A COMPANION TO INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

EDITED BY
Richard Whatmore and Brian Young

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Dedication

For Donald Winch and the late John W. Burrow, the best of companions to intellectual history.
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Introduction

Brian Young

Intellectual history has, since the 1960s, become one of the success stories of the historical profession, in the Anglophone world especially but also across Europe. It is now hard to find a subject that has not been examined from an intellectual history perspective. There are intellectual histories of cannibalism and (other kinds of consumption,) of science and technology, of emotions and senses, of human and animal bodies, and of hymns. One of the reasons for the success is undoubtedly the interdisciplinary nature of the subject. Intellectual historians can be found not only in history departments in universities but in departments of politics, international relations, English, language and linguistics, Classics, Divinity, economics, philosophy, sociology, business and management, public administration, mathematics and all of the natural sciences. Many of the old points of attack directed against intellectual historians – of being antiquarians and elitists, of being irrelevant to the world, and of being ignorant of social structures, class struggles and power relations are more rarely voiced today. Part of the reason is the sheer diversity of intellectual history, but it is also because of the ability of intellectual historians to defend both the patch and the tribe through their labours. Intellectual historians are not so often to be found playing what Donald Winch memorably termed ‘away matches’, when giving talks in front of an audience that is likely to be sceptical and, in some cases, hostile.

At the same time every intellectual historian will have experienced students or colleagues who continue to ask, ‘What is intellectual history?’ The history of intellectual history in recent decades helps to provide an answer. Intellectual history is necessarily pluralist in its ambitions, and also in terms of the approach and methods of study chosen by its many practitioners in achieving those ambitions: a subject that takes as its subject matter the history of thought cannot afford to be anything other than pluralistic. As a natural consequence of such an observation, it is equally clear that intellectual history cannot be triumphalist in terms of its relationships at any given time with other elements of the discipline of History. Its fortunes have often been better in America than in Britain, and have been infinitely better in Germany than they have largely and intermittently been in France; this is for a number of
reasons, all of which constitute, individually and collectively, territory for intellectual historians to explore and to explain. There are institutional as well as intellectual explanations for the optimism many American students of intellectual history currently express, just as there are for the more cautious attitudes common among students of the subject in Great Britain and elsewhere in Europe. Not least among the institutional aspects of its varied fortunes is the fact that intellectual history is a mode of historical thinking that is rarely taught outside universities; it does not enjoy the expansive (and expensive) resources of the history of art or visual culture more generally understood, and it would be difficult to imagine a museum dedicated to intellectual history in the way that students of economic or cultural history can enviably expand on their horizons through such everyday and open-ended modes of communication.

The occasional foray by intellectual historians onto radio broadcasts dedicated to some aspect or other of the subject of intellectual history broadly construed is no substitute for the daily outreach that naturally flows from being instrumentally involved in a series of experiences that can readily be communicated through museums or similar modes of reflection for a wider public. Masters of television as a medium have occasionally managed to discuss the world of ideas, as can be appreciated from viewing two landmark series made by the BBC in its glory days, Kenneth Clark’s *Civilisation* (1969) and Jacob Bronowski’s *The Ascent of Man* (1973), but even here it is notable how dependent on the visual both were. Clark’s specific episode on the Enlightenment, ‘The Smile of Reason,’ is a triumph of such exploration, but it was notably more abstract and somehow less stimulating than most of the other instalments of *Civilisation*. Bronowski’s series necessarily pioneered a history of visual and material culture since it displayed not only the natural world explored by natural science, but also the various and varied instruments with which that infinite world has been imaginatively and creatively explored over the centuries. When Bronowski discussed his hero William Blake, the worlds of art and nature were memorably enmeshed in the imagination of an erudite and humane historian of science.

Mention of Clark and Bronowski reminds one again of how rich the field of intellectual history is, as the history of art and the history of science are naturally fertile fields of exploration for the intellectual historian. Clark’s programme had its critics, and inevitably its alleged elitism was the charge most often repeated, but unusually this led to a positive resolution, in that the Marxist art critic, John Berger, was commissioned by the BBC to produce his own riposte to the old-fashioned style of art history he associated with Clark. Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (1972) has become a classic of television history in a way that its creator cannot possibly have imagined; it offers a challenge to the history told by Clark, who had admirably and very correctly insisted on the subtitle ‘A Personal View’ for his original – contra Berger, in all senses of the word – series. Among the many things Berger’s treatment of his subject achieved was to popularise and articulate a marxisant approach to art history that was then beginning to make its steady way to prominence in academic practice in the field at the very moment when his programmes were causing a stir nationally. Historians of art and material culture have always been more open to ideas than many Marxist historians in other fields of historical research (it was evident in the work of Anthony Blunt long before his exposure as a Soviet agent), and intellectual history has unfortunately long been subject to essentially trivial but institutionally significant slights made by some
Marxist critics. There is a paradox at work here, of course, in that Marx himself was a student of intellectual history, and his own works have been productively studied by intellectual historians, both negatively and positively. Leszek Kolakowski’s *Main Currents of Marxism* (1978) is a major contribution to the serious study of Marxism as a theoretical enterprise and as a mode of practice; it is both critical and appreciative, the work of an erstwhile advocate turned exquisitely patient historian. Marxist philosophers, such as the late Gerry Cohen, have always been aware of the possibilities of a positive relationship between Marxism and intellectual history – consider his *Lectures on the History of Moral and Political Philosophy*, posthumously published in 2013, which can profitably be compared with John Rawls’ *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, posthumously published in 2007 – but, for some reason, Marxist historians have tended to be altogether less imaginative. There have been influential Marxist intellectual historians, from Marx himself to Christopher Hill and C.B. Macpherson, but otherwise many intellectual historians are all too aware of what the late J.W. Burrow – the much-missed colleague in Intellectual History at the University of Sussex of the editors of this *Companion to Intellectual History* – had characterised as the ‘what about the workers?’ criticism levelled by Left-aligned historians impatient with what they routinely caricature as ‘elitism.’

Indeed, ‘What about the workers?’ To patronise the past is a cardinal sin in the historical profession, and it is one frequently committed by the self-proclaimed champions of those once all-too-conventionally forgotten by history. And effectively to separate the pursuit of intellectual history from the experience and activity of the working classes is deeply and offensively to patronise them. Jonathan Rose’s *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001) beautifully demonstrates just how interested in the life of the mind many working men and women actually were; and how they read Gibbon, for example, is at least as important as how, to cite a deservedly classic article by Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, the sixteenth-century humanist Gabriel Harvey had read his Livy. ‘Organic intellectuals’ read as well as speak and write. As one of the editors can personally attest, a Hull fisherman and his ten-year-old son watched and enjoyed together many episodes of *The Ascent of Man* when they were first broadcast by the BBC. Consciously class-orientated history-writing needs to be much more sensitive and altogether less inflexible than it frequently manages to be.

Intellectual history expands the horizons of history; it does not contract them by immediately and illiberally condemning other practices and approaches to the many mansions that constitute the heavenly cities of those fortunate enough to be able to pursue the study not only of human experience, but of the history of human reflection on that experience. Intellectual history imaginatively pursued has much to offer such emerging subjects as the history of the emotions (already long studied by many of its practitioners as a history of what had used to be called ‘the passions’), global history, and the history of material culture. Above all, intellectual historians have been amongst the most prominent in inviting historians to be consciously reflexive with regard to their own practice and activity, and accordingly the study of historiography has been one of the most enticing and intellectually arresting aspects of the subject, especially as practiced by English-language historians. And here the work of J.W. Burrow has been particularly influential, as has that of J. G. A. Pocock, itself influenced by that of Herbert Butterfield, himself a critical student of Friedrich Meinecke, who had learned to think deeply about historiography by reading the work of Jacob Burkhart.
Nor are the conversations initiated and developed among historians by the study of intellectual history simply undertaken within the discipline of history. Rather more than many other historians, intellectual historians, by necessity, are familiar with the territory explored by colleagues in other disciplines, from the study of the literature and philosophy of the ancient world, to that of modernity, from Platonism to Neoplatonism, from the direct experience of Hellenism to the call for its revival made by Nietzsche. Again, Marxist scholars have shown a concern with these fields congruent with that displayed by students of intellectual history: the work on English literature and its contexts that led to Raymond Williams’ pioneering and inspirational *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (1958), has been explored more recently in a significantly different but complementary manner by Stefan Collini. To reverse the order, the studies of Bernard Williams of philosophy and its history – and he, along with Hugh Lloyd-Jones (from a somewhat different political perspective), was unusual in being able to comment expertly both on classical drama and Nietzsche’s provocative evocation of its values – complement those made by the extraordinarily erudite Marxist student of intellectual life, Perry Anderson. But Anderson’s work also reveals why intellectual history is so often distant from critical Marxism. In his 1968 essay ‘Components of the National Culture,’ Anderson lamented the fact that British scholars preferred a liberal humanist conception of their various activities than did many of their continental colleagues, who were more typically concerned with perfecting the social sciences in a manner that led directly from study of the world to its transformation, the familiar Marxist exhortation. Liberalism will always provoke discontent. As Isaiah Berlin constantly reminded his readers, pluralism is a peculiarly agonistic series of experiences.

Pluralism as the origin and outcome of intellectual history is of the essence of this companion to intellectual history. And that is precisely what this expansive and ideally provocative series of essays is designed to be, a companion, not a dictator. There can be no definitive guide to so incomparably wide a study as the field constituted by intellectual history, a series of histories of human experience, and human reflections on experience. Hobbes explicitly and consistently rejected history as a means of exploring the political domain comprised by his *Leviathan* and its companion volumes; in doing so, he restricted the possibilities not only for individual liberty, but for liberation from his ‘artificial man’, his ‘mortal god.’ History provides an antidote to all those philosophies that seek to contain and direct human experience. So construed, intellectual history provides a fertile source for the pursuit of the liberty that thought can provide in a world that seems to be increasingly inimical to the active pursuit of the life of the mind. It is to the plural possibilities this occasions that this *Companion to Intellectual History* is primarily dedicated.

The chapters that follow are intended as a guide to the field both in terms of the method of intellectual history and in terms of its practice. Chapters consider the history and philosophy of intellectual history, developments in intellectual history in particular subject areas and in relation to particular national and broader histories, and show the ways intellectual historians have contributed to more established disciplinary enquiries. A much wider field still, of course, could have been covered.
PART ONE

Approaches to Intellectual History
A Companion to Intellectual History

Chapter One

The Identity of Intellectual History

Stefan Collini

Introduction

Intellectual history has no identity. But then, nor does social history or cultural history or any of the other subdivisions of history – at least, not if ‘identity’ is taken to indicate exclusive possession of a set of distinctive practices or a clearly delimited territory. What is done by those who are, for some purposes, regarded as ‘intellectual historians’ overlaps or is continuous with – and is at the margins scarcely distinguishable from – forms of scholarship that sail under flags as different as ‘history of science,’ ‘history of art,’ ‘history of political thought,’ and any number of others. As the metaphor of sailing under a flag suggests, these forms of identification can be useful for certain kinds of classifying and policing purposes, but all such flags are in a sense flags of convenience. Most often, instead of (to change the metaphor) seeking a quasi-Linnaean classification, with each species, defined by its unique characteristics, taking its place in a systematic taxonomy, we do better to ask a version of Pragmatism’s question: what purposes does the use of such a label serve? In what contexts does it matter and why? There are scholars who find themselves in a variant of M. Jourdain’s position and realise that they have been doing intellectual history all along without calling it by that name. That usually suggests they have been exceptionally fortunate in their professional or institutional lives, allowed to pursue their idiosyncratic interests without penalty. But more often, when scholars reach out for the label ‘intellectual history’ and use it in self-description, they do so in an attempt to establish the legitimacy of their interests, sometimes in the face of various kinds of hostility, scepticism or neglect. That was certainly the case during, roughly, the first three-quarters of the twentieth century when the dominance of the historical profession by political and, to a lesser extent, economic history could appear to make an interest in the intellectual life of the past seem an amateur or antiquarian activity, not based on the rigorous exploitation of archives and not dealing with those forces in society that ‘mattered.’ From this point of view, the relative autonomy and (not quite the same thing)
respectability now enjoyed by intellectual history – and exemplified by the existence of this *Companion* – is an achievement of the past generation or so.

Of course, it would not be difficult to show, given a little frisky conceptual footwork, either that there is no such thing as intellectual history or that all history is intellectual history. One could, for example, argue that history can only be a series of accounts of the doings of human beings and the only evidence we ever have of thinking is the trace left by action, which is all that historians ever have studied or can study: *res gestae*. Conversely, one would not need to subscribe to R.G. Collingwood’s Idealist conception of human action to see the sense in which one might want to say that ‘all history is the history of thought’ (Collingwood, 1946). Indeed, any notion of anachronism – one of the defining notions of historicity itself – implies a kind of brute intellectual-historical sense, an awareness that past minds might have had different assumptions and expectations according to their time and place. Seen thus, all historians cannot but be versions of M. Jourdain, doing a primitive kind of intellectual history without knowing it. By the same token, it would not be manifestly false, though it would be willfully irritating, to describe Herodotus as ‘the first intellectual historian;’ perhaps a marginally more credible, but still tiresome, case could be made for Plutarch. But in such instances the label seems to lose any useful specificity; it merely functions as a near synonym for ‘historian.’

If we are seeking some kind of genealogy, a more plausible case might be made for beginning with the late-seventeenth-century argument about the respective merits of the Ancients and the Moderns and moving on to figures from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Vico and Voltaire, where a self-conscious interest in charting phases or stages of human thought and sensibility prompted various departures from the canons of Classical and medieval historiography (for a general overview of these developments, see Kelley, 2002). But such enquiries tended to be animated by larger philosophical or polemical purposes, and before the nineteenth century, it is not easy to identify anything like a separate branch of historical enquiry devoted to recovering episodes in the history of human thought. Even then, and indeed into the early decades of the twentieth century, such enquiries were often undertaken by those who might be primarily identified as philosophers or critics rather than historians. For example, two works widely cited as early instances of what came to be labelled intellectual history were Leslie Stephen’s *The History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols (1876) and J.T. Merz’s *The History of European Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, 4 vols (1896–1912): the first was by a writer primarily known as a literary critic and biographer, the second by an author described as ‘an industrial chemist and philosopher.’

In Britain, this pattern continued deep into the twentieth century. Four of the figures who did most, albeit in quite different ways, to encourage a thickly textured interest in the intellectual life of the past were Aby Warburg, Isaiah Berlin, Arnaldo Momigliano and Herbert Butterfield: the first was primarily an art historian, the second a lapsed philosopher, the third a Classicist, the fourth a historian of European diplomacy. It is also significant that three of these four were immigrants to Britain from continental Europe; the broader Germanic inheritance of tracing the expressions of *Geist* was a significant predisposing factor in developing their respective scholarly interests. In imported form, this inheritance was also influential in the United States, where A.O. Lovejoy, another strayed philosopher, elaborated one of the first methodological
programmes for studying what he called ‘the history of ideas’ (understood as the story of ‘unit-ideas’ which combined and re-combined across time, as in his celebrated *The Great Chain of Being: a Study of the History of an Idea* (Lovejoy, 1936)).

Despite the intrinsic interest of these various bodies of work, it remained true that in the middle of the twentieth century intellectual history was frequently treated as the ‘background’ for something else – by implication, something more important, more deserving of occupying the foreground. The widely used books by Basil Willey, a literary scholar, made a virtue of this function, as *The Seventeenth-Century Background: Studies in the Thought of the Age in Relation to Poetry and Religion* (1934) was followed by *The Eighteenth-Century Background: Studies on the Idea of ‘Nature’ in the Thought of the Period* (1940). From the 1960s and 1970s onwards, ‘background’ tended to be replaced by ‘context,’ a term that came to be brandished as though it had the power of a magic spell: claiming to place ideas ‘in their historical context’ became the professionally approved way of asserting one’s scholarly seriousness. The two more specialised areas in which such contextualising work had greatest impact in the years from the 1960s to the 1980s were the history of science and the history of political thought; in both cases, especially the latter, there was a concentration on the long ‘early-modern’ period (circa 1450 – circa 1800). It was work in these areas that generated the methodological programmes associated above all with the names of Thomas Kuhn, J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, each of whom was taken to have provided a theoretically grounded template or paradigm of far-reaching applicability. For contingent historical reasons, the history of political thought was the form in which intellectual history – often in unstable compounds with elements of political theory, moral philosophy and political history – achieved a certain level of scholarly and institutional recognition in the USA and, especially, Britain in the first two or three decades after 1945 (see Collini, 2001). On a broader front, work on the borders of fields such as cultural history and literary theory subsequently prompted a greater plurality of approaches and a more expansive sense of the available modes of writing, while the impress of other political or theoretical formations, such as psychoanalysis and feminism, extended the reach and style of intellectual history in other ways, especially for the modern period. The most recent turn has been, inevitably, to embrace ‘global intellectual history:’ this involves an admirable avoidance of parochialism and a strenuous effort to undertake comparative studies, though in practice it can be hard to avoid superficial or tin-eared characterisations.

This brief characterisation necessarily condenses and simplifies a complex story, and several caveats must be entered. To begin with, these remarks primarily refer to what has come to be identified as intellectual history in the world of Anglo-American scholarship, particularly (in view of the provenance of this *Companion*) its British variants. A fuller account would need to discriminate more carefully among the various traditions which have tended to dominate at different periods, especially in the United States where versions of the history of ideas or intellectual history tended to enjoy greater recognition, and to be located more securely within History departments, than was the case in Britain until very recently. For example, a preoccupation with ‘American exceptionalism’ generated major studies of the distinctiveness of intellectual life in that country, from Charles Beard and Vernon Parrington early in the twentieth century, through Perry Miller’s *The New England Mind* (2 vols, 1939–53), to the work of a distinguished group of recent scholars including Thomas Bender, David Hollinger,
James Kloppenburg, Bruce Kuklick, Daniel Rodgers and Dorothy Ross (for an early conspectus of this group, see Conkin and Higham, 1979). European intellectual history has also tended to be cultivated with more confidence, and perhaps with more methodological self-consciousness, in the United States than in Britain, from the work of earlier figures such as Jacques Barzun and H. Stuart Hughes, through that of Peter Gay and William J. Bouwsma to more recent scholars such as Martin Jay and Anthony Grafton (for an overview, see Grafton, 2006; for contributions from a mainly Foucauldian or deconstructive perspective, see LaCapra and Kaplan, 1982; and for a more recent, and more quizzical, survey, see McMahon and Moyn, 2014).

A focus on other national cultures would produce a still more varied picture. The traditional centrality of philosophy and the aesthetic in German thought, for example, continued to inflect scholarly engagement with past intellectual life throughout the twentieth century, just as in France the field tended to be divided between the formalist studies by historians of philosophy and the more anthropological enquiries by social or cultural historians attempting to reconstruct the mentalités of entire communities (Dosse, 2003). In both these traditions, the term ‘intellectual history’ has retained a somewhat alien flavour, while various native enterprises from Geistesgeschichte and L’Histoire de philosophie to, more recently, Begriffsgeschichte and L’Histoire du champ intellectuel have divided up the terrain in different ways. These and other national traditions are all covered in more detail elsewhere in this volume; this chapter will concentrate on issues raised by work done in the English-speaking world.

A generation or more ago, those seeking to describe, and usually to vindicate, the distinctiveness of intellectual history largely felt themselves to be on the defensive, but there has been a notable increase in collective self-confidence in the last two or three decades. Elaborate exercises in definition and self-justification seem much less called for now. Labels are only labels, but the term ‘intellectual history’ has become commonplace, part of the furniture of institutional life, regularly appearing in the titles of books, journals, appointments and so on. I am not here offering a sunny narrative of disciplinary ‘progress’, but merely noting major changes in the setting and mood within which work is now undertaken, and hence in what it feels like to be an intellectual historian in 2014 in contrast to, say, 1974 or 1964. In any case, there are counter-vailing trends at work which should constrain any triumphalist note in this account. One is that developments growing primarily out of literary theory, and sometimes summarised as ‘the linguistic turn,’ have meant that all kinds of opportunist uses of texts from the past, primarily fuelled by ideological or deconstructive purposes, have increasingly presented themselves under the title ‘intellectual history’ even though they are not part of any sustained attempt to recover and understand the intellectual life of the past in its knotty, irreducible pastness. The potential for misperception and misidentification in practical matters such as appointments and reviews has increased correspondingly: literary scholars sometimes use ‘intellectual history’ as an honorific denoting an interest in theory or politics, while philosophers occasionally employ it as a derogated label for any interest in past thinkers that is not strictly philosophical. Another constraining development is institutional. For all the good work that is being done in intellectual history in Britain and America at present, there is still a paucity of established posts in the field. Very often, again especially in Britain, a scholar initially appointed to teach some other area (and themselves sometimes coming from a background in quite another discipline) makes a mark in the field and adopts ‘intellectual
history’ as part of the description of their chair or other senior appointment, only for their post to revert to its original disciplinary allegiance upon their departure or retirement. There are very few institutions where one can properly speak of a succession or a continuing graduate programme.

Nonetheless, the enhanced sense of legitimacy and shared values consequent upon the flourishing of intellectual history in the last couple of decades is itself an enabling condition for further good work. This healthy state is perhaps particularly evidenced by the cluster of journals that now serve the field. *Intellectual History Review* is the most recent, launched in April 2007, but it joins *Modern Intellectual History*, launched in April 2004, *History of European Ideas*, re-founded on new lines in 1995, and the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, which is more venerable but which has also recently undergone a welcome reshaping of its identity. (I should declare an interest here, since I am, or have been, on the Editorial or Advisory Boards of these last three journals.) Of course, good work in intellectual history is also published in a variety of other journals; I single out the above quartet simply because their simultaneous flourishing is a new phenomenon, and because they provide places for intellectual historians to publish without having to adapt to the protocols or expectations of scholars working in other disciplines or subdisciplines.

All this means that we can say, in a manner at once more confident and more relaxed than might once have been possible, that in the present, ‘intellectual history’ is a label applied to a wide range of enquiries dealing with the articulation of ideas in the past. At its core has been the close study of written expressions of thought, especially those crafted at a fairly sophisticated or reflective level. A constitutive part of such study is the attempt to recover the assumptions and contexts which contributed to the fullness of meaning that such writings potentially possessed for their original publics. All these phrases raise more questions than they answer but, for my present purposes, they are as far as it seems necessary to go by way of general description.

**The practice of intellectual history**

The manner in which I have been attempting, in these opening paragraphs, to address the question of the ‘identity’ of intellectual history by providing a primitive history of the activity may be seen as characteristic of work in this field more generally. That is to say, the historical impulse, where ideas are concerned, inevitably has a relativising effect, making particular expressions of an idea seem more tied to time and place than is the case with the fundamentally conceptual or theoretical disciplines, such as philosophy and several of the social sciences. But I would go further and say that, in the present, intellectual history is above all a form of practice, or a cluster of related practices, and the best way to exhibit its character at any given time may be by assembling a body of exemplary work. Systematic ‘methodological’ or ‘theoretical’ pronouncements may serve various purposes – philosophical, hortatory, exclusionary and so on – but they can only play an ancillary role in representing the nature and diversity of such scholarship. The succeeding chapters in this Companion give some indication of the range of such exemplary work, and it is not the task of an introductory essay to summarise, still less to preempt, those accounts. But perhaps three inferences, each of a loosely practical character, can be drawn from the diversity of work that has flourished in recent decades.
First, ‘context’ is never something given, never one fixed range of neighbouring activities: what can fruitfully count as context will depend on what we already understand about the text which we are choosing to surround with other elements, what questions we are seeking to answer or puzzles to resolve. Anything that helps to make or restore sense may be seen as an essential context, but there will necessarily be a plurality of such framing moves, always involving a selection from the almost limitless residues of the past. We like to think that the judicious selection of context is what helps protect us from misinterpreting what we read, and so it does in the best cases. But there can be no recipe for calling such contexts into play: the journeying between past and present which is constitutive of the historian’s activity includes an increasing familiarity with the mental worlds to be found at either end of those journeys, but the judgement about what needs explaining, what needs saying, is, like other forms of practical judgement, something built up by experience, not arrived at by applying a template.

Second, it is no accident that intellectual historians so often refer to debates, controversies, arguments, exchanges and so on: these represent ideas in action, living ideas being expressed and used in a highly specific setting. This is one indication of the deeply anti-individualist character of the most considered work in this field. The focus is always on what is shared and disputed with others – assumptions, expressions, arguments – not on an idea that can be treated either as self-sufficient or, in any meaningful sense, strictly singular. Even ‘intellectual biographies’ necessarily involve the reconstitution of networks of discourse: no writer or thinker creates the language they use de novo, and language is a social practice that expresses and is shaped by a collective history. There can, of course, be due recognition of the importance of the ‘original’ thought of a notable individual, but there can, strictly speaking, be no ‘great man’ school of intellectual history.

Third, while it is true that intellectual historians make use of a wide variety of genres of publication, it remains the case that three rather traditional forms predominate, and for good reason. The first of these is the essay – the essay rather than the article, in so far as that distinction has any force. Many of the best intellectual historians have been notable essayists – this was conspicuously true, to take contrasting examples, of Isaiah Berlin and Hugh Trevor-Roper – and this relaxed conversable form has proved itself particularly well suited to the tasks of heuristic questioning and intellectual portraiture. The second is the scholarly edition, often an underrated genre where the making of professional reputations is concerned, but a form that can be both the distillation of a lifetime’s learning and the bedrock of others’ investigations. Consider, to take two notable seventeenth-century examples, the fabulous wealth of erudition undergirding the Clarendon edition of the works of Thomas Hobbes or the Newton Project, which aims to make available an edited version of everything Sir Isaac Newton ever wrote, on any topic, published or not. These and comparable editions are monuments of intellectual history, and usually the result of collaborative endeavour. But, third, it probably remains true that the monograph continues to be the genre that best exhibits the distinctive virtues of the kind of work that combines an argued analysis of the character and functioning of a body of thought in a particular historical setting and a cultivated familiarity with a concentrated body of primary sources. (For this reason, intellectual history, along with some other fields in the humanities, has a lot to lose from the pressure currently exerted by modes of research assessment in the