presidents in order (along with the state capitals, which have to be the least useful piece of information ever drilled into American school children). The presidents were easy, except for the old question of whether to count Grover Cleveland, the only one to serve two nonconsecutive terms, as one president or

two. Otherwise, I don't remember anything of what we learned about history in class.

Past and present were a jumble in the classroom. At least for suburban kids like us, the curriculum was decades out of date. In the sixth grade at Chevy Chase Elementary we had soil conservation — above all, contour plowing — drummed into us with a passion that was given to little else. Soil erosion was the enemy. Playing Uncle Sam in a play that our class put on for the parents, I evangelized for contour plowing. When I first saw the Grand Canyon almost thirty years later, I instantly and whimsically recalled our sixth-grade soil conservation lessons. Could the canyon have been prevented by contour plowing, I wondered. In any case, the damage to Maryland's farmland had already been done by the time we arrived in grade school.

The modern-day world was opening up to us outside of school. By sixth grade, nearly every family had a TV set except mine. That was the year Lucille Ball's pregnancy was the centerpiece of the *I Love Lucy* show. The girls at school went wild over it. Still, that was an age of innocence. We had a sex-education film that year followed by a question-and-answer period. When one of the boys asked, "What happens when a girl gets spayed?" nobody laughed.

The names of presidents, none of whom ever engaged in sex as far as I knew, were easy for me to learn. My own interest in electoral politics continued past the election. By the summer of 1953 I was collecting what I thought were autographs of members of Congress — actually, they were rubber-stamped — and I knew the names of all the senators. Electoral politics, like baseball, gave me a ready-made context for looking at the events, and a sense of order. Just as the major league baseball season began in April every year and climaxed in the World Series the first week in October, American adults chose a president every four years and sent people to Congress every two or six years. Injustice may have cropped up frequently (in politics as in baseball) but never chaos. The framework within which events happened was perfectly clear and universally understood.

A well-defined chronology of past events, in politics as in baseball, made possible a type of mastery. Chronology — a framework for organizing and remembering a remarkable number of facts — saves us from being "lost" in the past. I could always find familiar landmarks: this was during the Coolidge administration, that

was during the New Deal, and so forth. But if memorization becomes an end in itself, then chronology ceases to be a tool and becomes a crutch. For me, rote learning made it harder for me to work out my own imaginings as to what American politics had actually felt like, for either the governors or the governed.

In electoral politics, both past and present, I had to have a favorite in every campaign. It added immeasurably to the interest. I rooted for Eisenhower in 1952 the way I rooted for the Washington Senators; I no more needed to agree with him on specific issues than I needed to explain why the Senators “deserved” to win more games than they did. Politics was a matter of competition within a mutually-agreed-upon framework, and it was the competition itself (rather than the nuances of difference between the candidates) that excited me. I was entitled to identify with a particular candidate just as I identified with a particular team. After all, underneath all the rivalries, wasn’t the nation itself a good one — the best in the world?

## **HISTORY AS INSPIRATIONAL CIVICS**

Eisenhower’s first year as president, 1953 — the year the Korean War ended in stalemate and the “Eisenhower years” of peace and white-suburb prosperity began — was the year I left elementary school behind. My new school, Leland Junior High, sat near the border between Chevy Chase and Bethesda, another upper-middle-class suburb, and drew from both communities. Its size intimidated me at first (maybe a thousand students in three grades), but by the ninth grade I was vice president of the Student Council (my better-known opponent was thought to be “conceited”) and co-editor of the student paper. But sports were more of an emotional focus for me. I played basketball, football, soccer, softball on the playground after school; I was bitterly disappointed at not being made one of the equipment managers for the basketball team in ninth grade. Socially, I felt off to the side: there seemed to be a clearly defined circle of socially prestigious boys and girls who had what passed for *savoir faire*, and I was off to the side — knowing most of those people as individuals but not part of the group scene. I

think a lot of them belonged to country clubs.

My main center of gravity outside of school was Boy Scouts. My troop met in an Episcopal church in Chevy Chase Circle, with the Maryland/D.C. boundary line running through our meeting room. We met weekly, lined up by patrols (mine was Panther). The troop owned a camping ground wedged in between cow pastures on Seneca Creek northwest of Washington. We had camping trips there once a month, using the cow pastures for softball and capture the flag, holding campfires with skits on Saturday night and nondenominational church services Sunday mornings. Scouts were important to me. I was one of the troop's best Christmas card salesmen, I rose to patrol leader of the Panther Patrol, I earned merit badges, and I reached the Eagle Scout rank just before my fifteenth birthday. Within limits I was trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent. The high point of my scouting career was a bus trip to mountainous northern New Mexico the next summer for two weeks of camping and hiking at Philmont Scout Ranch.

Church was less important than Scouts at that time. I took an easy-does-it catechism class at the Presbyterian Church when I was in seventh grade, and joined the church at the end of the class. The church was, among other things, a corporation. Once, during a fundraising campaign, a photographer combined our Sunday school class with another one in order to take a picture illustrating overcrowded classrooms. Sunday school became really interesting only in ninth grade, when the church joined a junior high school church basketball league and I made the team as a substitute (everyone made the team). Our star player, Fred Hetzel, then a 6'4" eighth grader, went on to become the first player chosen in the 1964 National Basketball Association draft.

It would never have occurred to me not to go to Sunday school. It was part of a stable social framework for my life, one that I didn't question. I did well in school and in Boy Scouts and I did all right in Sunday school. I wasn't a rebel. I even missed out on early rock 'n roll, which was the one great experience of my generation in the mid-'50s. I was aware of it, starting with Bill Haley and the Comets with "Rock Around the Clock." I liked some of the songs, including that one. But I preferred ballad-type songs. I never learned to dance to anyone faster than Pat Boone. I remember feeling jealous once in ninth grade when I stopped at a hamburger place and saw some people I knew from school — marginal students

— dancing happily to Carl Perkins’s “Blue Suede Shoes” on the jukebox.

Politically, I was a moderate Republican with liberal Democratic ideas. The discrepancy came from reading the *Reader’s Digest* and *Time* magazine along with the *Washington Post*. Herblock, the *Post*’s gifted liberal cartoonist, influenced me a lot, especially through his funny, pointed volume *The Herblock Book*. It was easy to share in the fervent anticommunism that all my opinion sources upheld. I remember fantasizing about somebody coming to our front door and trying to persuade me to be a Communist. I always slammed the door in his face. But I didn’t like “McCarthyism.” My parents hated the illogic and cruelty that Senator McCarthy stood for; so did the *Washington Post* and, for that matter, *Time*. The *Reader’s Digest* avoided writing about him.

My parents had more or less moderate-to-liberal mainstream politics. My mother had always been a Democrat in Republican surroundings. (Her first election was 1924, and when she told my grandmother she was voting for the independent Progressive candidate, Senator Robert LaFollette, my grandmother cried.) My father prided himself on being a registered Independent and on not telling anyone how he voted; I imagine he voted for Eisenhower in 1952 and again in 1956.

I began caring more and more about the issue of racial equality. That came from my family, I’m sure. We didn’t have black friends, but we had a lot of foreign visitors because my father’s job with the Public Health Service involved international health relations. His own father, the Congregational minister, had been president of a black college in New Orleans (long since defunct now) at the time of his death twenty years earlier. The US Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, outlawing segregated schools, came down in the spring of 1954 when I was in seventh grade. I had no trouble deciding it was the right thing. (Opinion was pretty much split down the middle in our classroom. We had a three-hour panel discussion about it, and I spoke most ardently for the supporters.) It was a moot issue since, after Montgomery County, Maryland desegregated its schools, only one black student came to our junior high.

At Leland, history was bundled with English and social studies. It was dull. We studied it in eighth grade and maybe seventh and/or ninth. Even the eighth-grade history, taught by a man who moonlighted in a clothing store and never wore the same combination twice (we kept track) yields almost no memories. Mainly I

remember three filmstrips about American history. One celebrated Eli Whitney, inventor of the cotton gin. The film made a warm human interest story out of the invention that prolonged American slavery. A second dramatized Andrew Jackson's fight to dismantle the Second Bank of the United States in 1829–33. The third gave us the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson in 1868 (Radical Republicans in Congress sought to remove him for impeding Reconstruction in the South) as a morality play with Johnson as the hero. The fact that the filmstrips stand out shows the power of stories in conveying history. These particular films were little more than propaganda.<sup>6</sup>

Junior high was the one time in my life that I wasn't excited, in one way or another, about the past. "History" was simply a subject taught in school, no more interesting than algebra or English. I had pretty much stopped reading about old-time baseball players by the time I got to eighth grade, and Sunday School was becoming more of a seminar on ethical dilemmas than a feast of Bible stories. The only historical novels I read that really grabbed my imagination were the trilogy of books by Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall about the mutiny on the *H.M.S. Bounty* and its aftermath. Without intending it, I memorized the names of all the crew members.

## **A Second Gifted Teacher**

History came alive again only after my family moved. It happened three fourths of the way through ninth grade. At age sixty-five my father had to retire from the Public Health Service, and against my mother's wishes he looked for another job. He became director of professional training for the state health department in Pennsylvania and we moved to the outskirts of the state capital, Harrisburg — to Camp Hill, a small, middle-class suburb with reportedly a good school system.

The history department at Camp Hill High School was Mrs. Schechter, whose

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6. The same could be said of the textbooks, the little that I remember of them. I do remember laughing with a friend in eighth or ninth grade about chapter titles that gave "democracy" as the invariable goal of the United States in its wars. We didn't disagree that the wars were righteous; the textbook just seemed to be laying it on a little thick. A friend of mine, James Loewen, wrote a book that I like a lot despite its belligerent title: *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New Press, 1995). One of his secondary points is that sanitized history at the high-school level is boring.

three courses covered Pennsylvania, the world (mainly Europe), and the United States. Bespectacled, her gray hair pinned up haphazardly, she lectured like a college professor and told us our note-taking would help prepare us for college. Nearing retirement (our class was the last one lucky enough to get her full series of courses), she seemed almost desperate for her messages to get through to us. She once angrily canceled a field trip when the basketball coach wouldn't excuse from practice the team members who were in her class. One of her children had been murdered some years earlier, as a young adult, and I think it may have given her a sharp sense of how precious time is. History involved both her mind and her emotions, and she put both into her classes.

Our setting was south-central Pennsylvania, where the broad island-studded Susquehanna River intersects the land route between Philadelphia and the west (Harrisburg was named for a ferry operator on the river). Harrisburg is also the gateway to the lush Cumberland Valley, which starts just west of Camp Hill and continues south through Virginia as the Shenandoah Valley. In June of 1863 Confederate troops had marched up the valleys, hoping to bring the war to the North. They fought at Gettysburg, thirty-odd miles southeast of Camp Hill. A plaque on Market Street in Camp Hill says that a foray there by Confederate scouts before the battle represented the "high water mark of the Confederacy." My father used to tell visitors (based on no evidence whatsoever) that Confederate scouts had watered their horses in the little stream that ran in back of our house.

As a mailing address, Camp Hill is well known to millions of avid readers who send their Book of the Month Club orders there. But only about ten thousand people live in Camp Hill itself. Its "downtown" amounts to two blocks' worth of stores and offices along Market Street. The high school is small — our graduating class in 1959 was about 125 and today's classes are much smaller — and smug. In social-class terms, though, Camp Hill was a notch below Chevy Chase, and there was less of a social hierarchy at the school. The main distinction separated the "business students," who weren't headed for college, from the three quarters of us who were. Social life centered mainly on high school sports, the movie theater on Market Street, and weekly dances in the high school gym, boys dancing with girls to the slow tunes and girls dancing with each other to the rock 'n roll.

Everyone was white. Nobody even knew how to respond when we got our first foreign-exchange student, from Germany! National Brotherhood Week every



February was like a self-parody.<sup>7</sup> One year a black minister from Harrisburg spoke and got spirited applause, but he could never have bought a house there

Camp Hill was Republican: the town's four elementary schools were named Lincoln, Hoover, Eisenhower, and Schaeffer, and I doubt that Schaeffer was a Democrat. Mrs. Schechter was a Republican too, but with a broad view of the party's history. The Republican Party was born in the 1850s opposing the expansion of slavery, then became an outright abolitionist party in the heat of the Civil War. After the war its Congressional leaders sought to break the power of the old southern plantation owners and guarantee southern blacks the right to vote. That was part of the legacy that Mrs. Schechter was proud of. She admired Thaddeus Stevens, for example, the fiery Pennsylvania congressman who, after the Civil War, championed Radical Reconstruction and wanted to extend it by giving land to freed slaves ("Forty acres and a mule" was the slogan). Stevens was a *bete noire* in what was then the standard account of Reconstruction: that Reconstruction was a disaster brought by greedy "carpetbaggers" from the North. Mrs. Schechter didn't challenge the Reconstruction myth directly, but she did give us a different view of Thaddeus Stevens. We met him as a hero who'd become a powerful statesman despite the stigma of being a cripple. It didn't convince me — the old view was too deeply ingrained — but it showed her as a good storyteller.

She was less proud of the political corruption that had marred Republican administrations in the late nineteenth century, and (in Pennsylvania) well into the twentieth. She gave us a rogue's gallery of Pennsylvania bosses. A particular hero for her was Gifford Pinchot, the forester/conservationist and Republican reformer who served a term as governor of Pennsylvania in the 1930s. Eisenhower was part of the Republicanism she embraced. She took us paragraph by paragraph through the *New York Times*'s editorial urging his reelection in 1956, which she praised as a masterpiece of logic.

Quoting the *New York Times* was no accident. She had taken advantage of a

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7. My own efforts didn't help. I served on the Brotherhood Week Committee one year with the job of reading an appropriate Bible verse over the public address system. Bible verses came via the speaker system once a week; on the other days, students in each homeroom took turns choosing and reading passages. I clicked on the speaker, announced that it was National Brotherhood Week and that I would read such-and-such a Bible passage, then suddenly realized I'd forgotten to bring a copy of the Bible along. I raced to my homeroom, grabbed the teacher's copy, ran back to the office, and found the verse in a hurry.

special school rate, and required us to subscribe while we took her world and US history classes. She wanted us to follow current events, and above all to be good citizens. I remember a movie she showed once in class. It pictured a future presidential election in which the winning candidate promised to take care of everyone if they let the government run everything. The movie showed people being carted off to jail after this man was elected. At the end of the movie, Mrs. Schechter said she hoped we had noticed that in one scene it was the young people who were the first to fall for his promises.

Mrs. Schechter's conservatism was barely apparent to me at the time. But one of my sharpest memories is of her telling us that Eugene V. Debs was still alive and was the leader of the Communist Party. I can't explain how I knew he was dead (he died in 1926), but I knew it. I don't remember whether I protested when she told us there had been only 100,000 Indians in the present-day US and Canada when the Europeans first came (a preposterous underestimate — three or four million would be a good conservative figure) but I was surprised. She also told us that various major battles in world history had taken the form of East vs. West, with the West (Europe) always standing for civilization, human decency, and progress. On that score, I had no reason to doubt her.

There was something else conservative about Mrs. Schechter's history, too, and it was conservatism laced with irony. Here was a proud, dynamic, assertive woman who stood up to male faculty when they crossed her. Yet the history she taught us had, for all practical purposes, no women in it. I believe she started the world history course by writing the term "His Story" on the blackboard: that is, history was the story of "man." It was strictly a memory device (she must have known that "history" comes from the Latin word "historia"), but it symbolized what she taught. History was serious business. Gone was the "fluff" of grade-school history — the simple human-interest stories that put people like Pocahontas, Priscilla Mullens, Betsy Ross, Molly Pitcher, Sacajawea, and Barbara Freitchie into history along with the menfolk. History was now taught as a matter of statecraft, and the cast of characters was virtually all-male.

The omission of women from history as taught in my high school followed naturally from defining "history" — in the standard way — as the deeds of famous decisionmakers. The lives of ordinary men and women fell outside "history" in this sense. We learned America's past against the backdrop of what has been

called the “presidential synthesis,” that is, a way of understanding history that centers on the White House. We learned about people who had risen above their surroundings. Their job was statesmanship — not farming, not shipping, not artisanry, not factory labor, and certainly not housework. They led lives that were abstracted from the day-to-day realities that faced ordinary people in their societies. By studying them I avoided having to grapple with questions of how people had lived at different times in the past. There was nothing in “history” that seemed to connect with my own family’s experience over the generations.

### **The “Big Story”**

Outside of school, the one institution that had a claim on my loyalties was the Presbyterian Church. Both my parents — especially my mother, who made friends much more quickly — got active in the church as soon as we arrived, and I went to Sunday School. I later became president of the youth group. We were close to the family of Reverend Smith, the minister. I went out with his older daughter for a while, and she sang at my sister Susan’s wedding. His son and I were (and are) good friends as well; he was president of the Student Council at school and I was vice president.

Presbyterianism has a distinctive doctrine that challenges our notions of time. I knew the doctrine by name (predestination), but never had a good sense of what it meant. As I understand it today, it basically means that God knows everyone’s fate; we exercise free will, but He knows what we will do and what the consequences will be. Reverend Smith tried to explain it once in a sermon. He said it reminded him of a time when he was driving away from Harrisburg and saw a massive tie-up in the traffic coming into the city. As he drove further he could see other drivers cruising along blithely; he knew — but they didn’t know — that they were about to be snarled in traffic. I think about that analogy sometimes. In the intervening years, Reverend Smith and both of his daughters have died in three separate auto accidents. Now I think of something that his widow, the most resilient person I’ve ever known, wrote me in a letter. She quoted a college friend to the effect that God has blessed us by giving us the power to remember the past instead of foreseeing the future.

A more important religious viewpoint on history was part of the basic message of

Christianity, not unique to Presbyterianism. If the Bible is taken seriously as history, as an account of what happened in the world up to about 2,000 years ago, it amounts to a mega-story breathtaking in its implications. The Bible says that the earth was created for the enjoyment of human beings, an extraordinary perspective in itself. It says that the earliest humans, acting symbolically in behalf of all who came afterwards, proved unworthy (which validates the feeling of many people that they in particular are unworthy). The Christian version goes on to say that an all-powerful god provided a way for people to escape the consequences of their evil. Because He came in human incarnation and took people's sins on himself, the New Testament says, painless and blissful immortal life is possible for all believers. That's the story in outline. It is the happiest of all possible happy endings. Now as I look at it from the viewpoint of a secular humanist (for want of a better term), I envy the excitement of those who fully and seriously accept the mega-story of the Bible.

In the "world" history course at school, which mainly covered Europe, religion was part of the curriculum, but only in a certain sense. When Mrs. Schechter described world religions it was obvious that her own loyalties lay with the Judeo-Christian tradition, and with Christianity in particular. Even so, this was not church. In the Bible, and in church, God is a subject of history — that is, He says and does things just like any human character does except that He is more powerful. But in a history class, even a devout teacher could treat God only as an object of history, not as a subject. We could study what Christians have said about God and (selectively) what they have done in God's name, but we couldn't say, "God did this" or "God did that." And of course we couldn't take the Bible (or any other religious text) as a reliable source for what had happened in the past.

I never thought about the difference between the history I learned on Sundays and the history I learned on weekdays. But I think the latter must have subtly undermined my religious faith, or at least pushed it to the side. After all, if it's possible to make sense of history without bringing God in directly, then what happens to the Christian view that the world's history is a vast drama climaxed by God's incarnation on earth? High school history had to be secular rather than religious, and it strengthened our secular rather than our religious loyalties.

The "big story" of our high school history lessons had nothing to do with theology. It was the story of how Western civilization — above all, the American

republic — became a pinnacle in the progress of humanity. High-school history had the purpose of making us appreciate our heritage — or, at any rate, the heritage of middle-class white suburbia. History for me was Americanism, just as it had been when I first encountered it in fourth grade.

## **Not So Simple**

Still, the late 1950s were not the early 1950s, and high school history wasn't quite the same as fourth-grade history. For Mrs. Schechter, the point wasn't so much to make us smug as to make us appreciate what we had inherited and, eventually, to help make it better — to be good citizens, in other words. American ideals had to be constantly renewed in order to be preserved. I took very seriously this mixed celebration and warning. When our senior-year English teacher assigned short speeches on the theme of "I Believe in..." I gave mine on "I Believe in Democracy."

By the late fifties, the cold war was less of a defining theme in American politics than it had been when I was in grade school. Correspondingly, race relations — above all, segregation in the South — was becoming more of an issue. Mob violence outside Central High School in Little Rock in the fall of 1958, ending only when President Eisenhower sent federal troops, helped to crystallize the issue. I followed the news in the papers and in Time, and I cared about the social injustice that racial segregation represented.

In small ways I was beginning to feel a distance from the status quo. Once, as senior patrol leader of my Boy Scout troop, I went before the "troop committee" of adults and asked them to let us go on a real camping trip instead of being part of the Armed Forces Day extravaganza at the nearby naval supply depot (they refused). I wasn't against the military — my biggest sports hero at around that time was Pete Dawkins, the West Point football star — but it felt as if we were being used for someone else's public image.

When a group called the Americans for the Competitive Enterprise System showed a film to our class about "Johnny's Bicycle," I was the only student I knew who recognized it as an allegory. In the film, Johnny wanted a bicycle and his grandfather was about to buy him one, but Johnny's father said it would be better

for him to earn the money. The grandfather had to be the government, but everyone I talked to said it was just a nice story about a bicycle.<sup>8</sup>

In my white suburban school I think the first part of Mrs. Schechter's message, national pride, affected even the students who were least interested in her classes. But it's not clear that all of us were proud of the same things. Looking back, I see a difference between people like myself who saw America in terms of its ideals and classmates who mainly cherished America's strength. I remember vividly the day in gym class when we had to take a standardized physical fitness test. As we stood there in our t-shirts and gym shorts, ready for our instructions, the teacher commented that European kids usually did better on fitness tests than American kids. This offhand remark made the boy next to me furious. I can still hear him whispering hoarsely, "Yeah? Well, who wins all the wars?"

For my part, I cared more for the righteousness of the national cause than its military might. I'm sure that outlook made me ripe for radicalization several years down the road. I wasn't the only one. I think of one of the most conservative people I knew in high school, a quietly vibrant transfer student named Mary Joe Gaw. I was shocked when she said she admired the late Senator Joseph McCarthy, who had died of ignominy in 1957: "Oh yes, he was a fighter!" But her idealism was more lasting than her conservatism. As an adult during the Vietnam War in the late 1960s, she became politically radical. At the time of her death in 1991 (a murder still unsolved) she was a charismatic and much-respected feminist law professor under her married name of Mary Joe Frug.

In the long run, the content of my high school history was less important than the spirit in which it was taught. History encouraged me to take being a citizen seriously; it made me care about what happened in my country.

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8. I don't know if that means the Competitive Enterprise people were getting their money's worth from the film or not. They also had a representative of a local bank speak to our class, but he cut the session short because all our questions focused on bank robberies.

## LOOKING BACKWARD

In the intervening years I have encountered history in new guises. It was my major field in college, as part and parcel of a liberal arts education. Then I served an apprenticeship in it as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, earning a PhD in American history. During that same period I shared in the feeling of “making history” that pervaded the 1960s New Left, which I was part of. I wrote a dissertation and a number of articles on the history of the New Left itself. Subsequently, I became fascinated by the history of the planet — the evolution of life in particular — and the ways in which human history and natural history have intertwined. Currently, as a part-time teacher and editor connected to the Gerontology program at the University of Massachusetts Boston, I am more and more interested in the twists and turns that individual lives take over the course of a lifetime.

Still, I find that my interest in the past has been rooted in my childhood experiences with it. The job of historians, I’ve come to understand, is to tell stories. “History” and “story” are two different words in English, but they are one word in French: “histoire.” It’s much harder for historians than for fiction writers, who are free to make up dialogue, put thoughts in their characters’ mouths, and arbitrarily create happy endings.<sup>9</sup> But historians have to do the best they can. For adults, as for children, the past is most memorably learned in the form of stories.

If I think about the ways that I draw on the past, I come up with two things that I cherish especially, both of which go back to childhood. The first is awe. That will take some explaining.

The very concept of time has become an object of awe for me. The closer we look at it, the harder it is to pin down exactly what time is. The earth has no clock beyond those which we invent and manufacture. Yet, mysterious as time may ultimately be, we feel its effects. We grow older. We take actions and they have consequences and the consequences cannot be undone. One of the Greek philosophers said that we never step into the same river twice because the river is

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9. Novelists have it easy. In Leon Uris’s epic novel *Trinity*, the narrator of the book is killed in a shoot-out toward the end, but the narration keeps right on going without him.

always changing. So are we.

The scale of time is even more an object of awe. Tiny fractions of a second can be measured, and we all know that an hour can seem like a eternity sometimes. Yet even an entire human lifetime is like a heartbeat when measured by the pace of geological time. Bobby Fix once explained to Davey and me that an “eon” was how long it would take a bird to break up an enormous rock by pecking at it once every hundred years. None of us really understood it, of course. I can sort of understand it now after having seen the Grand Canyon. Even at that, I have to remind myself that the oldest rocks in the canyon are hundreds of times older than the canyon itself, which started forming “only” about 6 million years ago.

As I get older myself, time takes on more emotional connotations. I sometimes wish that I’d had more of a sense of the vastness and mystery of time when I was studying history in school, but realistically I don’t see how I could have. I think you really need to have experienced long-term change in your own life before you can get a real feeling for time and its relationship to what you can see around you.

If awe is one of the two linchpins of my fascination with the past, the other is quite different: it is a feeling of being at home. This also takes explaining. It may be easiest to start by talking about reminiscence. Reminiscence is a way of trying to recapture moments in the past, of trying to keep alive that which is gone — and those who are gone. It is often a way of “taming” the past: through reminiscence we can often transform moments of fright or grief, for example, into warm memories of human connectedness and mutual support. Reminiscence implies an acceptance of the past, of the good and bad.

Feeling at home in the past means feeling a part of the flow of time. I’m struck, for example, at how the baseball history that fascinated me as a boy has become baseball nostalgia. The old-time statistics interest me much less than the way my own memories intertwine with the game. I know where I was when Bobby Thompson’s home run beat the Dodgers in 1951, and where I was when Don Larson’s perfect game beat them in 1956. I can place myself in relation to dozens of other historic games, as well as to myriad other events during my lifetime.

I’m made to feel at home in another sense by the certainty that the past can often yield. We can never know the future, but in certain limited ways we can know the



past — at least we can know the sequence of events, even if what caused the events is controversial. In keeping with my early interest in baseball history, I still get a feeling of security from being able to organize events chronologically in my mind. I can go overboard with this sort of thing. I remember riding in a car once with a successful academic historian. We were having a terrible time because the windshield-fluid mechanism on her car didn't work and we'd run into bad weather. After I asked her a couple of times how long ago it had stopped working, she informed me with all the politeness she could muster that she didn't see what difference it made.

I don't mean to make the past seem more tame and placid than it is. Sometimes memories will sting, and will do so at unpredictable and unwelcome moments. Sometimes news of a death will create one final memory of someone who meant a lot. I remember where I was in 1964 when I heard third- or fourth-hand that my childhood mentor Bobby Fix had committed suicide. I remember the shock in 1991, during a TV news report on the stabbing death of a popular Boston-area law professor, of suddenly realizing that she was a high-school classmate whom I had always hoped to see again. It turned out we had lived within a mile of each other for years and I hadn't known it. In a different vein, I had the experience in 1990–91 of investigating massive embezzlement in a nonprofit group I was involved in — I was bombarded with memories of old conversations and meetings where I, along with others, should have realized that something was amiss. Old memories are always ready to pounce.

I no longer look to the past for an overarching story with a happy ending. The “lived happily ever after” formula of the fairy tales had its echoes in childhood and after: in the grand redemption promised by the New Testament through Christ's suffering, in the marvelously fair present-day America postulated by grade-school history, and in the apocalyptic hopes for a reborn society I sometimes felt as part of the New Left. None of those happy endings resonates for me today. The only big story that I have any confidence in is the story of evolution, as a detective story slowly puzzled-through by scientists. And evolution tells me nothing about where life is headed.

As I look back, it strikes me that my interest in the past today is both a lot closer to my own life and a lot more far-reaching than when I studied history in school. I want to place myself firmly in the flow of time, but at the same time I

conceptualize that flow of time as encompassing thousands, millions, and billions of years before I was born. The past is something far more personal and also far more remote than anything that I used to understand by the word “history.” It is a source of endless curiosity for me, a source sometimes of pain but more often of enjoyment. Whether I call it “history” is something I still need to wrestle with. All I know is that there’s more of it every year.