

How to Study History:
Nicolas Lenglet
Dufresnoy and the
Heritage of *ars historica*

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The French Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy published his *Méthode pour Étudier L'Histoire, avec un Catalogue des Principaux Historiens, & des Remarques sur la Bonté de leurs Ouvrages, & sur le Choix des Meilleures Éditions* in 1713. The work was very much a compilation, both when it came to the catalogue or lists of historians and works and, less explicitly, in the suggested method. The rules and advice presented in the book were largely taken from other works and other authors, who at times were credited by Lenglet, at other times not. From a perspective of cultural history, the compilation and its comparative lack of originality are exactly what make this work interesting. Lenglet's work represents a tradition going back to the sixteenth century, the *ars historica*. It was not a book of history, but a handbook that focussed on the method of historical study. It presented systematic procedures for reading, assessing and learning history. Books of this kind also often contained lessons on the use and usefulness of historical knowledge, explaining why and how historical studies were worth pursuing. They presented more or less critical lists of historical works, together with instructions for *how* these books should be read. Originally aimed at an intellectual elite of learned readers, the genre of *ars historica* gradually developed into pedagogical textbooks. By the eighteenth century they had largely become learning tools for students or schoolchildren.¹

Even if Lenglet's name may be little known today, the *Méthode* met with great success, and numerous editions were published in his own time. Its influence was considerable. The book was translated into Italian in 1716, German in 1718, and English in 1728.² An edition especially adapted for children appeared in 1735, reflecting the development of the genre into a pedagogical tool. A supplement to the original work was published in 1739, transforming it into a more regular history book, not only one of method. Numerous subsequent reeditions gave *Méthode* wide distribution and large readership. Lenglet's wide

reading and thorough knowledge of books and other texts enabled him to produce a work that filled its place in the old tradition of *ars historica*. His comparative lack of originality, his eager mining of other people's work and uninhibited compilation of other books also makes it a very good example of what this genre became when it was no longer the privilege of the few and highly learned. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the genre was popularized and communicated to a more general public of students and other readers. Beatrice Guion has called Lenglet's *Méthode pour Étudier L'Histoire* a 'composite' *ars historica*.³ The present article will discuss it as a book that summarized and popularized this tradition in a period when it was becoming conventionalized and made generally accessible. The object of this study is consequently not to examine the arguments and ideas that might be original in Lenglet, but rather to investigate the tradition that is mirrored in his presentation.

Anthony Grafton opened up the world of the early modern *ars historica* to contemporary readers by exploring how intellectuals and political theorists like Jean Bodin, François Baudouin, Francesco Patrizi and Rainer Reineck developed and systematized an 'art' which, according to Grafton, was 'cast as a guide not to writing, but to reading history, and one that offered an Ariadne thread through the frightening, demon-haunted labyrinths of historical writing, ancient and modern, trustworthy and falsified, that every learned man must explore'.⁴ Correspondingly, Grafton has discussed how this art, so fashionable and promising during the latter part of the sixteenth century, collapsed for both internal and external reasons during the following century, and then was all but forgotten.⁵ This article navigates in the same landscape, but will investigate the *ars historica* – or method of studying history – in the period when it no longer represented an intellectually breathtaking and methodologically groundbreaking novelty. Likewise, the article will examine the work of a man who does not tower in intellectual history in the same way as the original theorists of the sixteenth century.

To present Lenglet to Nordic readers, the following exploration will start with a biographical sketch, largely based on Geraldine Sheridan's very thorough examination of his life.⁶ Then follows an investigation of Lenglet's presentation of the disciplines considered auxiliary to the study of history: geography, chronology, and the study of manners, customs and religions. From here the study moves on to the issue of historical truth and the critical evaluation of sources. The final part of the article will go into Lenglet's argument about the utility of historical knowledge: Why study history?

Erudition and Intrigue in a Literary Underworld

The son of a wealthy wigmaker originally from Beauvais, Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy was born in Paris in 1674. He studied theology at the Sorbonne and made his career as a man of letters and learning. He died in Paris in 1755. Well known for his large production and sharp pen in his own time, Lenglet is today largely forgotten, or known at most as a minor contributor to the *Encyclopédie*. The complete list of his works nonetheless shows that Lenglet's work for the latter was but a very small part of his literary production. In her biographical study of Lenglet, Sheridan lists 61 printed works, several of them appearing in numerous editions.⁷ She also points out that even if Lenglet did not succeed in making a name for himself as an intellectual of lasting renown, he represents a kind of literary and learned figure very typical for the period:

Lenglet's life-story evokes a pattern of a kind of *aventurier littéraire*, for whom writing was a predominant concern, but who was obliged to scrape a living through a host of other, sometimes related, activities. If he was lucky, he managed to keep his head above water, for when he sank, he risked entanglement in a dark underworld from which he might never re-emerge.⁸

Lenglet started his career as a publicist – and troublemaker – as a student with a pamphlet on the mystical experiences of a Spanish nun, Marie de Jésus, who had presented a life of the Virgin supposedly written under her direct guidance. Her book, *La cité mystique de Dieu* (1695), was under scrutiny by the theologians of la Sorbonne. Edme Piroton, one of the theologians in charge, asked his young protégé and boarder Lenglet to make a copy of the rare book. Lenglet profited from the situation by also composing a critical pamphlet of his own and issuing it when the public was still eagerly awaiting the theologians' judgement. The work, published in 1696, gained him both celebrity and enemies, as well as respect for his pen and sharp wit. It also signalled the start of his lifelong endeavour of fishing in troubled waters.

Despite numerous efforts, Lenglet never succeeded in gaining a fixed position (and stable income) within the Church. His Jansenist affiliation and controversies with the Jesuits only partly accounts for this. Lenglet's critical and biting satirical writings, as well as his engagement in intelligence work and frequent involvement in political intrigues, impeded his professional success. It also made him a man of shady reputation. His contradictory character, where learning, wit and energy mingled with disloyalty, spitefulness and vindictiveness, seems to

have been as baffling to his contemporaries as it is to researchers in later times. Sheridan has pointed out that he seems to have loved to feel that he was close to the center of political life and had a great appetite for intrigue on a grand scale: 'he seems to have rushed headlong into new schemes without considering the long-term consequences for his career.'⁹ At the same time, his never-ending struggle to survive as a man of letters, living by his pen and his wits, brought with it the necessity of constant planning and scheming; securing an income from printers and booksellers, circumventing censorship, and always on the lookout for new patrons for protection and work.¹⁰

At times it seems that Lenglet's own character and sudden changes of loyalty or interest were the factors that destroyed his carefully made plans; in other cases, it was the harsh realities of life in what has been called the literary underworld.¹¹ Intrigue, intelligence work and disloyalty earned Lenglet both enemies and in total nine imprisonments, in the Bastille as well as in Strasbourg and Vincennes. The suspicions associated with his life and character notwithstanding, Lenglet was recognized as a man of great learning and considerable literary skills.

The Sciences Preparatory to the Study of History

Astrid Witschi-Bernz has pointed out that an expanding interest in the task of teaching history made the number of study means and pedagogical systems grow during the eighteenth century, leading to a slow transformation of the tradition. A large number of handbooks, dissertations and manuals were published. In the European context, Lenglet's *Méthode pour Étudier L'Histoire* was among the most successful, together with Johann Christoph Gatterer's *Handbuch der Universalhistorie* (1761–1764). For the Nordic countries and England, Ludvig Holberg's *Synopsis historiae universalis* from 1733 held a similar position.¹² Many of these books shared approximately the same structure, which she describes as 'a combination of a few pages on "theory" (a discussion of the goals, the means and limitations on reading and writing good history, the obstacles); sections treating the auxiliary sciences; and finally a summary of universal history.'¹³

In his book, Lenglet makes the 'preparatory sciences' the subject of a separate introductory chapter, divided into three sections: on geography, chronology, and the study of customs, manners and religions. He is emphatic that knowledge of these fields must be acquired *before* the study of history proper. Two of them refer to a commonplace of early modern historical thought, and not least of the *ars historica*: geography and chronology are 'the two eyes of history'.¹⁴ Regarded as

self-evidently true, this adage often made further explication superfluous. Many history books would therefore provide a geographical exposé before entering on the historical account, without commenting much on this arrangement.¹⁵ Lenglet's ambition of presenting a method for study rather than an actual book of history called for an explanation *why* geographical knowledge is necessary.

Geography is where history takes place. Reading history, Lenglet writes, one will meet a great number of names of peoples, provinces and cities. Ignorant of the locations these names refer to, and the relations between them, it is difficult to comprehend what one reads. To this fundamental difficulty, another is added: 'we shall be surprised with considerable errors of Geography, to be found in the antients, which it will be difficult to correct, without a just knowledge of this science.'¹⁶ Geographical knowledge, then, is not merely a means to guide one's own understanding, but also to correct the errors of ancient authors. For this reason it is not sufficient to read merely the geographical notes that may be found in the historical texts themselves. Learning geography from such sources is both time-consuming and fraught with the possibility of error. Lenglet rather recommends the use of geographical compendia. The main problem about geography, however, is that the dryness of most works on the subject makes it troublesome to master. According to Lenglet, the best method is therefore to 'consider it attended by some Historical passage to render it agreeable, as of a Siege, a Council, the birth-place of some Prince or famous personage, or of the curiosities to be found in its natural History, Buildings, Palaces, and Trade.'¹⁷

Lenglet's description of how and why to study geography makes it clear that this discipline is not part of history, even if a prerequisite to it. It is moreover accorded little value of its own. Geography is a science of 'the object of the eyes' rather than a matter for the intellect, and therefore easy enough to learn.¹⁸ The challenge lies in its tediousness, not in any real difficulty of comprehension. Adding historical dates to geographical knowledge, as suggested by Lenglet, may be seen as a mnemotechnical device, but also as a means to render geography more intellectually stimulating.

The dryness of geography is still nothing compared to that of chronology, for which reason this science was long neglected, Lenglet writes. However, its necessity has been forcefully argued by a man whose work he always mentions with great respect: the Bishop of Meaux, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet. Lenglet claims that in his universal history, written for the French Dauphin, Bossuet points out that without proper knowledge of chronology 'we shall speak of the Persians conquered by Alexander as of the same Persians victorious under Cyrus. We shall fancy Greece as free in the time of Philip, as in that of Themistocles'.¹⁹ After

this admonition, the significance of chronology has been better understood, according to Lenglet.

Before embarking on the science of chronology, a student should, however, acquaint himself with the general principles for the calculation of days, months and years, as well as with the reforms represented by the Julian and the Gregorian calendars. For this use Lenglet recommends a number of works, particularly emphasizing Denis Pétau's *Rationarium Temporum*, originally from 1633. Once the basic principles are mastered, the student can advance, but must be aware that the discipline of chronology is divided into two kinds: the ranging of events according to the times in which they happened, and the disputes concerning some of these systems. The first is the easiest and also the most necessary:

so ought we there to begin our study of Chronology, all the ages from the creation of the world to the present may be divided into different parts. And these we may settle by means of certain *Æras*, in which all Chronologists agree. A method like this will have this advantage, that we shall more easily by it retain and remember what we meet with in History.²⁰

To master this part of chronology, Lenglet recommends the use of chronological tables, in which all eras, historical events and persons present themselves to the eye in one glance. Again he mentions the work of Pétau, as well as those of the seventeenth-century Irish bishop James Ussher and the sixteenth-century Italian lawyer Giovanni Paolo Lancelotti. Some years later, even Lenglet himself was to publish this kind of material. His *Tablettes Chronologiques* first appeared in 1743, and subsequently in a number of up-dated versions long after the original author's death in 1755.²¹

The use of chronological tables dates back to Eusebius of Caesarea and his efforts to synchronize all known history into one, coherent narrative of world history. Further developed by Augustine, this tradition of Christian universal history held a strong eschatological note, as history was thought to demonstrate the gradual unfolding of the divine plan, leading towards the end of the world and the final judgement. During the early modern period this concept of universal history was severely challenged by the discovery of the New World and increased contacts with Asian cultures, none of which fitted into the biblical chronology and scheme. The tradition did, nonetheless, remain strong, reaching its zenith with Bossuet's *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* from 1681 (cf. above).

Chronological tables remained a staple element in books written for students, as they were a very effective means to visualize history in its totality. The vertical

axes showed chronology, starting with the creation of the world and ending (usually) in the author's present. Side by side, on the horizontal axes, the histories of all known states and cultures were presented, each represented in one column. The arrangement made it possible to situate events and persons in each column in relation to both the general chronology (vertically) and to each other (horizontally). As Lenglet points out, they made it possible for the student to have all history available at a glance.

For disputes concerning chronology, Lenglet refers to the authors already mentioned. The contested issues spring from three different sources: the testimony of judicious authors (that is, historical texts themselves); astronomical observations; and finally, the eras on which all chronologers agree, even if they are arbitrary.²² That said, Lenglet also declares chronological disputes to be improper for those who do not make them a particular study. It is a matter for the specialists, among them Pétau, Joseph Scaliger, and Lancellotti. The average student of history – the intended reader of Lenglet's *Méthode* – does not need to delve deeper into such issues.

There are obvious parallels between geography and chronology, as observed by Lenglet. Not merely are both tedious and dry, but necessary; they also, each in their own way, represent a 'spatial' dimension that is essential for the understanding of history. Like geography, even chronology is presented as the scene of history. The argument remains that to understand the events and avoid misapprehensions, it is necessary to know history's exact location in time as well as in space. But are these locations also parts of history? The traditional saying that geography and chronology are the *eyes* of history can be interpreted in two ways: they are (parts of) the nature of history, or they are tools that can be used to make history apprehensible. In Lenglet, geography seems to correspond to the second understanding. It is external to history proper, but necessary if we are to understand it. The advice that geography may be 'filled' with history to make it easier to remember supports this view. The role of chronology, on the other hand, is more ambiguous. While geography can be envisaged without history (though in need to be filled by it to ease memory), chronology is different. As long as it merely concerns calculations and calendars, it may be a thing in itself, but in its primary function – that of ranging events in their right order – it is unthinkable without its historical content. The chronological tables, which are the main tool suggested by Lenglet for mastering chronology, are also the best example: without their content of historical figures and events, the tables would be nothing but sheets filled with blank spaces. On the other hand, and perhaps contrary to modern thinking, chronology is not integral to history: it remains a tool for ordering

it. The idea is clearly expressed by Lenglet's close contemporary, the Danish history professor and philosopher Ludvig Holberg. In his introduction to universal history, written in 1733 for the benefit of University of Copenhagen students, the following explanation can be found: 'History, properly speaking, differs from chronology, as matters from the regular disposition of them. History gives the former, chronology the latter.'²³

Finally, the study of manners, customs and religions is necessary for history because of the cultural and social contexts that historians refer to. Lenglet mentions Jewish customs, as well as those of the Egyptians, Romans and Greeks, as his cases. These peoples thus stand forth as the significant agents of history, whose religions and ways of living a student of history must know in order to understand their histories. Perhaps more surprisingly, Chinese and Indian customs are also mentioned. This does not ascribe these people corresponding historical importance, however; rather, the point is made to argue that even seemingly strange customs and traditions – the binding of female feet in China, and the practice among Indian women of throwing themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres – usually have rational origins.

Equally significant is Lenglet's argument that knowledge of customs and religions is necessary to the student of history, because all historians write according to the uses of their age and 'make numberless allusions to the customs of their country.'²⁴ The passage indicates that historians are not scholars who investigate history from the outside by means of historical material and the use of certain scientific methods. They are part of history themselves. The historical contexts in question are the historians' own, not merely those of the subjects they treat.

Histories and Historians – Questions of Truth

Who, then, are the historians, and what is their relation to history? A simple – and extremely extensive – answer to the first part of the question can be found by consulting the second volume of Lenglet's book: a 'catalogue of the chief historians of all nations, the best editions of their works, and characters of them.'²⁵ The volume is a list of more than 600 pages. It contains names of writers from Antiquity to Lenglet's own time, arranged in chapters that in part are thematic, and in part geographical. In modern parlance it could be called a list of historical source material rather than works of historical investigation. The catalogue bears witness to Lenglet's immense reading and great knowledge of books and manuscripts, published as well as unpublished.²⁶

More elaborate discussions of historians and their histories are found in the final part of the first volume, in the chapters on the character of good and bad historians (Chapter XVIII), and on rules for judging historical facts and for the discovery of spurious works (Chapter XIX–XX). As has been pointed out by Guion and others, large parts of the argument, as well as the specific rules, are taken from Bodin and Jean LeClerc.²⁷ Lenglet appears as a compiler, not as a theorist in his own right. In the present context, this lack of originality is less important than the idea of history that is expressed.

What, then, makes a good historian? Lenglet is explicit and vehement. The best historian has a natural gift for his work, has studied hard, and is well experienced. So far this might resemble the description of a modern historical researcher. But the figure portrayed by Lenglet soon proves to be another. Historians come in three ‘classes’, he declares:

First, those who have been well qualified by the Study of polite Learning and Politicks, as well as with excellent natural abilities proper to write History. In the Second those who had not made the preparatory and proper Studies, but supply them by their natural Abilities, and Experiences gained in Negotiations or Government of the State. In the Third Rank, those who have had all the Abilities necessary for the Writing of History well, but have not had any Thing to do in the Management of Affairs, supplying by Study their Defects as to Experience.²⁸

The best historian, then, is the experienced statesman and politician. Thucydides is the example of this category. The second category is represented by the mediaeval Jean de Joinville and Philip de Comines, who both ‘had no other school than the Court of their Prince’,²⁹ and the third – that of the analytical erudite man – is exemplified by the sixteenth-century French historian Jacques de Thou. Lenglet points out that if such a historian, as was the case with de Thou, has ‘laboured on good Memoirs’, he may still equal the others. Nonetheless, the features by which he most resembles a modern historical researcher are exactly what places the learned man only in the third class of Lenglet’s ranking: he has not been part of what he writes about, and is not personally experienced in the kind of issues history is about: statecraft and politics. The scholar is also an outsider, which lessens his qualifications as an historian.

Another quality that characterizes a good historian are that he does not belong to any party and is thereby able to judge without prejudice. A student of history should therefore examine carefully whether the historian he is reading may have had any particular interest in writing what he does.³⁰ Finally, Lenglet adds two other qualifications to his description of the able historian. He must have been

approved of in his own time and particularly by those who might have any personal knowledge of the events he relates. Moreover, the historian should not write from mere hearsay, but build upon ‘the Memoirs of Princes, or at least of their Ministers.’³¹ Seen on its own, the last remark seems to be about source criticism, but as part of the picture drawn by Lenglet it contributes consistently to the overall theme. A good historian must have access to the real agents of history, who are the princes and ministers and their accounts. It is through this position, and the personal experience he gains from it that he can present true histories. J. G. A. Pocock has pointed out that well into the Enlightenment, history was a narrative that ‘might be written by the principal actor himself, but was probably better supplied by a historian who was witness to his deeds and was himself active in the nexus of performance.’³² The position of royal historiographer, important not least under absolute rule, also springs from this understanding.³³ The historian is the man who has followed history. Personal experience and proximity to the events are his important qualifications, together with his analytical gifts.

The first of Lenglet’s two points makes it abundantly clear that history is not primarily about the past, seen from a distance. History is written in the close aftermath of the events described, while other persons who have also experienced them are still alive and able to make their voices heard. The examples given by Lenglet further emphasize this point. The most recent of the mentioned historians – de Thou – lived and worked almost two hundred years before Lenglet. Like Thucydides, Joinville and de Comines, he wrote about his own time and its close past. History may *come* to us from the past, but it is *about* its own time. The past is not the topic of history, but rather its context. The historian may bring the past into the present, but that is because his works about his own time live on, not because he writes about times gone by. Pocock points out that ‘history was ... written in and of the present, and only its survival in written form made it a record of the past.’ This also implied that, for instance, ‘Roman history’ or ‘English history’ meant an aggregate of surviving works, not a retrospective study of them.³⁴ This understanding is mirrored in Lenglet’s catalogue.

What makes history true, according to Lenglet, has partly appeared from his descriptions of the good historians. Nonetheless, he also dedicates separate chapters to the judgement of historical facts and of spurious works. The six rules presented for ‘judging historical facts’ mainly relate to the question of whether a certain event or action has taken place or not. What is to be considered is the possibility versus the probability of an action, its circumstances, and the merit of the authors who report it. Guion has pointed out that the rules are very directly taken from Jean Mabillon and LeClerc. It may also be worthwhile to consider Lenglet’s

understanding of ‘facts’ in this context. Barbara J. Shapiro has pointed out that the concept of fact changed its meaning and status during the seventeenth century. She traces the origins of this development to the field of law, but argues that the new understanding was vitally important for the epistemological ideals of the scientific revolution and the new natural philosophy.³⁵ During the early modern period, according to Shapiro, the term ‘fact’ meant an action. The etymology is clear in Latin-based languages: the French *fait* and Italian *fatto* both refer directly to something ‘that has been done’. A fact, then, represented an action or an event that was disputed, but which the court case might prove to be true: it had really taken place in the way it was reported. The fact was true when it had been judged to be so by rational men using their sound mental faculties.³⁶ Only gradually did the modern notion of fact develop, seeing facts as kernels of information that were already true and beyond dispute. Shapiro describes this as a ‘transformation of “fact” from something that had to be sufficiently proved by appropriate evidence to be considered worthy of belief to something for which appropriate verification had already taken place.’³⁷ What remained was nonetheless the definition of a fact as an action or event, something that had happened. Shapiro argues that this was part of the reason why observations and experiments could gain their new status as reliable sources of scientific knowledge. They were facts: actions and events reliably reported to be true. Lenglet’s understanding, as expressed through the rules he has borrowed from LeClerc, clearly reflects this notion of facts and the questions they raise: have the events taken place in the way they are reported by the historians, or have they not? The rules are intended to enable the reader to find answers using his sound judgement.

The rules concerning spurious works make an even longer list, centered on how to discover forgeries. A number of these rules deal with different kinds of anachronisms. Apart from looking for references to institutions or persons that did not exist in a history’s pretended period of origin, the reader ought also to compare dubious texts with other, more generally acknowledged works. Style and language must be checked for anachronisms and for potential misfits with the character and with other works of the purported author. Reasons why histories are not reliable may be the author’s ignorance, his credulousness, or exaggerated piety. Nonetheless, the main point of the rules is to make it possible to discover frauds. For different reasons of interest, some earlier historians have consciously tried to deceive their readers, and a number of them have employed considerable ‘Art and Caution’ in doing so.³⁸ Given the understanding of history as written ‘in and of the present’,³⁹ the rules and the critical work they encourage concern persons as much as texts, historians as much as their histories. Correspondingly,

what is judged as spurious, dubious or deceitful is the historian rather than his text, while the reasons behind this are related to his morals, emotions and psychology. Source criticism becomes a critique of historical agents.

Time is not what defines history, according to Lenglet. Time, like geography, constitutes history's frames, keeping it in place, but time – or 'the past' is not what history more fundamentally is about. Even if all histories can be forced into one time frame, as demonstrated by the chronological tables, they do not reflect an overarching and all-encompassing temporal dimension. They are histories, not history, each taking place in their own temporal and geographical location. History becomes a thing of the past only when these accounts are passed on over time, which is also why a student of history needs to know how and where to locate the histories in chronology. This understanding even has implications for the critical evaluation of histories. Source criticism is a defining methodological element of modern historical scholarship, as it was more or less 'invented' during the late nineteenth century. A corresponding lack of such criticism is often held to be a distinctive feature of the history writings of earlier periods. The definition is somewhat anachronistic – why should nineteenth century methods have been used by, for example, eighteenth- century people?

However, a lack of critical ability or method is certainly not what marks Lenglet's presentation – or the *ars historica* in general. His preoccupation with anachronisms is only one example of this. It is important, however, to note that the aim of his criticism differs somewhat from that of modern scholarship. As pointed out above, the main concerns are frauds and deceptions, and the verification of 'facts'. Similar to a modern scholar, Lenglet knows well that the time that has passed may obscure understanding and prevent access to relevant information. As opposed to this modern scholar, on the other hand, Lenglet is not out to interpret the past, or to understand developments that have taken place since the time of the author he discusses. His aim is to find out what happened. To do so he must know whether the author is trying to cheat him. He also needs sufficient contextual information to understand things that are merely implied or referred to in the text – such as place names, customs, and the like. Once again, the past is a framing condition of (most) histories, but not what history really is about.

The Usefulness of History

Why study history? The answer of course depends on what history is held to be. Through his work, Lenglet communicates a traditional understanding that his-

tory is mainly narratives of statecraft, military deeds and powerful institutions. Moreover, as has been pointed out above, what defines these narratives is not so much that they are about the past as the fact that they have been passed on from the past. History – or rather histories in the plural – is an aggregate of skilled and able men’s descriptions of important events, persons and institutions of which they have more or less direct experience and personal knowledge. This reflects a rather general understanding of history in the early modern period.⁴⁰ In his introduction, Lenglet argues more explicitly as to why this kind of knowledge is useful. Even if some people read history just for the fun of it, or to satisfy their curiosity, a real historical study has other advantages to offer, he says. On an overarching level, history should be studied ‘to equally take notice of good and evil, to imitate the one, and avoid the other.’⁴¹ The point is not to fill one’s head with trifles of names and years, but ‘to study the motives, opinions and passions of men, to be able to discover their engines, their windings, and inventions, finally to know all the delusions they put upon our intellects, and the surprizes they seize our souls with; in one word, it is to know one self by others.’⁴² More precisely, the way to do this is to

observe the maxims, the famous actions, prudent opinions, and particular end of affairs, which may be of use to a man, when in the same circumstances, above all is it useful to examine the characters which Historians give of great men, they are often quick spurs, to encourage us to become like them whom we admire, and on the contrary to avoid their ill customs whom we disapprove, wherefore without a mighty great application we may unite our daily experience to the examples of the ages gone before us.⁴³

History is the teacher of life, *magistra vitae*. Reinhart Koselleck has pointed out that this originally Ciceronian saying about the usefulness of history remained a dominant *topos* in Western culture from Antiquity until the late eighteenth century. During these nearly two thousand years it covered a wide range of understandings and motivations. It has worked as a mere commonplace, but also supplied the basis for complex political thought.⁴⁴ More recent research has started to investigate the varieties and shades of this huge complex, and discerned nuances as well as historical change in the understanding of history as *magistra vitae*.⁴⁵

The logic of exemplarity – be it of a moral, political or psychological kind – is fundamental to the *magistra vitae* topos. Historical knowledge was supposed to be effective, in the sense that it would influence the readers’ own lives. Students of history were supposed to act upon the insights gained, following the good examples and avoiding the bad. This logic of exemplarity has important implications

for the notion of history. It presupposes ideas about constancy or sameness. The virtues or ideals made real in certain acts or by certain people must in some way be understood as expressing values that were constant, independent of context or period. Furthermore, it will, as Lenglet says, be possible for the student of history to find himself 'in the same circumstances' as the person he reads about. In his investigation of examples and exemplarity in early modern European literature, John D. Lyons writes that examples 'in the sense of copy are only possible if the act or object in question is seen as corresponding to an earlier act or object that is the *same*. In this respect, time is an important dimension of example revealing an identity that appears across chronological boundaries.'⁴⁶

The idea of history as a collection of examples to learn from reduces the significance of the temporal dimension. The growing awareness of the difference of the past and, consequently, its lack of potential to guide future action, has been held forth as a main reason why the *magistra vitae* topos gradually dissolved. Exemplary history demanded stability: on the one hand, in the condition of human life and the challenges to be met with, but on the other hand, also in the virtues and values that ought to guide human actions and choices. Even though Lenglet was very aware of anachronism, he does not hesitate to say that a student of history will be able to find himself in 'the same circumstances' as the historical actors, and thus learn from what he reads. The temporal awareness prerequisite for any experience of anachronism seems local, and limited to specific cases of deliberate deception. It has not expanded into a more general and coherent experience of the past as significantly different from the present.

Exemplarity is regularly reported to have been in crisis during the entire early modern period.⁴⁷ From Renaissance humanism onwards, the understanding grew that the immediate historical context was more important to the meaning of objects and acts than their reference to pre-existing models, be they taken from authoritative texts like the Bible, or seen as the articulation of timeless and unchanging virtues. It can be argued that Lenglet's interest in anachronism as a means for detecting fraud and 'spurious facts' represents exactly the way of thinking that resulted in undermining the notion of history as a collection of timeless examples.

Scholars differ in their views on the radicalism of the crisis of exemplarity in the early modern era. While Koselleck has argued that the idea of history as *magistra vitae* dissolved by the end of the eighteenth century, the Danish historian Bernhard E. Jensen has followed similar ideas into the present.⁴⁸ Literary scholar Mark S. Phillips, for his part, has shifted the perspective of the debate. Rather than looking for dissolution, he has analysed the changes that happened to his-

tory's exemplary function during the eighteenth century. His contention is that the thematic range of historical literature was largely expanded in this period. New groups of readers with considerable 'sentimental competence' demanded new topics concerning civil life as much as politics and warfare, as well as more empathic ways of presenting traditional themes, putting greater stress on emotions, sensibility and ethical reflection. History could well keep its exemplary character of *magistra vitae*, but its teachings were no longer reserved for an exclusive political elite. New groups of readers demanded lessons of civic virtue, sensibility and public spirit rather than of warfare and high politics, Phillips argues.⁴⁹

Lenglet fits well into this picture. There is no doubt that, according to him, history is teaching by example. Moreover, the lessons to be learned are very much about psychology, emotions and ethical values. The reader of history is to get to know himself, but also, in more general ways, to know 'the opinions and passions of men.' Guion argues that Lenglet's ideas are typical of an early eighteenth-century development: history was thought to give specific moral and political lessons, not merely serve as the provider of timeless examples of deeds and virtues to be emulated.⁵⁰ This argument corresponds to the development described by Phillips, as well as to the period's more general quest for a universal knowledge of man.⁵¹ Nonetheless, the actual content of history, as Lenglet presents it, still comprises the traditional themes of war and statecraft. The topics identified by Phillips in his study, concerning civil life and civic virtue, are not dominant.

Whom did Lenglet address? It seems obvious that his intended audience was not made up of the young princes and nobles who traditionally studied history to prepare for a future of government and war. The reader is referred to as 'a man', and more implicitly presented as a member of the bourgeoisie: cultivated and interested in learning, but with no public or political position. What lessons could such a reader draw for his own life, from his reading about princes, politics and the art of governing a state? After presenting the 'know-thyself' goal, Lenglet adds a warning to this respect. While human motives, opinions and passions are 'common to all mankind', and hence make a useful study for anybody, care must be shown when it comes to other aspects:

we know that the difference in conditions ought also to make great difference in their studies: wherefore it is useful, nay necessary, that every one knowing the state of life he is placed in, ought to regulate himself in the study of History accordingly. We know for certain, that it would be very dangerous for a private person in applying himself to the reading of Historians, to turn his head to political reflexions, and those means made use of to make an appearance, and advance himself in the courts of great men: a small mat-

ter of attention is necessary, to keep us clear from irregularities, the consequences of so ridiculous a conduct.⁵²

The passage reads like an ironic commentary on Lenglet's own life. From a bourgeois background, he had become a learned man, well educated in history, theology and law. Frequently mixed up in political intrigue, and offering his services as an intelligence worker and a man of learning to a number of different patrons and allies during his life, he ended up in prison more than once. Read less biographically, the admonition to abstain from politics and public activity above one's own rank reflects a more general paradox that developed in the period. On the one hand, history should be read for its exemplary and instructive potentiality, giving the reader competencies and skills he needed in his own life. On the other hand, works of history were no longer composed to be the 'mirror of princes' – as for instance Bossuet's great work for the Dauphin – but to be read by men who had no public position and little political influence under the *ancien régime*. Reading history, these men acquired political competencies and understandings that they were not supposed to have, or at least not to act upon.

Notes

1. Astrid Witschi-Bernz, 'Main Trends in Historical-Method Literature: Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries', *History and Theory*, 12 (1972), pp. 51–90. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2504714>.
2. For practical reasons, quotations in this article are taken from the English version of Lenglet's work.
3. Beatrice Guion, "'La Méthode pour étudier l'histoire' de Lenglet Dufresnoy: Un *Ars Historica* composite", in *Lenglet Dufresnoy entre Ombre et Lumières*, ed. by Claudine Poulouin & Didier Masseur (Paris: Champion, 2011), pp. 193–210.
4. Anthony Grafton, *What was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 26.
5. Grafton, *What was History?*, p. 189.
6. Geraldine Sheridan, *Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy and the Literary Underworld of the Ancien Régime* (London: Voltaire Foundation, 1989). Another major study of Lenglet is Poulouin & Masseur (eds.), *Lenglet Dufresnoy*.
7. Sheridan, *Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy*, pp. 283–289.
8. Sheridan, *Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy*, p. 274.
9. Sheridan, *Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy*, pp. 268.

10. Sheridan, *Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy*, p. 270.
11. Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
12. Johann Chr. Gatterer, *Handbuch der Universalhistorie* (Göttingen: Wittwe Vandenhöck, 1761–1764); Ludvig Holberg, *Synopsis historiae universalis* (Copenhagen: Joh. Georgii Höpffneri, 1733), English edition: *An Introduction to Universal History* (London: A. Millar, J. Ward, A. Linde, 1758 [1st edn. A. Linde, 1755]).
13. Witschi-Bernz, 'Main Trends in Historical-Method Literature', p. 81.
14. See, for example Peter Friderich Suhm, *Tiids-Regning til ungdommens Nytte* (Copenhagen: Brødrene Berling, 1773) and Grafton, *What was History?*, p. 92.
15. See, for example Ludvig Holberg, *An Introduction to Universal History*.
16. Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy & Richard Rawlinson, *A New Method of Studying History, Geography, and Chronology...*, vol. 1 (London: W. Burton, 1728), p. 27.
17. Lenglet Dufresnoy & Rawlinson, *A New Method*, vol. 1, p. 29.
18. Lenglet Dufresnoy & Rawlinson, *A New Method*, vol. 1, p. 29.
19. Lenglet Dufresnoy & Rawlinson, *A New Method*, vol. 1, p. 33.
20. Lenglet Dufresnoy & Rawlinson, *A New Method*, vol. 1, p. 34.
21. Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy, *Tablettes chronologiques de l'histoire universelle sacrée et profane [...] Depuis la Création du Monde jusqu'à l'an 1743* (Paris: Frères De Bure, P.M. Delaguette, 1744).
22. Lenglet Dufresnoy & Rawlinson, *A New Method*, vol. 1, p. 37.
23. Holberg, *An Introduction to Universal History*, p. 45.
24. Lenglet Dufresnoy & Rawlinson, *A New Method*, vol. 1, p. 30.
25. Lenglet Dufresnoy & Rawlinson, *A New Method*, vol. 2.
26. See Jens Bjerring-Hansen for the tradition of *historia literaria*, or bibliographic work: 'Videnssamfundets forhistorie: En introduktion til nyere, international udforskning af tidlig-moderne videnskulturer ca. 1500–1800', *Fund og forskning*, 52 (2013), pp. 432–456.
27. Guion, 'La Méthode', p. 200.
28. Lenglet Dufresnoy & Rawlinson, *A New Method*, vol. 1, p. 276.
29. Lenglet Dufresnoy & Rawlinson, *A New Method*, vol. 1, p. 277.
30. Lenglet Dufresnoy & Rawlinson, *A New Method*, vol. 1, p. 280.
31. Lenglet Dufresnoy & Rawlinson, *A New Method*, vol. 1, p. 282.
32. J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2: *Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
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34. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2, p. 8.
35. Barbara J. Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact: England 1550–1720* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

36. Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact*, p. 32.
37. Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact*, p. 31.
38. Lenglet Dufresnoy & Rawlinson, *A New Method*, vol. 1, p. 304.
39. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2, p. 8.
40. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2; Grafton, *What was History?*
41. Lenglet Dufresnoy & Rawlinson, *A New Method*, vol. 1, p. 25.
42. Lenglet Dufresnoy & Rawlinson, *A New Method*, vol. 1, p. 24.
43. *Ibid.*
44. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).
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46. John D. Lyons, *Exemplum: The Rhetoric of Example in Early Modern France and Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 11, italics in the original.
47. Alexander Gelley (ed.), *Unruly Examples: On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995); François Rigolot, 'The Renaissance Crisis of Exemplarity', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59:4 (1998), 557–563. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jhi.1998.0042>.
48. Bernard Eric Jensen, 'Using a Past: *Magistra Vitae* Approaches to History', in *Negotiating Pasts in the Nordic Countries*, ed. by Anne Eriksen & J. V. Sigurdsson (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2009), pp. 205–238.
49. Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain 1740–1820* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
50. Guion, 'La Méthode', p. 195.
51. See, for example Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Science of Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1977).
52. Lenglet Dufresnoy & Rawlinson, *A New Method*, vol. 1, p. 25.

Summary:

How to Study History: Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy and the Heritage of ars historica

Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy first published his *Méthode pour Étudier L'Histoire* in 1713. A very popular work in its own time, it saw numerous translations and editions during the eighteenth century. The article investigates Lenglet's work as part of the early modern tradition of *ars historica*. In the eighteenth century this

once so fashionable art of reading history did no longer represent a methodological novelty, but had become more a pedagogical tool. The article explores the *ars historica* in its late phase of popularization and general distribution.

To Lenglet and his contemporaries, history was a collection of instructive examples, serving as ‘the teacher of life’. The lessons to be learned were about psychology, emotions, and ethical values. The reader of history was to get to know himself, but also, in more general ways, to know ‘the opinions and passions of men.’ History was a mirror of humanity. The article investigates how the understanding of history as a collection of examples reflects early modern experiences of temporality, as well as how it influenced assessment of historical truth.

Keywords: ars historica; historiography; Lenglet Dufresnoy; magistra vitae-topos.