Preserving History In Accounting: Seeking Common Ground Between ‘New’ And ‘Old’ History

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by

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Abstract

Traditional conceptions of accounting history and its achievements are being challenged by new accounting historians who are informed by radical philosophies and approaches to history. This is a belated reflection of movements within the wider discipline of history which can be traced to the Annalists in the 1930's and more recently to the influence of postmodernism. At issue between the traditional and new history are the importance of facts and the pursuit of truth by traditional historians. New accounting historians have decried the reactionary effects of traditional history, which they propose to overcome by substituting accounting as an interested discourse for accounting as a neutral, socially sterile technique. As the conventional form of history writing, the narrative form also has been disparaged. The paper concludes by warning that accounting historians should avoid the extreme path of the postmodernist historians. They should instead be tolerant of different approaches to accounting history.
PRESERVING HISTORY IN ACCOUNTING: SEEKING COMMON GROUND BETWEEN ‘NEW’ AND ‘OLD’ HISTORY

INTRODUCTION
The rise of the ‘alternative’ research or critical accounting paradigm in accounting and its strong challenge to the entrenched hegemony of the positivist paradigm is one of the most striking features of academic accounting over the past decade. Central to much of the critical accounting research which has sought to question the legitimacy of existing institutions, distributions of power and the role of accounting in sustaining and perpetuating dominant capitalist forms of discourse has been an emphasis on history. Work which incorporates insights from the work of Foucault, for example, in order to explain and critique the present relies heavily upon developing a historical trajectory (eg Stewart 1992; Armstrong 1991; Hoskin and Macve 1986; Loft 1986). Indeed, much of the work in the alternative paradigm stands or falls on the strength of its historical work; that which is now boastfully referred to as the “new accounting history” (for examples see Willmott 1986; Walker 1991; Bryer 1991; Loft 1986, pp.140,167).

The embracing objectives of this paper are twofold. Firstly, to show some of the fundamental differences between traditional and new accounting historians, initially through an examination of conflicts in the wider discipline of history, and then to argue that, in the absence of an extremist interpretation of the mission of accounting history, there can be sufficient common ground to bind the accounting history discipline. To achieve these objectives the paper will update some of the judgements in Miller, Hopper and Laughlin’s 1991 paper which reviewed the progress of new accounting history and examine the criticisms levelled by the new accounting history at traditional or ‘old’ forms of accounting history, especially beliefs about the relationship between facts and truth, objectivity and the place of narrative in the writing of history. With reference to the work of Paul Ricoeur the paper promotes the role of narrativity in the

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1Hoskin and Macve prefer the term “conventional” (1986, p.107) while Loft, with deliberation, describes traditional accounting history as “official history” (1986, p.140).
'new' accounting history, arguing that narrative should be central to the subject matter and epistemology of new accounting history and not be treated as incompatible.

This paper, therefore, is both an attempt to demonstrate the value of the methods of the "old" accounting history and a plea for understanding between the new and the traditional historians. It will argue, after Miller, Hopper and Laughlin (1991, pp.398,399), that both streams of accounting history have much to gain by seeing some value in the contributions which the other can make and much to lose if new accounting historians take the path of intellectual superiority which seeks to demean the accomplishments and methods of traditional accounting history. Identification of faults should not mean that the whole structure is condemned. The last thing which accounting historians should do is extend the battles of the wider accounting discipline into accounting history. The schism in accounting research between positivists and the non-positivists has been the cause of enough angst and ill feeling in the discipline, especially as the positivists are seen as using their current ascendant position to advantage like minded and motivated colleagues.

Reflecting the nature of the new research agendas within the alternative research paradigm (sometimes called critical social research), accounting history has embarked upon a path which is at variance with traditional conceptions of accounting history. Consistent with the radical philosophy, methods and aims of alternative research, the differences between the new accounting history and traditional accounting history are exalted as the saviour of accounting history and the means by which it can start to make a worthwhile contribution to improving our understanding of the environment in which accounting operates. More importantly, new accounting history is said to provide the foundation to expose the reflexive relationship between accounting and the socio/economic/political system in which it is embedded and thereby demonstrate that not only do "men make history ... (but) history also makes men and fashions their destiny - anonymous history, working in the depths and most often in silence" (Braudel 1980, p.10; Loft 1986, p.138).
Researchers in accounting have been reminded that to "the extent that the social construction of reality is generally a long-term, gradual process, the research strategy should also focus on building a knowledge of context" (Covaleski and Dirsmith 1988, p.548; Dillard 1991, p.9). Similar calls much earlier by Littleton (1933, p.267) and later by Glautier (1973, p.437) indicate that the current interest of new accounting historians is far from novel in accounting history. What is new is the difference in purpose of the new accounting historians' focus. For Littleton a study of the social context of accounting was important to see how society's needs led to accounting practices. The new accounting history's concern is significantly different in primary focus. To promote their endeavours the new accounting historians see the study of accounting history

as a way of demonstrating that the legitimacy of a particular body of professional knowledge, its status as a naturalized and neutralized body of techniques, is a historically contingent state of affairs (Miller, Hopper and Laughlin 1991, p.395).

Cooper and Sherer stress that a strong reliance on a descriptive historical approach to the study of accounting is necessary "in order to understand the changing roles of accounting" (1984, p.219). In a similar vein, Hopwood and Johnson have praised the emphasis of many accounting historians on

taking temporal sequences seriously when attempting to understand the emergence of outcomes and events. They strive to ask questions of social structures and processes when they are understood to be situated concretely in time and space (1986, pp.38-39, quoted in Poullaos, 1992, chapter 2).

Numerous other studies have also referred to the "web of social factors" in which the meanings of accounting have been embedded and the way that these have been "seriously underresearched" (Laughlin 1990, pp.16,34,35; Neimark and Tinker 1986; Burchell, Clubb and Hopwood 1985; Miller and O'Leary 1987; Kirkham 1992).

History in its traditional forms has been widely criticised by those within the academic accounting profession and by professional historians. Mills (1993, p.801) refers to 20 years of turmoil in the discipline of history which has been brought about as historians have borrowed from a wide diversity of social sciences (see also Braudel 1980, p.200).
These borrowings have brought the content and methods of traditional history, which have developed since the 19th century (Carr 1964; Elton 1982; Parker 1990, p.1), into open and often acrimonious conflict with the brash ways of the 'new' historian (Braudel 1980, p.6; Himmelfarb 1987,1994). Prominent amongst the torrent of criticism which has been levelled at the way history has been traditionally practised and written have been American historiographers, notably Hayden White. Despite often vitriolic attacks by this group, well known practising historians still have a very firm and fond attachment to traditional conceptions of history and the way it should be written and researched (Himmelfarb 1987,1994; Tuchman 1981; Elton 1982). Certainly, in this regard, accounting historians continue to be prominent examples. As a result of the reluctance of many 'traditional' historians to launch their craft on the new wave of history, two antagonist camps have developed: those who see very little of merit in the traditional history and want to sweep it away in the rush to their new order, amongst which appear to Tyson (1993,1995) to be the new accounting historians, and those who dedicate themselves to preserving the place of traditional history.

In the next section the paper examines, with reference to the battles raging in the discipline of history, the main features of the new accounting history and its criticisms of traditional accounting history. These concern ontological and epistemological disagreements which have lead the new accounting historians to reject, to varying degrees, the traditional concerns, although not necessarily the methods, of history practice. This paper regards the differences between the new and the traditional accounting history as another variation of the disagreements between historiographers, and others practising in the wider discipline of history, which have been passionately argued over this century without any final resolution. The paper later focuses on the antipathy of new accounting history towards the narrative form of history. Without underestimating the differences between new and traditional accounting history, the paper argues for a less extreme position than is sometimes advocated and proposes that the narrative as a means of story-telling can be a starting point for understanding and tolerance within the discipline of accounting history. Certainly if accounting historians take up the cudgel's of historians outside accounting and attempt to
perpetuate their inconclusive conflicts it is unlikely that accounting historians will be successful where so many others have failed. Should new accounting historians adopt a more moderate approach and not seek to take all before them then accounting history is in a strong position to accomplish a great deal.

OLD HISTORY, OLD ACCOUNTING HISTORY AND THE THREAT OF THE NEW

It is not difficult to find in the accounting and history literature a large number of good reasons for studying history, most of which praise its usefulness. A fond hope, which even a cursory study of history shows is rarely honoured, is that as a result of the study of the past we will have a better understanding of human nature which will enable us to be tolerant and to avoid the mistakes of the past, thereby giving us greater control over the present (Russell 1957, p.25; Willis 1987, p.123). For Huizinga history is “the intellectual form in which a civilisation renders account to itself of its past” (Zagorin 1990, p.273; see also Pirenne in Marwick 1981, p.287). G.M. Trevelyan, the archetypal traditional historian, believed that history would make people better citizens and allowed people to live richer lives by opening new intellectual and spiritual vistas (Cannadine 1993, p.184). Bertrand Russell also saw history as suggesting “possibilities of action and feeling which would not have occurred to an uninstructed mind” (quoted in Willis 1987, p.123).

In the case of accounting history, Napier (1989), Johnson and Kaplan (1987), Ezzamel et al (1990), Previts et al (1990) and Murphy (1950, p.280) follow their history colleagues and accord utilitarian motives to the study and writing of accounting history. Previts et al (1990), for example, propose that it assists accounting policy makers and standard setters and informs accountants of their heritage, especially interdisciplinary contributions to the evolution of accounting. Johnson and Kaplan’s Relevance Lost (1987) has been a particularly recent prominent example of the importance now accorded to the study of accounting history. Common to each of the views expressed above is the belief that history should inform the present by illuminating the path to the present ie. announce the underlying forces and influences which produced the historical positions (Previtts et al 1990, p.3; Lee 1990, p.100; Arrington and Francis 1989; Ezzamel et al 1990, p.157; Carlyle in Parker 1990, p.6
and also see p.224). This alone, apart from the inherent pleasure of reading and writing accounting history, notes Napier (1989, p.239), would justify the place of accounting history. No longer should accounting historians feel that they have to defend the value of accounting history.

Disputes over the type of history which should be the work of the historian have occupied historians particularly since the turn of the century, waxing and waning through a number of phases. The current rivalry between the new and the old history (not the new and old accounting history) can be traced to France in 1929 with the publication of Annales d'Histoire: Economique et Sociale by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch and around the same time in England the Economic History Review. These events, notes Stone (1981, p.11), marked the start of an internecine war which has only deepened since 1960 with the rise of new strands of history, including geographic history, cliometry, feminist history and the many derivatives of ethnocentric history (see also Himmelfarb 1989, pp.661,664 and 1994; Appleby et al 1994; Stoianovich 1976). Appleby et al (1994, pp.199,200) characterise the form of history which arose in the 1960's to challenge traditional history as new social history. These historians did not reject the methods of traditional history, only its conclusions by redirecting emphasis from the political and economic to the social ie. recognising the existence of social classes other than political and economic elites. To highlight the alleged myopia of traditional history, Ermarth (1992, p.17) rhetorically asks the telling question “Is it possible to exist outside history? Women know; they have existed there” (see also Lehman 1992; Kirkham 1992).

The nascent criticisms of these new social historians were seized upon by a more extreme group of historians, referred to now as postmodernists, which had far more fundamental disagreements with traditional history. They questioned not only subject matter but also the accepted beliefs about truth in history writing, the existence and duplicity of 'facts' and the stability of the language of history (Appleby et al 1994, pp.200-1). At the present time accounting history is going through a similar sequence

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of development, except that the stages have been compressed and to some extent overlap in the new accounting history with the presence of an amalgam of diverse styles of history ranging from what will be referred to as new social accounting historians pursuing 'contextualised history' (Napier 1989, p.244; Hopwood 1983; Willmott 1986, p.559; Hopper and Armstrong 1991) and accounting historians moving towards postmodern conceptions of history (see Tyson's 1993 and 1995 complaints). In the case of the former, a more tolerant stance is usually taken on the practices of traditional history with most criticism reserved for its asocial nature. For a postmodern accounting historian, everything about traditional accounting history would be open to questioning.

The big differences between traditional and postmodern historians are to do with their contrasting stands on subjectivity, realism and conceptions of time. Once it is agreed that there is an objective, knowable reality outside the historian then facts immediately assume an important role in the discourse of history. If instead, as the postmodernists advocate, history is rendered by highly subjective interpretations which do not accept a separate reality; that language is not a simple signifier of this external reality and that time is rhythmic instead of chronological, then facts are dethroned and the evidence of history becomes just another form of text (see Calhoun 1993, p.80). Although these changes to traditional understandings of history mean that there is no longer a unified field of history, recent research makes it very clear that there is still the opportunity for all but the more radical new social accounting historians to find common ground with the traditional accounting historians. Should the time ever arrive, reaching an accommodation with postmodern accounting historians will be much more difficult, as this paper will show, because of their different conceptions of historical facts, historical time and reality.

The work of accounting historians generally has been slow to reflect these controversies in the wider discipline of history. Journals promoting a new accounting history did not start to appear in any number until the 1980's and it was not until this time that the bastion of traditional accounting history, the Accounting Historians Journal, signalled its intention to move from highly descriptive forms of history. Even
now, many accounting history researchers seem to be either unaware of or to have underestimated the yawning divide which separates traditional and postmodern conceptions of history and which threatens to cast accounting history into similar turmoil. Napier (1989, p.244), for example, while he distinguishes between traditional accounting history and contextualised accounting history, apparently accepts a change in focus from accounting as a technique to accounting as a constituent and active element in social and organisational contexts as the salient (only) difference between the two without pursuing the implications of this for the practice of history. He seems to conclude that all forms of history can peacefully co-exist, the one working with and extending the efforts of the other:

(t)he ... (contextualising) approach does provide a theoretical structure within which accounting history may be written, but it is not clear whether this structure will prove liberating or ultimately constricting. The actual content of the historical contextualisers’ research programme could well be quite similar to that of the traditional school, as many issues are seen as problematic by both approaches (1989, p.25).

His approach is naive and misleading to readers of accounting history for it understates the radical agenda of postmodern historians.

Accounting history recently has moved from a prolonged period where practitioners felt secure in the solid contributions which they were making to the understanding of accounting to a new period of uncertainty about the legitimate directions and concerns of accounting history. Miller, Hopper and Laughlin (1991) propose that recent changes in accounting history constitute more than enough reason to refer to a ‘new accounting history’, an echo of Braudel’s observation that “(i)t is a new world, so why not a new history” (1980, p.8). They argue that changes in methodologies, subject matter and a keener awareness of the constitutive role played by language have empowered accounting history for the first time. In their view the changes have taken accounting history from a protracted state of obsequious submission and naivety to the threshold of maturity. Unfortunately, designating these changes to the practice and writing of accounting history as ‘the new’ inescapably generates apprehension on the part of those who represent the previously accepted forms of accounting history. Consequently, traditional accounting historians have taken the announcement of the
coming of the new accounting history as a declaration that they can expect trouble, with the result that many of the defenders have retreated to the barricades to resist the intruder. Currently foremost amongst the defenders of the place of traditional history in accounting is Tyson (1990, 1993, 1995) while Tinker et al (1988), Hopwood (1983), Hoskin and Macve (1986) and Armstrong (1987) are strong champions of the new accounting history.

So successful have been the new accounting historians in promoting their cause, principally through vigorous research, that traditional accounting history has been spurred into denunciations of their energetic and persuasive rival (Tyson 1993, 1995). Tyson sees conventional accounting historiography as being “besieged” by the new accounting historians (1995, p.17). This is taken as a compliment by the new accounting historians, a signal of “impressive achievement” (Armstrong 1991, p.2). Instead of the two groups of historians inciting attacks upon each other a more tempered approach and productive stand should concede that there can co-exist several, non-mutually exclusive streams of accounting history where each can learn from the achievements and criticisms of the other. The progress of one should not be at the fatal expense of the other. In this regard, Braudel has argued that

we can no longer believe in the explanation of history in terms of this or that dominant factor. There is no unilateral history. No one thing is exclusively dominant ...(1980, p.10; see also Lee 1990, pp.99-101 and Ermarth 1992, p.14).

The two rocks upon which any co-operative endeavour between the traditional and the new accounting historians can flounder are what appear to be wildly differing perceptions about content and methods as well as divergent ontological and epistemological beliefs. Himmelfarb contends that, the disagreements between the ‘old guard’ and the new are so profound that the two approaches constitute “different conceptions of history” (1987, p.5). Despite this pessimistic outlook adopted by some historians, this paper will instead argue that traditional accounting historians can safely ‘give’ without undermining their credibility or relevance and that the new accounting historians can continue to incorporate most of the methods of their predecessors without diluting the strength and integrity of their critique. Simpson (1988 in Stewart 1992, p.69) has sought to recommend this direction for accounting history by pointing-
out that "stringent scepticism about the nature of historical claims can perfectly co-exist with an absolute commitment to historical methods".

To see the source of the differences between the traditional and the new historians one does not have to go any further than their respective positions on the 'facts' of history. From these stem most other differences.

TRADITIONAL HISTORY: A HISTORY OF FACTS OR ONLY TEXT?

Traditional history has been characterised as obsessively empirical with an overwhelming concern for the 'facts' (Breisach 1987, p.138; Bermejo-Barrera 1993, p.17). Norman (in Miller, Hopper and Laughlin 1991, p.400) refers to this as "history realism" while Fernand Braudel and the Annalists, after Francois Simiand, called traditional history "l'histoire evenementielle" or history concerned with events which had a very limited duration in comparison to the wider sweeps of natural history (Braudel 1980, p.3; Flynn 1987, p.178; Ricoeur 1980b, p.8). Using language which can only guarantee to raise the ire of accounting historians who still see the precepts of traditional history as worthwhile, the new accounting historians have referred to their predecessor's preoccupation with hard facts as "brute antiquarianism" while their own newer version is said to lead to "richer histories" which will allow accounting to be seen as far more than a mere technology (Stewart 1992, p.68; Dillard 1991, p.24; Armstrong 1991). This one sided view of traditional accounting history which is reluctant to point to any of its saving graces is common with most new prophets who believe that to make way for the new the old must be debunked.

Traditional history stands or falls on the veridicality of its facts. It has been the traditional historian's role to seek out the facts of history from hard evidence, principally the extant documents of a period, which for the accounting historian most often have been preserved ledgers, and to let the story of history emerge from those facts. The traditional historian accepted that there lay within the documented facts a discoverable truth (see Martin 1993; Ricoeur 1980b, p.8; Napier 1989, p.239). For Tuchman (1981) discovering this truth and the serendipity which surrounds findings in historical investigation are the most exciting aspects of the practice of traditional
history. Only 'rough hypotheses' will guide the historian (Hexter 1971, p.18). By not having any set, preconceived ideas of either specific questions to be pursued or expected findings, the historian is able to be surprised by that which emerges from the previously silent historical record:

if the historian will submit himself to his material instead of trying to impose himself on his material, then the material will ultimately speak to him and supply the answers (Tuchman 1981, p.23).

Without agreement on many basic facts or occurrences in history, according to traditional historians, there can be no history. Traditional historians do not claim always to agree on the relative importance of facts or their interpretation; they do, however, agree on the reality of the past and therefore on the relevance of facts (Himmelfarb 1989, p.665). If facts, all facts, are taken as contentious, not simply the information which they embody but because it is disputed that there can be such a thing as a 'fact', then from the very outset there is little opportunity for co-operation between new and traditional historians.

Denial of the possibility of objective historical facts is an extreme position usually associated with postmodern historians which, despite Tyson’s (1993;1995, p.18) accusations, has not as yet taken root in new accounting history (as examples see Walker 1991; Bryer 1991; Bougen et al 1990; Hoskin and Macve 1986; Hopper and Armstrong 19913). Indeed, there is overwhelming respect for the conventional facts of history, if not for their meaning in different discursive contexts. For the postmodern historian there is no such thing as absolute, naive truth. Truth is not something which lies dormant in the historical record until the attention of the historian brings it to life. Rather, postmodern history characterises, after Derrida’s deconstructionist polemic, what the traditional historian sees as facts as merely another form of ‘text’. Text, as a unique semantical arrangement of language, is a human artefact and therefore it is an interested product or, as Ermarth (1992, p.11) describes it, a form of “discursive engagement” which is far from neutral. Its meaning will be shaped by the discourse in which it is embedded (Ermarth 1992, p.4). Text is produced for reasons which

3 Hopper and Armstrong, as an example, when questioning the historical interpretations of Johnson and Kaplan state “The facts certainly bear a different interpretation” (1991, p.414). They use the same ‘facts’ as Johnson and Kaplan but produce a different story.
historians must later attempt to discern by trying to put themselves into the mind of the historical actors and construct “readable inventions”. The act of reading a text is “to interpret and to interpret is to reinvent, or coinvent, the text” (Ermarth 1992, p.23). Inventions are deemed to be possible because the language of which text is composed is notoriously inefficient at communicating a specific, non-ambiguous message. No matter how hard the writer may strive it is most improbable that language will be uncontentious, as the wealth of lawyers testifies. Thus, to deconstruct text ie. destroy factuality, requires the historian to sever the link between text and historical context. History is then no longer historicised. Instead, a ‘constructive suspicion’ allows history to be freed from the constraints of its origins and to take on meanings which transcend place and time.

The extreme deconstructionist enterprise is to dismantle the privileged interpretations encoded in all text or 'facts' and thereby dethrone privileged meanings. This allows other meanings the opportunity to recast the interpretations of history. New meanings are supposed to become articulated with a naive text which frees the historian from the accepted and the unquestioned of the past.

To those who criticise facts as the building blocks of history, the indeterminacy of language means that it has no immutable external referents; language is not an isomorphic mapping of reality. Rather, the messages and meanings which language conveys have the ability to create differing realities according to how the text is decoded. Deconstructionists propose that each person’s interaction with the text can lead to a different interpretation. Therefore, there cannot be only one code. Any meanings attributed to the writer of the text accordingly must compete with those of later readers. Proximity to the creation of the text does not entitle privilege, according to the postmodern historian. As a result, textualising historical facts removes any hierarchical ordering which may have existed in the different branches of history. With every interpretation of text as legitimate as any other and every text seen as nothing more than text, or an assemblage of words, there will be no privileging and therefore no fall back into the pit of factual history. Symptomatic of the changed status of facts in postmodern history, its followers, argues Himmelfarb, are prepared to venture into
unknown territory where documentary evidence may be scarce, as in psychohistory (1987, p.200), and to be directed by 'hypotheses' which channel, even unavoidably blinker, the historian's search. The emphasis then turns to interpretation and analysis. With facts suspect, the primary vehicle of historical writing, the narrative, is also prepared to be jettisoned by new historians as an unsound derivative of a deceptive historical culture. To move forward history must leave the narrative behind.

The deconstructionist program is anathema to traditional historians. Where the term 'fact' as used by traditional historians has strong positive connotations, the term 'text' is laced with negativity. To regard hallowed facts as mere text is to move history from the rock of certainty to the shifting sands of endless, confusing conjecture. With nothing stable little can be achieved in constructing the past because there would be no fixed reality (Himmelfarb 1989, p.666). Traditional historians, amongst whom are included accounting historians, are not opposed to interpretation but they do assume that it will be tethered in its wanderings to a spike of facts (Napier 1989, p.241). Their recognition that competing interpretations are possible, indeed desirable, reflects their belief that their rendering of facts of the past may be faulty. Given the distance in time between historians and the objects of their study and the imponderables of humankind's peridious nature, complete certainty is not possible.

Recent studies in new accounting history have demonstrated that the process of deconstructing accounting history does not have to be an all consuming project. Instead, it recognises that some 'facts' are more open to being disabused of their Olympian standing while others are permitted to stand (Bryer 1991; Hopper and Armstrong 1991; Hoskin and Macve 1986,1988; Loft 1986; Wilmott 1986; Lehman 1992). The new accounting history, therefore, has been relatively cautious in its denunciations of the accomplishments and methods of traditional accounting history (for example Miller, Hopper and Laughlin 1990). Despite Tyson's (1990;1993;1995, p.18) aggressive criticisms, the new accounting history is not as yet some wayward postmodern history libertine which has come to wreak improvident havoc. The different frameworks of interpretation used by new accounting historians has not meant a complete repudiation of the conventions of traditional history. Unfortunately,
on the past experience in the history discipline this does not mean that the future will be as equally measured. Questioning of the status quo often brings out more extreme forms of behaviour and it becomes no longer enough to seek a new king but to do away with kings altogether. Herein lies a very opportune warning for the new accounting history.

In addition to criticising the traditional historian’s preeminent concern for digging up the facts of history, however defined, new historians also take objection to the selectivity which they say must occur during this process and for what they allege has been the dishonesty of traditional historians in disguising this selectivity. Allowing for their scepticism of facts, new historians point out that the act of choosing facts from a vast universe of candidates causes traditional history to be partial and biased and thus not worth the effort. Lucien Febvre claimed that “(t)here was no history; there are only historians” (Ricoeur 1980b, p.9). The result, according to Levi-Strauss, was that “history ... replaced mythology and fulfils the same function” (Ermarth 1992, p.25). In their defence, traditional historians point out that selecting facts is not the same thing as ‘selectively choosing’ items which can support a hypothesis which the historian may have developed, or ignoring confounding evidence (Zagorin 1990, p.272).

Opponents of traditional history argue that the process of selection means that the facts selected are not value free, both because a selection process by historical actors has preceded the historian and the evidence has passed through the historian’s cognitive sieves to determine its significance and relevance. Accordingly, the facts chosen may be more a reflection of the historian's selectivity than the already unavoidable selectivity of the past which has bequeathed to historians only part of the enacted past. Traditional historians, including accounting historians, do not dispute that the historian is usually dealing with only that part of the past which historical actors determined was worthwhile preserving and the part of this material which has survived the ravages of time. In the case of accounting, the preservation of documents recorded on portable,
fragile mediums has been especially fickle and ruthless (Yamey 1981). Bryer in his work on the accounting practices of U.K. railways in the 1840's during the 'railway mania' was very conscious of the incomplete nature of the records available to latter-day historians and the possibility of bias which gaps in the record may engender in any conclusions (1991, p.462).

The best chance of survival for accounting records was to be bound and placed in the protection of perpetual corporations, trade guilds, ecclesiastical bodies and large landed estates. Consequently, much of what the traditional historian has worked with has been that which actors of the past have decided would be available. Given the undisputed widespread oppression and illiteracy of populations of the past, in most cases it could be expected that this would be material which more often would favour the interests of controlling elites and therefore, according to new historians, should be seen as prejudiced, partial and unreliable (for examples see Winjum 1971; Thrupp 1949; Read 1956; Pollard 1972; Oschinsky 1971; Le Strange 1917; Denholm-Young 1933). Instead of blaming silences in the accounting history record on a form of unseeing and depersonalised time, Bryer dares to suggest that in some circumstances there may have been a deliberate and extended attempt to sanitise the historical record through the destruction and culling of documents by descendents of ruling elites (1991, p.462).

That part of the past which has gone unrecorded is silenced forever; it is as if it never existed. Thus, apart from the recorded deeds of the heroic and ruling elites the remainder of society was given little or no visibility. It becomes the historian's task to construct the 'original' with very imperfect tools. Historians recognise that in these circumstances they cannot hope to come up with a result which claims to be the absolute truth. The best the historian can hope for is to provide an account which in the face of competing explanations, that could be drawn from the same set of facts, his/her account is the more convincing or the most likely to be true (Martin 1993, p.29). Traditional historians have been trained to believe that it is the historian's obligation
to discover the truth as best he can, to convey the truth as truthfully as he can, in order to make the truth known and to enable man ... to distinguish the right from the wrong reason (Himmelfarb 1987, p.21).

Postmodernists insist that the concept of absolute truth which traditional history promotes has been an effective means of perpetuating the status quo throughout historical eras. Truth is characterised as a “totalizing”, “hegemonic”, “logocentric” and “tyrannical” concept used by dominant elites for the purpose of maintaining their position (Himmelfarb 1994, p.83). The new historians argue that truth can only ever be contingent and partial. Foucault in his *Power and Knowledge* refers to a political economy of truth which is “centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political incitement” through the exercise of power (quoted in Appleby et al 1994, p.203; Loft 1986, p.140). For Foucault history was not to provide the comfort of the old Whig historians who believed that, despite the woes of daily life, history shows a pattern of improvement: the travails of the world are not for nothing. Instead, Foucault saw history as the means to disturb “what was previously considered immobile; ... (fragment) what was thought unified” (Appleby et al 1994, p.210). A high priest of the new historians, Hayden White, made it clear that the new history was less concerned with ascertaining what happened in the past and more with

the desire to determine what certain events might mean for a given group, society, or culture’s conception of its present tasks and future prospects (quoted in Stewart 1992, p.61).

To counter the new historian’s criticisms that traditional history is tainted by blind, uninformed empiricism, traditional history disparages what it sees as the relativism of its rival and, in its more extreme forms, its disdain for truth (Himmelfarb 1994, p.141; see also Calhoun 1993, pp.76-77). Allegations of the relativisation of truth by new historians, and the implications which this has for the recognition of ‘facts’, is probably the greatest stumbling block which keeps the old and the new apart. Consistent with their veneration of the facts of history, for traditional historians there must be a belief in a discoverable truth which can only be uncovered by respect for the facts of history

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5 His book, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th Century Europe* (Baltimore 1973) has been influential in promoting the cause of the new historians.
and an honest rendition of these in writing. Cannon (1980, p.14) argues that a "passionate devotion to historical truth" is one of the "supreme historical virtues". If historians deny the fundamental presence of truth then progress in our philosophical understanding of how we both do and should determine what happened, why it happened, and what it means that it happened may be a long time coming (Martin 1993, p.30).

In the absence of the values of traditional history and the aggressive way postmodern historians attack its basic beliefs, traditional historians see no future or role for history (Zagorin 1990, p.274; Himmelfarb 1989, p.667-8; Carr 1964; Tyson 1993,1995; Ennarth 1992, p.7). For these writers the disagreements between the traditional and the new and the stated intentions of people like Foucault to dismantle traditional history (see Stewart 1992, p.65), and traditional history's attachment to a search for truth, if not the truth, are matters of life and death for their discipline. In Tyson and Himmelfarb's cases this accounts for the urgency of their message and the passion of their writing. At best, according to Tyson, the new accounting historians are naive because of a lack real world experience. At worst, they are devious charlatans who are prepared to suppress primary material and to conspire with their colleagues to promote their dangerous form of accounting history (1995, p.29).

Appeals to the truth component of traditional history have encouraged new historians to take exception to what they see as the high moral tone of traditional historians and accuse them of hypocritically portraying their history as objective, that the facts which they recount correspond with a reality in the past instead of being a representation of the historian's interpretation of what might have happened (Miller, Hopper and Laughlin 1991, p.396). This characterisation of the practice of history, argue traditional historians, is not only an exaggeration designed to serve the purposes of the new historians but also betrays ignorance of the practice of history and the traditional historian's respect for interpretation (Elton 1982, p.70).

THE ROLE OF INTERPRETATION IN HISTORY
If historians stopped with the collection of facts then they would be dealing in mere chronologies and antiquarianism. The imagination and creativeness, not in the
pejorative sense, of the historian must be brought to bear on the raw material to produce a written or recorded history (Cannadine 1993, p.185). The past is the past and we will never be able to reproduce its image either definitely or incontrovertibly. Contrary to the general impression which new historians try to create, traditional historians accept that the facts do not speak for themselves but instead the stories which might be locked within can only be freed as the historian interrogates the raw material. Traditional historians do not claim that this is a passive process with the historian maintaining a sterile part in the process, devoid of analysis and interpretation. Traditional historians have not claimed to write a completely impartial history which is unaffected by the beliefs and feelings of the historian (Cannon 1980, p.7; Elton 1982, p.131). Instead, according to Carr, interpretation is “the life-blood of history” where “the historian is engaged in a continuous process of moulding his facts to his interpretation and his interpretation to his facts” (1964, p.28,29).

Tyson (1995) is disturbed by what he sees as the new accounting historians’ apparent disdain for historical facts in favour of interpretation, instead of accepting both as necessary; a view echoed by Zagarin (1990, p.274) and Gourvish (1995, p.12). He takes particular objection with Miller, Hopper and Laughlin’s observation that “there may be more emphasis on interpretations being tested by facts instead of being derived from them” (emphasis added) (1991, p.397). Therefore, he urges conventional accounting historians to be ever vigilant and to “confront every attack that is made against the relevance of primary evidence” (1995, p.29). Taking the work of Ezzamel and Hoskin and Macve on the Springfield Armoury, Tyson (1990,1993,1995) accuses the new accounting historians of replacing the hard work of mining documentary evidence with the armchair ease of spurious interpretations, bolstered by dubious secondary sources, which are designed to further the cause of prominent social ideologues, in this case Foucault. The consequence is that accounting historians risk making the facts ‘fit’ the theory. Echoing the protests of traditional mainstream historians, Tyson (1995) and Gourvish (1995, pp.10-11) call for history to be driven by the facts of history, although even this has its hazards, and not by partisan doctrine; history which is evidence driven and not theory driven. Despite Tyson’s good
intentions, he is confusing ‘theories’ with the frameworks of interpretation which the new accounting historians bring to their work.

Some traditional historians regard the intrusion of the personality of the historian as a strength and urge the historian not to be ashamed to admit that there is a subjective component to his/her work. Rather, good history writing requires the facts to be worked with imagination (Clark 1967, p.44). This is not a call for licence in history. Indeed, it is well recognised that it is dangerous to play with the facts and that “all interpretation ... is speculative” (Clark 1967, p.45). Carr (1964) argues that there has always been for the historian this ‘quarrelsome dichotomy’ between facts and interpretation which causes historians to question just how far they should intrude themselves into their story. The trick has been to strike a balance between interpretation ie. the historian’s personal contribution to history, and the facts of the past so as to reduce the distortions which will ultimately result when the past is reflected from the historian. This should not entitle critics of traditional modes of accounting history to conclude, argues Mills (1993, p.802) and Tyson (1995), that because complete objectivity cannot be ensured that the historian should give up all attempts at achieving a measure of objectivity. Nor should they feel entitled to substitute a declaration of their personal beliefs and apprehended biases, the implication being that this is the practice of new accounting historians, as if this could compensate for an acceptance that the historical enterprise as traditionally interpreted is worthless without complete objectivity.

Differing conceptions between traditional and new historians on the importance of interpretation and the reliability of the facts of history can be seen to be related to their conceptions of reality. For the traditional historian there is a reality outside of the observer which can be gauged and described, however imperfectly; hence the superior standing of facts. For a postmodernist there is no objective reality of the past; reality is instead a discourse amongst others which historians create through language and which should not be privileged (Appleby et al 1994, pp.250-1 and White 1989, p.245). In this view there is no separate otherness which is superior to the reader of text and to which the text points. Reality is nothing other than a construct of the reader and
therefore has no inherent, stable form (Ermarth 1992, pp.69, 164). The implication of this is the rejection of the traditional historian's conception of change and the uniqueness of historical events, which are the manifestation of change, as particular (idiographic) and non recurrent (Stone 1981, p.4; Himmelfarb 1987, p.156; Robinson 1904 in Breisach 1987, p.143; Dauenhauer 1987, p.167). New history instead is nomothetic. It turns away from historicism, challenges the uniqueness of historical events and seeks similar patterns and, more importantly, enduring meanings throughout history.

REALITY, THE NEW ACCOUNTING HISTORY AND LIBERATION FROM THE PAST

Reliance on a realist form of history and exposure to its alleged deficiencies, it is alleged, has blinded traditional accounting history to discourses of power. This has caused it to be naive in its economic assumptions, including those pertaining to the motives of economic actors, narrow in the compass of its subject matter and complicitous in sustaining hegemonic relations of power (Armstrong 1991, p.2; Mills 1993, p.802). This view can be seen to be reinforced with reference to the definition of accounting history given by the American Accounting Association's (AAA) Committee on Accounting History as "the study of the evolution in accounting thought, practices and institutions in response to changes in the environment and societal needs" (1970, p.53). Instead of this guileless, instrumentalist view of accounting, new accounting historians accuse accounting of being "infused with interests, such that its very nature is constructed by the exercise of social and political power" (Tinker et al 1988, p.128; Lee 1990, pp.99-100). Consequently, accounting is not an ideologically sterile technology (Laughlin and Lowe 1990, p.16; Laughlin 1987, p.480; MacIntosh and Scapens 1990, p.468; Chua 1986; Hopwood 1987, p.213). Traditional accounting history is mocked for allegedly missing all of this through its single minded dedication to ordained facts and its supposed aversion to interpretation.

Adherents of the new accounting history believe the first step in enlightenment requires that we should not seek clues in current accounting practices which might indicate their original purposes. They stress that it is improbable that roles fulfilled by powerful technologies, such as accounting, which are implicated in the establishment and
perpetuation of a given set of power relations will have remained unchanged over hundreds of years. The present, therefore, is not the undistorted image of the past. We are urged instead to look beyond that which confronts us now and to not let the aura of the known present occlude the opportunity to be open to the hidden realities of the past.

Whereas the traditional accounting history adopted an instrumentalist, functionalist view and was preoccupied with a continuous incline of evolution in accounting technologies, double entry bookkeeping in particular (Littleton and Yamey 1956; Littleton 1966; Yamey 1947,1964; Kats 1924,1926; de Roover 1955,1956; Winjum 1970; Lee 1990, p.99), the new accounting history has a much broader agenda (Bougen et al 1990; Loft 1986, p.140). The new accounting historians take particular issue with the conception of accounting development as being one of continuous improvement in response to the needs of capitalism. This approach to accounting history followed the well-worn path of Whig history where the selection of facts and the direction of the historical narrative were governed by the need to show that history is the story of progress (Bertrand Russell in Willis 1987, p.123; Marwick 1981, p.286; Parker 1990, p.9). Instead of a trajectory of continuous improvement, Foucault argues that history is characterised by unevenness and discontinuity. History is not deterministic. Rather, there is considerable opportunity for human agency to intervene and turn back on itself any emerging trend in history. The present does not have to be better than the past.

The more aggressive new accounting historians seek to liberate us from the tyranny of our unquestioned past, which they see has been the legacy of traditional accounting history, to reveal the true nature of our existence (Dillard 1991, p.17; Dauenhauer 1987, p.vii). The ability to reflect on the past, according to Aaron, was seen by Hegel as the source of knowing for

man has in fact no past unless he is conscious of having one, for only such consciousness makes dialogue and choice possible. Without it, individuals and societies merely embody a past of which they are ignorant and to which they are passively subject (quoted in Dupre 1987, p.24).
New accounting historians argue that uncritical acceptance of the social, economic and political frameworks in which accounting developed meant that capitalist discourses were privileged at the expense of others and that the objectivity of accounting was a constructed illusion (Hopper and Armstrong 1991). Essential to this process has been the absorption of accounting as part of the accepted order of things, thereby making accounting’s powerful influence over capitalist discourses virtually invisible to traditional accounting history (see Roberts 1991, pp.355,359). Dillard urges that unless accounting historians embrace alternative ideologies to those which have dominated accounting history research in the past then “accounting will continue to reinforce and reify the social system from which it emanated” (1991, p.9). Accounting history by conceiving accounting solely as a technology divorced it from its social context and thereby allowed connections between the two to go undiscovered. By restoring accounting to its social contexts, ie. to show how it influenced its social context, thereby to give it meaning, the present can be liberated from the possessive grip of a sanctioned, unchallenged past (Stewart 1992; Hopwood 1983). This “true history”, according to Ricoeur, is the means by which the “buried potentialities of the present” become accessible (1981, p.295).

New historians argue that before historians can begin to ask and then to answer significant questions about the past as it has lead to the present they must be aware of the need to ask questions. Therefore, the first task of the historian is to raise the consciousness of the observer; to part the veil of deceptive experience, to question comfortable conventions by "telling what was the case" (Megill 1989, p.647). Fay's 'self estrangement theory' determines that most people are unaware of the dichotomous existence they experience, with "human existence ... split into two spheres, the manifest/ordinary and the hidden/ extraordinary" (quoted in Dillard 1991, p.15). The former is seen and sensed. The 'hidden' consists of those belief systems, conventions, social structures and practices which by their ancestry and diffusion remain unchallenged. These constitute the substance of a discourse. Discourses provide the means to construct a persuasive reality through their unobtrusive ability to
define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension- what it is possible to do and not to do) with respect to the area of concern of that institution ... A discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organises and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about. In that it provides descriptions, rules, permissions and prohibitions of social and individual actions (Kress 1985, pp.6-7 in Yeatman 1990, p.164).

The new accounting history desires to raise the level of consciousness; to enlighten by providing alternative explanations for the observable and accepted which 'simple' historical investigation has encouraged. From a radical structuralist point of view, accounting can be implicated with power and privilege which arise from these exploitative, hidden structures contained within the discourses which accounting facilitates (Dillard 1991, p.14; Walker 1991, p.279). In terms of Morgan's schema of 11 major metaphors relevant to accounting, "accounting as politics" and "accounting as mythology" are most relevant to the new accounting historians (1988, p.481). In the first instance, accounting and accounting systems are seen to "reflect and support the values and needs of specific interest groups" (p.481). As mythology, "accounting systems provide a societal resource to be used in sustaining myths of rationality, and as a means of justifying rationalizing, and legitimising decisions that ultimately serve other individual and social ends" (p.481).

With the benefit of hindsight, new accounting historians attempt to attribute to the actors of the past the 'real' motives which guided their actions and not what the raw documentary evidence seems to suggest. In contrast, understanding accounting history within its social context for traditional historians has been interpreted as placing themselves back in time, trying to get into the heads of people at the time and see how accounting was used from their perspective and not one borrowed from the present time. The present should be understood in light of the past, certainly never the past in terms of what is known of the present (Russell 1957, p.10; Tuchman 1981, p.18; Elton 1982, p.65; Napier 1989, p.241) for

(t)he study of the past with one eye ... upon the present is the source of all sins and sophistries in history ... It is the essence of what we mean by the word 'unhistorical' (Carr 1964, p.41).
According to Hopper and Armstrong this form of sophistry has marred Johnson and Kaplan’s transaction cost approach to management accounting history (Hopper and Armstrong 1991, p.409).

It took skill on the historian’s part in selecting and organising historical material but also imagination to be able to create in the historian’s mind the conditions of the time. The traditional historian does not claim to know the motives of people of the past better than they did themselves; he/she only attempts to recreate these motives from the fragmentary evidence available (see comments by Himmelfarb 1994, p.133).

New historians paternalistically claim to be more knowing than those locked in their historical context and who were unable, therefore, to stand outside of their surroundings, shake off the ideologies and beliefs which governed their life and to see how they were controlled. The new historians believe that they are able to bring to the study of the past an understanding of what was really happening. To the traditional historian this is arrogance of the highest order, apart from being just plain bad history. Himmelfarb (1989, p.668) sees it as condescending and demeaning to ignore that which historical actors believed about their lives. Himmelfarb (1989) and Appleby et al (1994, pp.5, 226) argue that, taken to extremes, the new history results in the rewriting of all history, transforming it in the image of the present and not, as historians have previously accomplished, in terms of the past as the past knew itself:

the old history stands within the received opinion, trying to understand it as contemporaries did, to find out why they believed what they did, why those beliefs seemed to them "credible", a "faithful interpretation of their experiences (Himmelfarb 1989, p.669).

To expose the ideology of traditional history and the hegemonic interests it has served requires the new historians to attack not only traditional methods of historical research but also the vehicles used to communicate the results of historical research (Himmelfarb 1994, p.137). In particular, the narrative form of historical discourse has attracted the approbation of new historians. Hopper and Armstrong, for example, criticise traditional management accounting histories for being “rich in narrative terms but they have neglected to explore the important linkages between phases of accounting development and their socio-economic context” (1991, p.405). Appleby et
al (1994, p.231) believe that the word narrative “has become one of the charged code words of the current struggles over history”. In the next section it will be argued that rejection of narrative in accounting history is unnecessary because, apart from possible extreme examples of postmodern accounting history, both new and traditional accounting history can, and do, accommodate narrative. Disagreements over the reality of facts, objectivity and the nature of truth in history do not preclude a narrative form to written history. Thus, the narrative can provide the common ground between new and old accounting history.

ASSAULTS ON THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE IN HISTORY
The significant ontological and epistemological disagreements between new and old historians cause the role of narrative in the writing and telling of history to be contentious. In terms of the historiographical approaches described by Stone (1979), Megill (1989) and Porter (1981)

(n)arrative is taken to mean the organisation of material in a chronologically sequential order and focussing of the content into a single coherent story, albeit with sub-plots (Stone 1979, p.3).

Porter believes that "traditional historical narratives are the most effective way to express our understanding of temporal events" (1981, p.ix). They allow the confirmation of “an entire discourse, one that values empirical procedure, reasoned discovery, problem solution, linear causality and temporal unfolding” (Ermarth 1992, p.19). Polkinghorne favours the narrative for the way it orders individual events, thereby making them comprehensible by identifying the whole to which they contribute. The ordering process operates by linking diverse happenings along a temporal dimension and by identifying the effect one event has on another, and it serves to cohere human actions and the events that affect human life into a temporary gestalt (1988, p18, quoted in Poullaos 1992, chapter 2).

For traditional historians the narrative is fundamental not only to the organisation of historical events but to their conception of history (see Elton 1969; Appleby et al 1994, pp.231,235; Himmelfarb 1994, p.36). According to Tuchman, narrative “is the lifeblood of history”, “the most desirable thing a writer can do” (1981, pp.18,48). Ricoeur has argued for “the irreducibly narrative character of history” (1981, p.275)
while for Groce "where there is no narrative, there is no history" (quoted in White 1989, p.3). Although White has established his reputation on criticism of the traditional history he could still accept narrative as "a manner of speaking as universal as language itself" (White 1989, p.1).

Narrative has been the preferred and natural form of historical discourse for historians since the time of the ancients, receiving the imprimatur of history luminaries like Homer, Trevelyan, Gibbon and Macaulay (eg. Gibbon 1984, p.158). The traditional historian's preoccupation with facts and evidentiary precepts inexorably lead to the narrative. It is only in this century that historical narratives have fallen into disfavour in the face of aggressive, universalist and, what Burke calls, scientific historiographies of the new history (1991, pp.14,15). In addition, the privileging of these 'scientific' paths to history caused a narrowing of historical perspective resulting in, laments Hamerow (1989), exclusion of historical writing's traditional audience of amateur enthusiasts through its arcane statistical and theoretical discourses.

Until this century it has been difficult for historians to conceive of any mode of historical discourse other than the narrative because the quest for historical truth and the narrative have been inexorably woven. Narrative was not solely a means of chronologically ordering the melee of the past, rather the past was a narrative; it unfolded as a narrative with events occurring at specific instances of time with beginnings and conclusions, causes and effects (see Reisch 1991, p.2; Megill 1989, p.645; Parker 1990, p.6). The narrative has been accepted as the natural form of history and of everyday life as it progresses through events from morning (opening) to evening (close). The naturality and common-placeness of the narrative, those very aspects which have attracted generations of traditional historians, however, have been contributing reasons for making it suspect and leading to its denunciation by new historians. According to White,

a discipline that produces narrative accounts of its subject matter as an end in itself seems methodologically unsound; one that investigates its date in the interest of telling a story about them appears theoretically deficient (1989, p.1).
Sentiments of this force have not received the unquestioned allegiance of all new historians. Recently Norman (1991, p.119) has called upon new historians to re-examine their hostility towards narrative and to recognise that it can have relevance.

Narratives can be examined on two levels: as a technique of writing, a form of storytelling, and as an epistemological form. When postmodernists, for example Foucault, criticise history and new accounting historians criticise traditional accounting history they are mainly concerned at the level of epistemology (Appleby et al 1994), although censure of the narrative has also embraced its story telling function (Megill 1989, p.638). For Barthes the sequential structure of the narrative was the source of considerable historical violation because it suggested

that the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes after being read in narrative as what is caused by: in which case narrative would be a systematic application of the logical fallacy denounced by Scholasticism in the formula post hoc, ergo propter hoc (quoted in Megill 1989, p.639).

In his defence of the narrative in history, the French advocate Paul Ricoeur (1985) treats narratives as a form of storytelling with the corresponding structure of a story. The story, and therefore the narrative, can either be historical narrative or a form of mythical narrative, described by Scholes and Kellog as the "empirical narrative" and the "fictional narrative" respectively (Ricoeur 1981, p.288). It is not the form of the story which separates the two forms of narrative but the content. In the former, as this paper has shown above, facts gleaned from documents and aspirations to truth drive the story. In the fictional narrative, the form of narrative which some new historians would ascribe to all narratives, imagination is the motive force; there is no expectation of truth in the sense of correspondence to some external referent. It is common for new historians to find the story-telling nature of historical narrative repugnant because they see it as description laden and story-telling as synonymous with, and carrying the negative connotations of, 'telling stories'.

The chronological sequencing required by the narrative is problematical for postmodern historians also because it depends on linear historical time where historical events are strung along time, one leading to but not necessarily causing the others
which are subsequent. Narrative time assumes the guise of a neutral tool having no impact on the events which it orders. Time is treated as unidimensional and unidirected. Thus, instead of narrative time accommodating events, events have to be structured to fit with historical time. As a result some of the dimensions of the past are excluded from written history. To reinstate these, Ermarth has suggested the concept of 'rhythmic time' (Ermarth 1992, p.16). Rhythmic time is the time of the human pulse or the duration of an aroma. It

recalls readers to their senses by focusing acts of attention of the actual practices of consciousness and sensibility as they operate in process, and not as they might operate if the world were ... a rational, natural, logocentric place (Ermarth 1992, p.12).

As an alternative to the historical time of the traditional narrative, rhythmic time removes the interconnectedness of temporal moments in history and instead accentuates the importance of each (Ermarth 1992, p.53). Time becomes no longer directed.

New historians refer to 'narrative' in a generic sense; they do not see that there can be different forms of narrative which perform different functions. Topolski (1990, p.326), however, distinguishes structural narratives, which recount the details of social life, from dynamic narratives which move through an extended course of events. He also describes a narrative continuum, extending narratives from those which are primarily works of description to those which give greater emphasis to explanation. Apart from the end points which serve only a referential or terminal role, at each point along this scale, which can encompass all history, narrative will be infused with elements of both description and explanation (see comments of Previts et al 1990, p.2; Megill 1989, p.650). After all, historians do not

simply ... explain, as some contend. On the contrary, they first of all recount, in delight or fascination or horror or resignation. Upon recountings (descriptions), explanations arise (Megill 1989, p.653).

Accusations of being overly concerned with description have been particularly effective in calling into question the role of the narrative in history. It is also castigated for imposing a narrative structure on a “pre-narrativized past” which leads, in White's terms, to “interpretative violence” (White 1989, p.3). Further, narratives are said
artificially to choose enclosure and commencement and configure facts into an inappropriate unity (Norman 1991, p.120; Veyne in Megill 1989, p.630). One of Satre's characters in La Nausee pessimistically concludes that "to present human life in the form of a narrative is always to falsify it" (quoted in Norman 1991, p.120).

Irrespective of the type of narrative, they all have the common characteristics of a beginning after which changes occur which elicit reactions from the actors and lead to conclusions as the actors attempt to resolve problems which are not usually of their own doing (Ricoeur 1980a, p.174; Dauenbauer 1987, p.165). Narrative has its own dialectic that makes it pass through the successive stages of mimesis, starting from the prefigurations inherent in the order of action, by way of constitutive configuration of emplotment ... to the refigurations that arise due to the collision of the world of the text with the life-world (Dauenbauer 1987, p.167).

It is not changes per se which demand a response from the unsuspecting actors but the revelation of previously hidden dimensions which change brings about (Ricoeur 1981, p.277). Actors are therefore caught in a web of causation and reaction which they seek to manage. The narrative 'configures' or organises these actions and reactions into understandable wholes. The narrative is not the story but the mechanism which holds the whole together; it is the form rather than the substance of the story. As actors react to their changed circumstances the story is irresistibly moved forward. Thus, to follow a story is to understand the successive actions, thoughts and feelings as displaying a particular directedness. ... (W)e are pushed along by the development and ... we respond to this thrust with expectations concerning the outcome and culmination of the process (Ricoeur 1981, p.277).

The actors' reactions energise the story both by their ex post nature and the set of expectations which the actors' behaviours create about how the story will conclude. Although the direction of the narrative is ascertainable, it is not possible to deduce the conclusions from the narrated events. There is no sense of inevitability, only conclusions which can be regarded as "acceptable" in light of the events (Ricoeur 1981, p.277). History is not, and cannot be, prophetic (Braudel 1980, p.9).
In a narrative it is the presence of a plot which enables historical events to cohere into a meaningful and understandable chronological arrangement by eliciting "a pattern from a succession" of events (Ricoeur 1980a, pp. 171, 178; see also Previts et al. 1990, p. 2). Unless an event contributes to the development of a plot, according to Ricoeur, it will not be historical (1981, p. 277). The importance accorded to plot in traditional historical narrative, however, cannot be tolerated by postmodern historians. The very existence of a plot would indicate that one interpretation of historical events is being naturalised and privileged above others. The interested role of narrative leads the postmodern historian to be suspicious of plots as understood in the sense of 'to conspire secretly'. Thus, not only does there not have to be a 'story' with a plot to give form and a meaning to events, the need for meaning is also rejected. Ermarth notes how this creates great consternation to traditional historians for

if one conceives of narrative ... in terms of unified temporal sequences of action-sequences that can be formulated in terms of cause and consequence-the absence of such sequences and powers is tantamount to the absence of motivation itself, or even worse, a symptom of authorial self display and self-indulgence (1992, p. 21).

Many of the differences between the new and traditional historians on the nature and role of narrative in the writing of history or, as the new historians would argue, the construction of history, centre on the new historians characterisation of narrative as an interested discourse. In this view narrative, like accounting, is not a neutral tool of history used to represent but instead has been used to "constitute a spectacle" (Barthes as quoted in White 1989, p. 19). Ermarth believes that it is hard to overestimate the impact of narrative time on "individual subjectivity, ... proper uses of language ... and, perhaps most of all, the nature and uses of knowledge" (1992, p. 20). Adding considerable support to this view, White (1989, p. 19) sees narrative as a form of multilayered code which is meant to convey messages, only some of which are sensible to the target audience. The new history seeks firstly to decode the narrative and expose what may have been previously undetected messages. Narrative, therefore, can be seen as either a communicative discourse, a means to get a message across but where the meaning can be lost in the content of the message, or a performance discourse designed to produce meaning or configure attitudes. As a configurative discourse narrative is not a form of construction but an ideology reliant upon language
to achieve its aims. If the form of the discourse is changed from the narrative then the messages obtained from the discourse will differ (White 1989, pp.14,19).

The *constitutive* or *configurative dimension* of a narrative complements the chronological *episodic dimension* which is implicated in the narrative's communicative discourse (Ricoeur 1980a, p.178). The former, according to Ricoeur, is what is overlooked by anti-narrativists in their enthusiasm to denounce the narrative. As a result the narrative is divested of complexity and above all of its power to combine sequences and configurations. Indeed, this structure is so paradoxical that every narrative can be conceived in terms of the competition between its episodic dimension and its configurational dimension, between sequence and figure. This complex structure implies that the most humble narrative is always more than a chronological series of events and, in turn, that the configurational dimension cannot eclipse the episodic dimension without abolishing the narrative structure itself (Ricoeur 1981, p.279).

Unlike the chronological dimension in the historical narrative, which is a *discovered* entity, the configurational dimension arises from reflection by the writer. In this regard it resembles the creativity and subjectivity which the new historians argue is a fatal flaw of traditional history. There exists, therefore, a dilemma about the historical narrative; as historical it claims to represent, through its from, part of the real complexity of the past, but as narrative it is a product of imaginative construction, which cannot defend its claim to truth by any accepted procedure of argument or authentication (Mink, quoted in Norman 1991, p.119).

We have seen in this paper that this has not been a significant problem for traditional historians who have recognised the need to incorporate creativity and exactitude in writing history.

If new accounting historians continue to recognise the elemental role of narrative in their histories, at least its configurative dimensions, then there can be considerable common ground upon which they can co-operate with their more traditional colleagues. The large number and diverse range of new accounting histories are compelling recommendations that narratives can accommodate the critiques of new accounting historians and the results of traditional accounting history research
(Burchell et al 1985; Bryer 1991; Armstrong 1987; Hoskin and Macve 1986; Wilmott 1986). While Previts et al (1990, p.8) criticise narratives in accounting history because they believe that of necessity narratives are incomplete in the story which they tell and are therefore a 'weak form' of history, Guthrie and Parker (1991) have called for accounting history researchers to reconsider the significant contributions which a narrative form of history can provide to reconstructing the socio-political context of accounting development. They argue that historical events cannot be understood as solitary objects or unique historical artefacts but only as part of an ongoing temporal process. Following Porter (1981), Guthrie and Parker (1991, p.5) state that the best way to make sense of historical events is to examine the prior conditions from which they arose through the use of the technique of the narrative.

At present both traditional and new accounting historians continue to find common ground with the narrative form and its epistmological attributes. If, however, new accounting history follows the path of historians outside accounting and moves into the realms of postmodernism then the narrative will no longer provide a source of common ground for all accounting historians.

CONCLUSION AND A CALL FOR TOLERANCE

The days are long gone when one could refer to accounting history in some sort of generic and all encompassing sense: there are now many directions which accounting history can take in content, epistemology and methods. At the same time, enthusiasm for the 'new' should be tempered with an appreciation for its antecedents. In the face of the attractive newness and zealotry of the new accounting historians let us not allow the deficiencies and relative myopia of the accounting history of the past blind us to its value. Accounting historians of all persuasions should be open to alternative interpretations and not accept that one method of inquiry and explanation is the only source of insights and can disclose all the answers. Only by accepting the value of a number of approaches can accounting historians go some way to ensuring that their discipline does not retire into dogmatism and intradisciplinary intolerance.
The “new” accounting history does not have to be at the complete expense of the “old”; it does not have to be the old or the new, nor does the old have to be put on the offensive of self justification for everything which it does or for which it stands. Rather, all variations of history can have a role to play: “the peasants ... (of history) are as vital ... as its princes” (Elton 1982, p.80). The destructive alternative of impatient iconoclasm will deny accounting history the opportunity to take the best from both the new and the traditional. This is not an appeal that is blind to any deficiencies which might be present in the old accounting history, or the new history, as this study has demonstrated. Rather, it accepts that the new accounting history has much to offer but that the extent of the bounty will be dependent on the foundations which have been laid and continue to be provided by traditional modes of historical inquiry (Bryer 1991, p.440). New accounting historians, according to Napier, will “wish to rely on the traditionalists to generate much of the raw data for their theorising” (1989, p.247). Accordingly, the writing of accounting history needs to be a collaborative effort. It requires those whose primary focus is on the “what” and “how” of history which verifies dates and the specifics of historical chronology, the traditional province of the traditional accounting historians, and those whose overwhelming concerns are to interrogate the historical record and ask “why” or "how did we get into this state?".

Accounting history is currently at a new cross road: it can decide to take the path of the accounting discipline of the past which only leads to dissension and the generation of negativity within the discipline or it can show the way to co-operation which will provide the key to a greater historical and intellectual inheritance. If accounting historians are to avoid internecine strife then they need to adopt a conciliatory stand towards each other and to recognise the long term benefits that this will bring to the discipline of accounting history. Acceptance by traditional accounting historians of the merits of new accounting history should not be indicative of a loss of confidence and doubts about the credibility of the products of the traditional accounting historians (Miller, Hopper and Laughlin 1991), p.396). Already, unfortunately, the forces have begun to form on each side of the barriers.
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