A. THE WRITTEN RECORD

There can be no ideal research methodology. In actual practice, historians must be very flexible and creative, receptive to the tension between original data and its interpretation. There are at least three different kinds of evidence: documentary, artifactual, and oral. Each of these, in turn, can be broken down into subcategories. The challenge to the historian is to engage in an interactive process with his sources, seeking to understand the dynamic interrelationship among the diverse kinds of sources themselves.

The obvious research source for most historians is written material. For those who study cultures with a literary tradition, the written sources are the logical place to begin, if for no other reason than their abundance. Within these records are those which were consciously written in narrative form for posterity, those that were confidential and therefore not intended for public view, and those that were meant to preserve data for record-keeping. The primary sources can be published or unpublished, their authorship may or may not be known, and they may reflect either public, corporate, or private concerns.

Primary sources cannot be taken at face value. The historian must be constantly evaluating the worth of the source. Bias of authors frequently exists. Some sources are closer to the time period under study. Some were written for a public audience in order to persuade; some were written without ulterior motives other than to maintain an account of an event or a transaction. All primary sources are not equal in value.

Typically, academic historians turn to such printed records for the starting point of their study. Most plentiful are government and church records, but newspapers, diaries, private letters, corporate records of universities, or businesses, literary texts, and minutes of meetings are only a few of the sources that can begin to uncover information. Official records of this sort were often the creation of the elite within society—those who understood their importance within their culture. For this reason, it has been argued that public historians, who tend to research more local issues, will not be able to use written sources in the same way. Indeed, it has been claimed that the public historian frequently will have no "traditional" sources available.

In *Nearby History*, David Kyvig and Marty Myron dispel this myth. The local historian must often be more creative in his search for sources, and
he will often be able to collect only sketchy information. His quest will take him down less-travelled paths, often using those materials which were not originally intended for public disclosure. But sources do exist. In fact, they are often very similar to those used by "academic" historians. The difference is that such sources come from local rather than state or national repositories, and they may not initially be recognized by the nonhistorian as worthwhile. Among the sources to be culled are local planning department studies and reports, city and county council records, plat and Sanborn maps, city directories, pamphlets, timetables (from bus and railroad companies), wills, local newspapers, church archives, census records, vital statistic records, deeds, and cemetery tombstones. As in all other documents, one must ask of the written evidence a series of analytic questions, in order to establish the circumstances under which the document was created and its ultimate validity. Here are the questions Kyvig and Marty propose:

Was it a hasty, spur-of-the-moment act, a routine transaction, or a thoughtful, deliberate process?

Did the recorder possess firsthand knowledge of whatever was being described or simply report what he or she was told?

Was the recorder a neutral party or did he or she have interests which could be positively or negatively affected by what was recorded?

Did the recorder intend the document for his or her own use, for one or more selected individuals, or for a larger audience of one sort or another?

Was the recorder's intention merely to inform, or was it to persuade the reader?

Was the information recorded immediately or only after time has passed, causing memories to change or fade?

With these questions posed by local, public historians in mind, the following selection by John Tosh on the raw materials of history should be read. Tosh, from an academic perspective, illustrates the active interrelationship between the historian and his sources. He also emphasizes the function of the historian as analyst and detective. This constant analysis in the collection and evaluation of research materials is fundamental to the task of the historian. Indeed, there is no difference in the way historians use printed records, whether they be those available to the public or academic historian. Research of written records is basic to the work of the historian.

The second piece, from Carl Becker's famous book on The Declaration of Independence, nicely illustrates the value of close textual analysis for primary documents. These important documents of our past have a history of their own; they result from a process of revision and compromise, which can reveal a great deal about the cultural values of the time when they were written. Becker's presentation and analysis of the drafts of the Declaration of Independence are a useful reminder that we, as researchers, can benefit from scrutiny of extant texts of the same document while we serve as detectives of a culture.

NOTES

2. Kyvig and Marty, Nearby History, ibid., 60.
THE RAW MATERIALS

John Tosh

Such is the range of motives and the variety of interests which draw people to the past that history can be said to embrace the human experience of every place and period in the past. No part of that past can be dismissed as falling outside the proper domain of historical knowledge. But how far it can be made the subject of well-founded research depends on the availability of historical evidence. Whether the historian's main concern is with re-creation or explanation, with the past for its own sake or for the light it can shed on the present, what he or she can actually achieve is determined in the first instance by the extent and character of the surviving evidence. Accordingly it is with the sources that any account of the historian's work must begin. This chapter describes the main categories of documentary material, showing how they came into being, how they have survived down to the present, and in what form they are available to the scholar.

I

Historical sources encompass every kind of evidence which human beings have left of their past activities—the written word and the spoken word, the shape of the landscape and the material artefact, the fine arts as well as photography and film. Among the humanities and social sciences history is unique in the variety of its source materials, each calling for specialist expertise. The military historian of the English Civil War can examine the arms and armour surviving from the seventeenth century, the terrain over which the battles were fought, as well as the military dispatches of each side. A rounded picture of the General Strike of 1926 calls for a study of government and trade union records, the press and broadcasting, together with the collection of testimonies from survivors. The reconstruction of a pre-colonial kingdom in black Africa is likely to depend not only on the excavation of its capital but on the contemporary observations of European or Arab visitors and the oral traditions handed down over many generations. No single historian can possibly master all these tools. The more technical of them have become the province of distinct specialisms. The excavation of ancient sites and the interpretation of the material remains found there is the business of the archaeologist, assisted these days by the aerial photographer and the chemical analyst. The art historian has established a comparable hold over the study of the visual arts. The historian frequently draws on the findings of archaeologists and art historians, and he or she may feel qualified to draw inferences from a wide range of material evidence—from the design and structure of a Norman castle, for example, or the imagery employed in contemporary portraits of Elizabeth I and on the coinage of her reign; but these are regarded by most historians as 'extras', peripheral to their discipline. During the past thirty years the range of sources in which historians claim expertise has certainly increased. It now includes place-names, landscape patterns and—for recent history—film. The fact remains, however, that the study of history has nearly always been based squarely on what the historian can read in documents or hear from informants. And ever since historical research was placed on a professional footing during Rake's lifetime, the emphasis has fallen almost exclusively on the written rather than the spoken word—though oral sources, as we shall see, have recently begun to attract attention once more. For the vast majority of historians, research is confined to libraries and archives.

The reason is not just academic conservatism. From the High Middle Ages (c. 1000–1300) onwards, the written word survives in greater abundance than any other source for Western history. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries witnessed not only a marked growth in record-keeping by the state and other corporate bodies, but also the rapid spread of printing which encouraged literate production of all kinds and transformed its prospects of survival. Written sources are usually precise as regards time, place and authorship, and they reveal the thoughts and actions of individual men and women as no other source can do. One has only to read an account of a society for which virtually no written records exist—for example Iron Age Britain or Medieval Zimbabwe—to see how lacking in human vitality history can be when denied its principal source material. Moreover, the written word has always served many different purposes—information, propaganda, personal communication, private reflection and creative release—all of which may have relevance for the historian. The interpretation of texts serving a variety of functions from an age whose habits of mind differed sharply from our own calls for critical abilities of a very high order. Written sources are at the same time the most rewarding and (in most cases) the most plentiful. Small wonder, then, that historians seldom look elsewhere.

The use of written materials as the principal historical source is complicated by the fact that historians communicate their findings through the same medium. Both in their choice of research topic and in their finished work, historians are influenced to a greater or lesser extent by what their predecessors have written, accepting much of the evidence which they uncovered and, rather more selectively, the interpretations which they put upon it. But when we read the work of a historian we stand at one remove from the original sources of the period in question—and further away still if that historian has been content to rely on the writings
of other historians. The first test by which any historical work must be judged is how far its interpretation of the past is consistent with all the available evidence; when new sources are discovered or old ones are read in a new light, even the most prestigious book may end on the scrap-heap. In a very real sense the modern discipline of history rests not on what has been handed down by earlier historians, but on a constant reassessment of the original sources. It is for this reason that historians regard the original sources as primary. Everything which they and their predecessors have written about the past counts as a secondary source. Most of this book is concerned with secondary sources—with how historians formulate problems and reach conclusions, and how we as readers should evaluate their work. But first it is necessary to examine the raw materials a little more closely.

The distinction between primary and secondary sources, fundamental though it is to historical research, is rather less clear-cut than it might appear at first sight, and the precise demarcation varies between different authorities. By 'original sources' is meant evidence contemporary with the event or thought to which it refers. But how far should our definition of 'contemporary' be stretched? No-one would quibble about a conversation reported a week or even a month after it took place, but what about the version of the same episode in an autobiography composed twenty years later? And how should we categorize an account of a riot written shortly afterwards, but by someone who was not present and relied entirely on hearsay? Although some purists regard the testimony of anyone who was not present as a secondary source, it makes better sense to apply a broad definition, but to recognize at the same time that some sources are more 'primary' than others. The historian will usually prefer those sources which are closest in time and place to the events in question. But sources more remote from the action have their own significance. The historian is often as much interested in what contemporaries thought was happening as in what actually happened: British reactions to the French Revolution, for example, had a profound influence on the climate of politics in this country, and from this point of view the often garbled reports of events in Paris which circulated in Britain at the time are an indispensable source. As this example suggests, to speak of a source as 'primary' implies no judgement of its reliability or freedom from bias. Many primary sources are inaccurate, muddled, based on hearsay or intended to mislead, and it is a vital part of the historian's work to scrutinize the source for distortions of this kind. The distinction between primary and secondary is further complicated by the fact that sometimes primary and secondary material appear in the same work. Medieval chroniclers usually began with an account of world history since the Creation to the life of Christ, based on well-known authorities; but what modern historians value them most for is the entries which they recorded year by year concerning current events. Equally a work can be primary in one context and secondary in another: Macaulay's History of England (1848–55) is a secondary source whose reputation has been much undermined by modern research; but for anyone studying the political and historical assumptions of the early Victorian elite, Macaulay's book, in its day a best-seller, is a significant primary source. These examples might suggest what is often assumed, that 'historical documents' are the formal, dignified records of the past. It is true that records of this kind are more likely to endure, but the term should carry the widest possible reference. Every day all of us create what are potentially historical documents—financial accounts, private correspondence, even shopping lists. Whether they actually become historical documents depends on whether they survive and whether they are used as primary evidence by scholars of the future.

In order to make sense of the vast mass of surviving primary sources, the first requirement is some system of classification. Two types are in common use. The first draws a distinction between the published—which in the modern period has usually meant printed—and the unpublished or manuscript source. The second emphasizes instead the authorship of the sources, drawing a distinction between those produced by governments and those produced by corporations, associations or private individuals. Each of these methods lends itself to the precision required by the cataloguer, and bibliographies published by historians at the end of their works are normally arranged along these lines. But the criteria which historians actually apply in the course of their research, although related to these two types of classification, are rather less cut and dried. In the historian's hierarchy of sources those which carry most weight are the ones which arise directly from everyday business or social intercourse, leaving open the task of interpretation. In every age men and women have sought to make sense of their times, and to interpret the pattern of events through books, broadsheets and newspapers. Such statements offer valuable insights into the mentality of the age, but for the historian they are no substitute for the direct, day-to-day evidence of thought and action provided by the letter, the diary and the memorandum: these are the 'records' of history par excellence. The historian wishes to be as nearly as possible an observer of the events in question; he does not want to deliver himself into the hands of a narrator or commentator. The most revealing source is that which was written with no thought for posterity. Marc Bloch called this 'the evidence of witnesses in spite of themselves'; it has all the fascination of eaves-dropping.

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II

We begin, however, with primary sources written for the benefit of posterity. These tend to be the most accessible because their survival was seldom left to chance. Often they have a literary quality which makes them a pleasure to read. They provide a ready-made chronology, a coherent selection of events, and a strong sense of period atmosphere. Their drawback is that they recount only what people found worthy of note about their own age—which may not be what interests us today. Prior to the Rankean revolution in the nineteenth century it was on primary sources of this kind that historians tended to rely. For Roman history they turned to Caesar, Tacitus and Suetonius, while Medievalists drew on the Anglo-
Saxon Chronicle and the works of men like Matthew Paris in the thirteenth century and Jean Froissart in the fourteenth. Nor do modern historians disparage these narrative sources. They owe their continuing importance to the fact that they survive from periods which have left only a limited amount of record sources. In the Middle Ages most of the early chronicles were written by monks without personal experience of public affairs, but increasingly from the twelfth century they were joined by secular clergy who had served the king in responsible positions and could to some extent record political history from the inside. Gerald of Wales was a royal chaplain who became acquainted with Henry II towards the end of his reign in the 1180s. The following passage well conveys the restless energy of one of England's most remarkable kings:

Henry II, king of England, was a man of reddish, freckled complexion with a large round head, grey eyes which glowed fiercely and grew bloodshot in anger, a fiery countenance and a harsh, cracked voice. His neck was somewhat thrust forward from his shoulders, his chest was broad and square, his arms strong and powerful. His frame was stocky with a pronounced tendency to corpulence, due rather to nature than to indulgence, which he tempered by exercise...

In times of war, which frequently threatened, he gave himself scarcely a modicum of quiet to deal with those matters of business which were left over, and in times of peace he allowed himself neither tranquility nor repose. He was addicted to the chase beyond measure; at crack of dawn he was off on horseback, traversing waste lands, penetrating forests and climbing the mountain-tops, and so he passed restless days. At evening on his return he was rarely seen to sit down either before or after supper. After such great and wearsome exertions he would wear out the whole court by continual standing.6

The autobiography is essentially a modern variant of the chronicle, with the personality of the author brought to the front of the stage. Invented by the self-conscious Italians of the Renaissance,4 this form is favoured by artists, writers, and perhaps most of all by politicians. Their fascination derives from the fact that they are the recollections of an insider. Indeed they often provide the only available first-hand account because in all countries recent government records are closed to public inspection (see below p. 156–157); in Britain former Cabinet ministers, when writing their memoirs, are permitted to consult official papers relating to their term of office, though they may not cite or quote from them. But the author's purpose is less to offer an objective account than to justify his or her actions in retrospect and to provide evidence for the defence before the bar of history. Autobiographies may be very revealing of mentality and values, but as a record of events they are often inaccurate and selective to the point of distortion. The historian of the Suez crisis of 1956 who could use no other source than the third volume of Sir Anthony Eden's memoirs (Full Circle, 1960) would be in an unenviable position.

The eighteenth century understood the term 'memoirs' in a rather different sense: it denoted a personal chronicle written by someone in public life and intended for publication only after—sometimes long after—his or her death; its purpose was to record facts and opinions which it would have been indiscreet or dangerous to make known at the time, and it therefore makes much more exciting reading than the usually bland and evasive political autobiography. The master of this genre was the Duc de Saint-Simon, whose ambition was to leave what has been aptly called 'a minority or dissenting report' on the Versailles of Louis XIV and Louis XV; his Memoirs, written in a superb prose style, cover the years from 1691 to 1723. His nearest English rival was Lord Hervey, a favourite of George II's Queen Caroline, who composed a malicious picture of palace intrigue between 1727 and 1757.6

The chronicles and memoirs which people write for future generations are, of course, only a small minority of what is published in any period. Most publications are issued with little thought for posterity; they are rather intended to inform, influence, mislead or entertain contemporaries. The invention of printing in the fifteenth century greatly facilitated the dissemination of such writings, while the growth of literacy among the laity increased the demand for them. Governments were quick to profit from the revolution in communications, and by the nineteenth century statements of policy, propaganda, and digests of information on trade, revenue and expenditure were flowing from the official presses. In Britain perhaps the most impressive of these publications were the census reports published every ten years from 1801, and the reports of royal commissions set up from the 1830s onwards to take evidence and make recommendations on major social problems such as public health and conditions of work. Another official publication of great interest is the reports of parliamentary proceedings. Thomas Hansard began publication of the debates in the Lords and Commons as a private venture in 1812 (though not quite the first of its kind). The series assumed its modern format in 1909 when the government, through His Majesty's Stationery Office, took it over; first-person, verbatim reporting became the rule. Few other sources convey so well the public face of political discourse.

But the most important published primary source for the historian is the press, which in Britain has a continuous history dating back to the early eighteenth century, the first daily newspaper having been founded in 1702. Newspapers have a threefold value. In the first place, they record the political and social views which made most impact at the time; indeed the earliest newspapers, which had developed out of the vigorous tradition of pamphleteering during the Civil War and Commonwealth (1642–60), contained little else and are remembered now for the brilliant polemics of Addison, Steele and Swift. To this day the leaders and correspondence columns of the great London dailies offer the best entry into the current state of establishment opinion—provided due allowance is made for the editorial bias of the paper in question. Secondly, newspapers provide a day-to-day record of events. During the nineteenth century this function began to be filled much more fully, particularly when the development of the electric telegraph in the 1850s enabled journalists in distant postings to file their copy home as soon as it was written. W. H. Russell of The Times was one of the first to take advantage of this revolution in com-
munications. His celebrated despatches from the Crimea during the war of 1854–56, which provided shocking evidence of the disarray of the British forces, had a major impact on public opinion at home and still make compelling reading.\(^7\) As sources of straight reporting, newspapers are likely to become even more valuable to historians in the future. For despite the vast archives which governments and corporations continue to amass, important decisions are increasingly communicated by telephone rather than by letter, and information obtained informally by journalists at the time may provide the only contemporary written record of what has taken place.

Lastly, newspapers from time to time present the results of more thorough enquiries into issues which lie beyond the scope of routine news-reporting. The founder of this tradition was Henry Mayhew, an impecunious writer briefly employed by the Morning Chronicle in 1849–50. As ‘Special Correspondent for the Metropolis’ he wrote a series of articles exposing social conditions among the London poor in the aftermath of the great cholera epidemic of 1849, which later formed the basis of his book, London Labour and the London Poor (1851). Few investigative journalists since then have equalled Mayhew in the thoroughness of his research or in his impact on contemporary opinion.\(^8\)

There is one other kind of source intended for the eyes of contemporaries (and often for posterity too) which historians have to consider, though it is rather a special case: this is creative literature. Novels and plays cannot of course, be treated as factual reports, however great the element of autobiography or social observation may be. Nor, needless to say, do historical novels—or Shakespeare’s history plays for that matter—carry any authority as historical statements about the periods to which they refer. But all creative literature offers insights into the social and intellectual milieu in which the writer lived, and often vivid descriptions of the physical setting as well. The success of an author is often attributable to the way in which he or she articulates the values and preoccupations of literary contemporaries. So it makes good sense to cite Chaucer as a spokesman for the attitudes of the fourteenth-century laity to abuses in the Church, or Dickens as evidence of the frame of mind in which middle-class Victorians considered the ‘condition of England’ question.

III

Because newspapers, official publications and parliamentary speeches are composed mostly with a view to their impact on contemporary opinion, historians attach greater weight to them than to the chronicles and memoirs written with the requirements of posterity in mind. But the very fact of publication sets a limit on the value of all these sources. They contain only what was considered to be fit for public consumption—what governments were prepared to reveal, what journalists could elicit from tight-lipped informants, what editors thought would gratify their readers, or MPs their constituents. In each case there is a controlling purpose which may limit, distort or falsify what is said. The historian who wishes, in Ranke’s phrase, ‘to show how things really were’ must go behind the pub-

lished word, and that is why the greatest advances in modern historical knowledge have been based on research into ‘records’—that is, confidential documents such as letters, minutes and diaries. It is in these forms that men and women record their decisions, discussions and sometimes their innermost thoughts, unmindful of the eyes of future historians. Time and again, historians have found that a careful study of the record sources reveals a picture very different from the confident generalizations of contemporary observers. Whether the question at issue is the motives of the participants in the English Civil War, or the impact of the Industrial Revolution on standards of living, or the volume of the Atlantic slave trade, there is no substitute for the painstaking accumulation of evidence from the record sources of the period.

In most countries the largest single body of unpublished records is that belonging to the state, and since Ranke’s day more research has been devoted to government archives than to any other kind of source. In the West the oldest surviving state archives took shape during the twelfth century, which saw a marked advance in the sophistication of government organization all over Europe. In England a continuous series of revenue records—the Pipe Rolls of the Exchequer—extends back to 1155, and the records of the royal courts (King’s Bench and Common Pleas) to 1194. The beginning of systematic record-keeping can be dated precisely to 1199. In that year King John’s chancellor, Hubert Walter, began the practice of making copies on parchment rolls of all the more important letters dispatched from Chancery in the king’s name. Even after the emergence of other departments in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Chancery remained the nerve-centre of royal administration, and its enrolments are the most important archival source for the Middle Ages in England.

During the period 1450–1550 the Medieval system was superseded by a more bureaucratic administrative structure controlled by the Privy Council. The most powerful single official within this structure was the king’s secretary (later called the secretary of state), and from the reign of Henry VIII his records, known as the State Papers, become the most rewarding source for the policies and actions of the government. In contrast to Chancery records the State Papers, to quote Galbraith,

are not the routine products of an office, but the intimate and miscellaneous correspondence of an official whose duties knew no fixed limits . . . The veil that separates us from character and personality in the Middle Ages is torn aside.\(^9\)

Among the State Papers for 1536 there survives this letter summoning an unfortunate priest from Leicestershire to an interrogation, probably in connection with treason; the menacing tone is unmistakable:

I commend me unto you. Letting you wit the King’s pleasure and commandment is that, all excuses and delays set apart, ye shall incontinent upon the sight hereof repair unto me whereasover I shall chance to be, the specialties whereof ye shall know at your coming. Without failing thus to do, as ye will answer at your peril. From the Rolls, the 8th day of July. Thomas Cromwell (sic).\(^10\)
It is this category of document which proliferated in the following centuries as additional secretaries of state were appointed to run new departments which could keep abreast of the expanding scope of government. By the nineteenth century each department of state was keeping a systematic record of letters and papers received, copies of letters sent out, and memoranda circulating within the department. At the apex of this complex bureaucratic structure stands the Cabinet. For the first two hundred years of its existence, its deliberations were entirely off the record, but since 1916 the Cabinet Secretariat has kept minutes of the Cabinet's weekly meetings and prepared papers for its use.

Another aspect of the enlargement of government under the Tudors was the beginning of routine diplomacy conducted by resident accredited ambassadors. The Italian states set the pattern in the 1490s and 1490s; other countries soon followed, and England's diplomatic network had taken shape by the 1520s. The Venetian ambassador who, in the course of twelve months in 1503-4, sent back from Rome 472 despatches was more industrious than most,11 but regular reporting home was from the start an essential part of the ambassador's duties. These reports not only document the conduct of foreign policy more fully than ever before; they also record the diplomat's appraisal of the court of the country to which he was accredited. Ranke relied on them heavily for both political and diplomatic history, and there have been many historians since whose expertise is almost entirely limited to diplomatic documents. By the late nineteenth century—often thought of as the 'golden age' of diplomatic history—the documentary record is so full that the historian can reconstruct every stage in a diplomatic initiative from the first tentative proposal of a ministry official to the completed report on the negotiations.

Two other types of record share the official character of central government records. In the first place, during the Middle Ages the Church wielded as much, if not more authority than the state, and in most European countries retained many of its powers in the secular sphere until the early nineteenth century. Its history is fully documented by the immense quantity of church records which are available to historians today, many of them still virtually untouched. Royal charters granting land and privileges to the Church have been preserved from the early Middle Ages, and copious records document the efficiency of episcopal and monastic administration. The records of the church courts are more interesting than might seem likely at first glance, because so many moral misdemeanours of ordinary people came within their jurisdiction. In sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, for example, when the established Church's position vis-à-vis the Puritan sects was under threat, strenuous efforts were made through the church courts to discipline the laity, and the records of these courts are therefore an important source for the social historian. The church courts also retained jurisdiction over wills in England until 1858, and from Elizabeth I's reign onwards they insisted on detailed inventories of all moveable property, which can now tell the historian a great deal about wealth, status and standards of living.
at any one time—whether they be governments, religious bodies or businesses. For the greater part of recorded history, literate people have probably done most of their writing in the course of their professional or official duties. Nevertheless there survives a vast mass of written material which has been set down by men and women as private individuals, outside the office or the counting house. Much the largest proportion is accounted for by private correspondence. Among the earliest and most intimate is that between a successful fourteenth-century merchant of Prato (a Tuscan cloth town) and his wife. For eighteen years (1382–1400) pressure of business kept Francesco Datini away from home in Florence and Pisa, and twice a week he wrote to Margherita, and she almost as often to him. On Datini’s instructions, most of these letters, along with his extensive business correspondence, were preserved after his death in his house at Prato. The result is a unique chronicle of a Medieval marriage. Something of the strain which frequent separations imposed on the marriage is conveyed in this extract from a letter written by Margherita in 1389:

As to your staying away from here until Thursday, you can do as you please, being our master—which is a fine office, but should be used with discretion . . . I am fully disposed to live together, as God wills . . . and I am in the right, and you will not change it by shouting.

Methinks it is not needful to send me a message every Wednesday, to say you will be here on Sunday, for I trow on every Friday, you repent. It would suffice to tell me on Saturday that I could buy something more at the market: for then at least we would fare well on Sundays.14

There are no other sources which bring to life so clearly the family and social relationships of people in the past. Without private correspondence the biographer must be content with the public or business life of his subject—which indeed is all that Medieval biographies can usually attain. But private letters are an essential source for historians of politics as well. This is because government records are more concerned with decisions and their implementation than with the motives of the people who made them. The private correspondence of public figures reveals much that is scarcely hinted at in the official record. It is the 522 volumes of the Duke of Newcastle’s papers (supported by many other private collections), rather than the State Papers or the proceedings of the House of Commons, which underpin Namier’s classic analyses of electoral and parliamentary management in the mid-eighteenth century.18 The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the eve of the telephone era and the great age of personal correspondence, when close colleagues in public life wrote to each other daily. Much of this correspondence by-passed official channels and was intended to be seen by none but the recipient. Some politicians confided to a remarkable degree in friends who were without any formal position in politics at all. For three of the years (1912–15) during which he was prime minister, H. H. Asquith wrote once or twice a day to a young lady called Venetia Stanley. In these letters he could frankly express all his political anxieties and frustrations (as well as many more trivial reflections) confident that his remarks would go no further. Here, in a letter

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of March 1915, is his assessment of Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty:

As you know, like you, I am really fond of him; but I regard his future with many misgivings. . . He will never get to the top in English politics, with all his wonderful gifts; to speak with the tongue of men & angels, and to spend laborious days & nights in administration, is no good, if a man does not inspire trust.16

Private letters are associated with another source which is in some ways even more revealing of personality and opinion—the diary. Diary-keeping began in the sixteenth century and soon became a common literary accomplishment among the educated, especially in England, which in John Evelyn and Samuel Pepys produced two of the greatest masters of the art. Unlike the chronicler or annalist, the diarist is as much preoccupied with his own subjective response as with the external events which he has witnessed. The considerations which induce someone to devote several hours each week to keeping up a diary are anything but frivolous. For creative writers the diary satisfies the compulsion to observe and reflect, free of the constraints imposed by the formal requirements of the novel, poem or play. Of politicians it is sometimes assumed that a diary serves as little more than an aidemémoire to be drawn on when the time comes to compose an autobiography. But for most political diarists this is a secondary consideration compared with the release from the intense pressures of life in the public eye which a diary affords. The diary which Gladstone kept from 1825 to 1896 has almost the character of a confessional: the record of daily engagements and political commentaries is broken up by long passages of painful self-analysis, an unremitting quest for purity of soul.17 No historian who has not read the diary can hope to understand the personality of this giant among Victorian statesmen. In the case of the Labour politician, Hugh Dalton, diary-writing seems to have filled a psychological need directly related to his political performance. As Ben Pimlott explains, the diary, which spans the years 1916 to 1960, acted both as a sounding-board for ideas and as a safety-valve for Dalton’s ‘very strong instinct towards political self-destructiveness’, being fullest for those times when he was consumed by feelings of resentment or irritation against his closest political associates.18

For the historian of twentieth-century politics letters and diaries are of particular significance, despite the almost limitless volume of official records. In the course of the last two generations ministers and civil servants have tended to become more discreet in their official correspondence. During the nineteenth century such correspondence was occasionally published by authority, for example in the Blue Books laid by British ministers before Parliament; but this was usually done almost immediately, for pressing propaganda reasons, and the published despatches had in some cases been composed with that express purpose. In the 1920s, however, the select publication of official records grew out of all proportion, as governments strove to excuse themselves, and blame others, for responsibility for the First World War, often with scant regard for the reputation of
individual officials twenty or thirty years earlier. Ministers and civil servants, especially those concerned with foreign policy, became much more inhibited in their official correspondence; what they wrote to each other privately, or recorded in their diaries, therefore gains in interest. Moreover, much that politicians do say in the course of their ministerial duties does not find its way into the official record. The civil servants who compile Cabinet minutes, for example, are primarily concerned with the decisions reached; the heated political arguments, which are what interests the historian most about Cabinet meetings, go largely unrecorded. Richard Crossman, who served as a Cabinet minister under Harold Wilson from 1964–70, kept a weekly diary which was intended, as he put it, to do something towards ‘lighting up the secret places of British politics’, among which the Cabinet featured prominently. Crossman’s diary is unusual in that, almost from the outset, he envisaged its publication within a few years; his work bears comparison with ‘memoirs’ in the sense understood by Saint-Simon or Hervey. By contrast, the vast majority of the diaries and letters available to the historian were written without thought of a wider readership. Of all sources they are the most spontaneous and unvarnished, revealing both the calculated strategems and the unconscious assumptions of public figures.

From this discussion about the different categories of source material it will be apparent that a variety of factors has contributed to the survival of so much documentation from the past. Private letters and diaries have owed their survival to the writer’s desire for posthumous fame, or the family piety of the heirs, or perhaps their inertia in leaving trunks and drawers undisturbed. In the case of public records the reasons are more straightforward and more compelling: they arise from the central role of written precedent in law and administration since the High Middle Ages. To put it bluntly, governments needed an accurate record of what was due to them in taxes, dues and services, while the king’s subjects cherished evidence of privileges and exemptions which had been granted to them in the past. As the royal bureaucracy grew bigger and more unwieldy, it became increasingly necessary for officials to have a record of what their predecessors had done. As the practice of diplomacy became more formalized from the fifteenth century onwards, ministers could review the earlier relations of their governments with foreign powers and be briefed on their obligations and entitlements under foreign treaties. What was true of governments applied mutatis mutandis to other corporate bodies such as the Church, or the great trading companies and financial houses. The only way in which institutions with this sort of permanence could have a ‘memory’ was if a careful record of their transactions was preserved.

But practical motives are not everything. Written documents are also fragile, and the fact that they have weathered the hazards of fire, flood and sheer neglect in such profusion also requires explanation. Continuity of government and of basic law and order are vital. Throughout most of

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THE RAW MATERIALS

Europe the fabric of literate civilization has endured without a break since the early Middle Ages. Within Europe the distribution of the surviving documentation is largely explained by the incidence of warfare and revolutionary upheaval. It is because England has had little of either that English Medieval public records are so plentiful. Last but not least, the growth of historical consciousness itself has had important consequences in minimizing the destruction of documents once they have ceased to be of practical use. Here the Renaissance was the turning point. Curiosity about classical antiquity bred an antiquarian mentality which valued the relics of the past for their own sake—hence the beginning of both archaeology and the systematic conservation of manuscripts and books. It is the combination of these factors which accounts for the uniquely rich documentation for the history of Western society, and distinguishes it from the other great literate cultures of China, India and the Muslim world where the survival of written sources has been much more patchy.

Only relatively recently, however, has it become a reasonably simple matter to locate the sources and secure access to them. Without the coming of age of historical studies in the mid-nineteenth century and the growing political awareness of the need to preserve the raw materials of a national past, historians today would face a much more daunting prospect. Their task is easiest in the case of published sources. In England there is a good chance that the researcher, assisted by bibliographies and catalogues, will find what he or she wants in one of the great ‘copyright’ libraries which by Act of Parliament are entitled to a free copy of every book and pamphlet published in the United Kingdom; the most complete is the British Museum (reorganized as the British Library in 1973) whose entitlement dates back to 1757, and has been rigorously enforced since the 1840s. But what of the unpublished sources? The conservation of public and private documents, many of them written with no thought for the requirements of storage and reference, presents much greater problems.

In some cases the problems have been partially solved by publication. An immense effort was devoted to this task during the nineteenth century when the historical value of records gained common acceptance for the first time. The pattern was set by the Monumenta Germaniae Historica series, which began publication with government support in 1826 under the direction of the best historians of the day; by the 1860s most of the raw materials for Medieval German history were in print. Other countries quickly followed suit, including Britain, where the equivalent Rolls Series began to appear in 1858. The original promoters of these projects intended to publish all the extant primary sources. Even for the Medieval period this was an ambitious goal; for later, more lavishly documented periods it was an obvious impossibility. In the late nineteenth century, therefore, attention was increasingly switched to the publication of ‘calendars’, or full summaries of the records. Calendars are an immense help to the researcher, but only because they indicate which documents are relevant to his or her purpose; they are no substitute for perusal of the originals. There is therefore no evading the need to spend long and often tedious hours reading primary sources in manuscript.
The historian's task is in most countries greatly eased by an elaborate archive service. But this is a relatively recent development, and the survival of documents from the remote past has often owed more to luck than good management. Many archival collections have perished by accident: the Whitehall fire of 1619 destroyed many of the Privy Council papers, and the fire which swept the Palace of Westminster in 1834 took with it most of the records belonging to the House of Commons. Other holdings have been deliberately destroyed for political reasons: a prominent feature of the agrarian revolts which broke out in the French countryside in July 1789 was the burning of manorial archives which authorized the exaction of heavy dues from the peasantry. In Africa during the 1960s departing colonial officials sometimes destroyed their files for fear that sensitive material would fall into the hands of their African successors.

In England, as elsewhere in Europe, the conservation of archives by the state dates back to the twelfth century. But until the nineteenth century each department of government retained its own archives. They were housed all over London in a variety of buildings, many of them highly unsuitable. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Chancery records in the Tower were kept above the Ordnance Board's gunpowder stores, while other repositories were exposed to the ravages of damp and rodents, These conditions not only frustrated private litigants (and the occasional historian) wishing to track down precedents, they had ceased to be in current use. The case is entirely different with records in private hands. Record Office is the largest archive in the world (with over 80 miles of shelving) and, in its new building in the new state of Asia and Africa which won independence between the 1940s and 1970s. The consolidation of the records of colonial administration into a national archive has been one of the first tasks undertaken in pursuit of a properly documented national past.

As the interests of historians have been enlarged to cover social and economic themes, the conservation and organization of local records has been increasingly taken in hand. This has been a formidable undertaking which has won scant public recognition. Under legislation passed in 1965 every county in England and Wales is required to maintain a county record office whose job is to gather together the different categories of local record—quarter sessions, parish, borough and manorial records, etc. Many of the record offices originated in local initiatives taken before the Second World War, and they have extended their search well beyond the semi-official categories to include the records of businesses, estates and associations. Today the holdings of all the county record offices almost certainly exceed those of the PRO. Local and regional studies have become a practical proposition for professional historians for the first time. Nowhere, however, have historians been granted complete freedom of access to public records. If historians were allowed to inspect files as soon as they had ceased to be in current use, they would not be able to study material which was only a few years old. All governments, whatever their political complexion, depend on a measure of confidentiality, and they tend to interpret this requirement very rigorously. Civil servants expect to be reasonably secure in the knowledge that what they set down officially shall not be publicly discussed in the foreseeable future. In Britain the 'closed period' laid down for public records varied considerably according to the department of origin until it was standardized at fifty years in 1958. Nine years later, after a vigorous campaign by historians, this period was reduced to thirty years. France followed suit in 1970, but in some countries, for example, Italy, fifty years is still the rule. Everywhere governments do not hesitate to withhold indefinitely documents which relate to particularly sensitive episodes—for example the Irish crisis of 1916-22 and the abdication of 1936 in Britain, and in France several issues which arose during the decline of the Third Republic in the late 1930s. In the USA the Freedom of Information Act of 1975 allows both historians and the general public much wider access, but elsewhere the reduction of the closed period to thirty years is probably as far as the liberalization of access to public records is likely to go. Clearly this has major implications for the study of contemporary history, where historians are forced to rely much more than they would on what was made public at the time, or what has been disclosed retrospectively in memoirs and diaries.

Yet, however galling these restrictions may seem, government archives are at least centralized and accessible. The same broadly applies to local public records. The case is entirely different with records in private hands. These are widely dispersed and subject to varying—and sometimes perverse—conditions of access; and while governments have usually acknowledged the need for some kind of archive conservation, however rudimentary, family and business records, which may serve no practical function, have often been completely neglected. Nor can the historian whose interest is confined to official documents afford to ignore these private collections. Until the Cabinet Secretariat laid down firm guidelines after 1916, it was common for retiring ministers and officials to keep official papers in their possession; from the sixteenth century onwards, a steady flow of State Papers passed out of public custody in this way, and to this day most of the State Papers dating from Robert Cecil's tenure of office (1596-1612) are at Hatfield House.

In most European countries one of the functions of the national libraries which were set up during the nineteenth century has been to secure possession of the most valuable private manuscript collections. Britain's national library dates back to the foundation of the British Museum in 1758.
Of the Museum's foundation manuscript collections, the most important from the historian's point of view is that of Sir Robert Cotton, the early seventeenth-century collector and antiquarian; this numbered among its treasures a great many State Papers, one version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and two of the four surviving 'exemplifications' of Magna Carta (i.e. copies made at the time of the agreement between King John and the barons in 1215). Purchases and bequests since then have made the British Museum far and away the largest repository of historical manuscripts in this country outside the PRO. Even so, the number of important documents held elsewhere is incalculable. Many private collections have been given or loaned indefinitely to public libraries, or to the county record offices. But many more remain in the hands of private individuals, companies and associations. For over a hundred years the Historical Manuscripts Commission has promoted the care of manuscripts privately held in Britain and located their whereabouts, but there is still scope for the historian with a nose for detective work. Several of the collections of private papers on which Namier relied for his studies on eighteenth-century English politics were discovered during what he called his 'cross-country paper-chases'.

The position is worst in the case of the personal and ephemeral materials in the hands of ordinary people—the account books of small businesses, the minute books of local clubs, everyday personal correspondence and the like. Neither the local record offices nor the Historical Manuscripts Commission cast their net as widely as this, yet the recovery of everyday documentation is important if historians are ever to make good their oft-stated aspiration to treat the masses and not just their masters. This is a task for historians with a local focus everywhere, but it is seldom energetically pursued. Since people are usually unaware that they hold material which might be historically significant, historians cannot wait for documents to be brought forward; they need to engage in propaganda and go out in search of them. The Manchester Studies Unit of Manchester Polytechnic began an adventurous programme of archive retrieval in 1975. Appeals for material appeared in the local press and on radio, and a field officer was appointed who approached likely holders of papers and organized house-to-house canvassing in selected neighbourhoods: the results were rewarding.

It might be supposed that a clear division of labour exists between archivists and historians, with the former locating the materials and the latter putting them to use. These examples show that historians cannot in practice leave the task of tracking down documentation to others. The first step in any programme of historical research, then, is to establish the full extent of the sources. Considerable perseverance and ingenuity may be required even at this early stage.

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