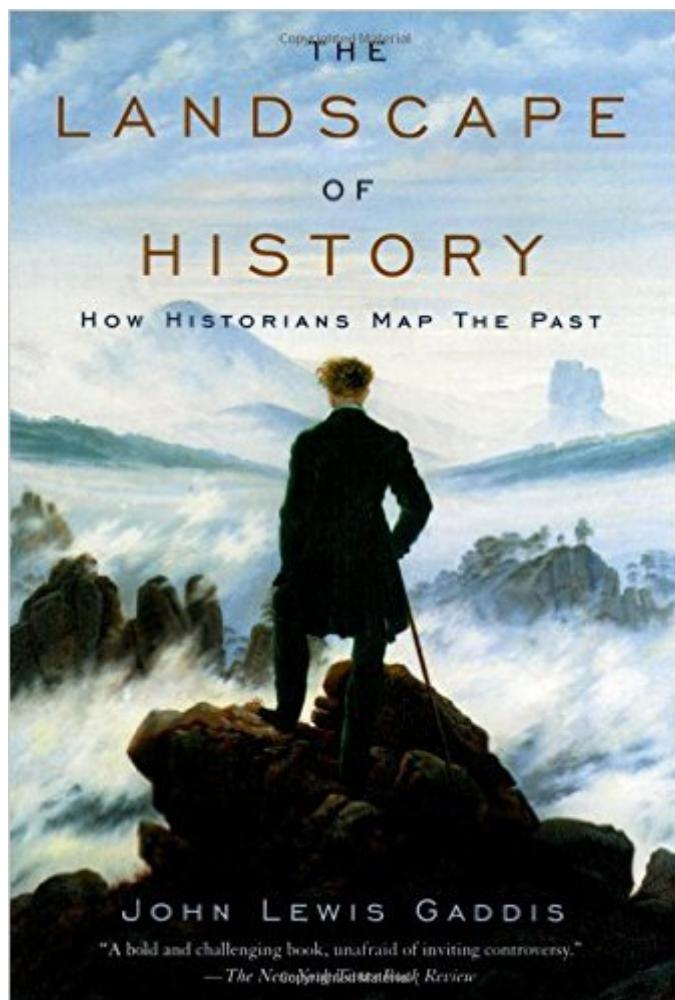


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# The Landscape Of History: How Historians Map The Past



## Synopsis

What is history and why should we study it? Is there such a thing as historical truth? Is history a science? One of the most accomplished historians at work today, John Lewis Gaddis, answers these and other questions in this short, witty, and humane book. *The Landscape of History* provides a searching look at the historian's craft, as well as a strong argument for why a historical consciousness should matter to us today. Gaddis points out that while the historical method is more sophisticated than most historians realize, it doesn't require unintelligible prose to explain. Like cartographers mapping landscapes, historians represent what they can never replicate. In doing so, they combine the techniques of artists, geologists, paleontologists, and evolutionary biologists. Their approaches parallel, in intriguing ways, the new sciences of chaos, complexity, and criticality. They don't much resemble what happens in the social sciences, where the pursuit of independent variables functioning with static systems seems increasingly divorced from the world as we know it. So who's really being scientific and who isn't? This question too is one Gaddis explores, in ways that are certain to spark interdisciplinary controversy. Written in the tradition of Marc Bloch and E.H. Carr, *The Landscape of History* is at once an engaging introduction to the historical method for beginners, a powerful reaffirmation of it for practitioners, a startling challenge to social scientists, and an effective skewering of post-modernist claims that we can't know anything at all about the past. It will be essential reading for anyone who reads, writes, teaches, or cares about history.

## Book Information

Paperback: 208 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (April 8, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0195171578

ISBN-13: 978-0195171570

Product Dimensions: 7.8 x 0.3 x 5.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.7 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 starsÂ  See all reviewsÂ (44 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #46,536 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #25 inÂ Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Historiography #74 inÂ Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > Europe #234 inÂ Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > United States

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Gaddis examines the nature of history and the function of historians through a wide range of

metaphors. By putting forth the question: How long is the British coast line? Gaddis immediately sets out that if we measure in miles we won't get to the alcoves and cubbyholes and we'll probably end up with a nice round number. If we measure in microns and millimeters, it'll take a while but we'll measure every single bend and dog leg and we'll have a much larger number. Many of Gaddis' metaphors spur philosophical discussions but he does not approach them with a philosophical background, instead he sets out to solve a functional question: What is history? Is it a natural science? If it is, then why can we not replicate any historical findings as biology and physiology can? Is it a social science? Then why do other social sciences like economics and anthropology try to find an independent variable upon which everything hangs when historians try to put out the bigger picture? Gaddis' conclusion then is that history is its own beast. It does not mirror either the hard sciences nor the social sciences although it may pick up some of their properties. All in all, this book is very readable for a historiography and may appeal to non-historians seeking a perspective on history. The chapters read more like the text of a speech than a textbook so the minimal 140 or so pages will make this a very easy read.

John Lewis Gaddis' *The Landscape of History* is a scholarly yet very approachable work that successfully attempts to pick up the mantel of the famous scholars of historiography, specifically Marc Bloch and E. H. Carr. Gaddis' purpose is to encourage students and historians not only to reexamine the theories of Bloch and Carr in a more modern light, but also scrutinize the methodology that historians use, and more often than not, recoil from making explicit. Gaddis, in a veiled manner does refute some of the assumptions of postmodernism, primarily the extremist view that historians are unable to make conclusions about the past. Gaddis is content with inundating his work with metaphors, some of which span chapters to relate and clarify complex ideas and arguments to the reader since he claims that "we need all the help we can get" (pg 128). Gaddis, masterfully using this powerful tool, arrives at a concept of historical consciousness which he argues helps to establish human identity. In the course of this argument Gaddis explains how historians "achieve [this] state" (pg 129) through their manipulations of time and space, the mechanisms of structure and progress, and causation, contingency, and counterfactuals. He claims that the methodology that emerges, although long since said to be closer to the realm of the social science, actually uses methods and techniques more similar to paleontology, geology, and evolutionary biology since both require thought experiments. One of Gaddis' achievements is his ability to convey complicated ideas in a crisp, persuasive, and well-supported fashion. His primary tool is the use of extended metaphors, the most important being the painting *The Wanderer above a Sea of Fog* by

Caspar David Friedrich, comparisons to sciences such as paleontology, and the length of Britain's coastline. Gaddis' exploration of metaphor of The Wanderer above a Sea of Fog spans his carefully unfolding arguments from beginning to end and each subsequent interpretation is added to by the next, providing a vast framework. These metaphors provide a point of reference for the reader and a visual embodiment of Gaddis' arguments. It encourages active participation by the reader in the argument and the layered interpretation exemplifies the complexity of his arguments and the complexities the historian faces in general. Gaddis argues that people cannot apply the 'scientific method' to history, since historical events have already happened the causes cannot be proven with a physical experiment. But not all sciences use physical experimentation either. Paleography examines the remains and postulates from fossils that are millions of years ago. History and many sciences "start [s] with surviving structures;" the geologist studies an ancient formation, the historian his sources (pg 41). The conclusions are proven by thought experiments; however, the deductions made must be "tethered to and disciplined by their sources." Gaddis does not clearly state if history is a science, but declares that the "distinction would lie along the line separating actual replicability... from the virtual replicability that's associated with thought experiments" (pg 43). He is not skirting the issue for much it to be gained "by comparing what they do to what happens in other fields," namely, to illustrate facets of the historian's own methodology. This answer relates back to Gaddis' purpose, to argue that historians need to make their methodological approaches clear for "methodological innocence leads to methodological vulnerability" especially from the extremist critiques of the postmodernist (pg 51). Just as metaphors cannot convey the complexity in its entirety yet yield important benefits, comparisons to science allows the historian to examine their methodological methods. A critic of The Landscape of History probably would argue that the well-read student or historian already puts into practice, sometimes without knowing it, most of Gaddis' conclusions about methodology. However, Gaddis' purpose is not to belabor the obvious but rather to argue that historians need to make "their methods more explicit" (pg XI). This book rather, makes a point to examine these unconscious workings that once pointed out to us are often obvious. Like many historians and students Gaddis' admits that he also has questioned the benefit of history, a study that he has devoted his life to, and partially because of his unease he decided to write this book to reestablish in his own mind the importance of history (pg x). He concludes with the following powerful statements of the purpose of history which his metaphors slowly revealed: "by breathing life into whatever remains from another time... we thereby assure it a kind of permanence" (pg 140), the study "helps establish human identity" (pg 147), and by "learning about the past liberates the learner from oppressions earlier constructions of the past have imposed upon them"

(pg 146). The most remarkable part of the book, and unfortunately the briefest, occurs on the last few pages where Gaddis argues that the "single most important thing any historian has to do.... is to teach" (pg 149). Gaddis' *The Landscape of History* is a fascinating and illuminating read for both the student and the historian.

Gaddis examines the nature of history and the function of historians through a wide range of metaphors. By putting forth the question: How long is the British coast line? Gaddis immediately sets out that if we measure in miles we won't get to the alcoves and cubbyholes and we'll probably end up with a nice round number. If we measure in microns and millimeters, it'll take a while but we'll measure every single bend and dog leg and we'll have a much larger number. Many of Gaddis' metaphors spur philosophical discussions but he does not approach them with a philosophical background, instead he sets out to solve a functional question: What is history? Is it a natural science? If it is, then why can we not replicate any historical findings as biology and physiology can? Is it a social science? Then why do other social sciences like economics and anthropology try to find an independent variable upon which everything hangs when historians try to put out the bigger picture? Gaddis' conclusion then is that history is its own beast. It does not mirror either the hard sciences nor the social sciences although it may pick up some of their properties. Gaddis uses metaphors that seem to have little connection with history, such as fractal geometry and natural sciences. The connections are then developed and this may be a way of making scientists understand the nature of history or giving students with a familiarity in natural sciences a correlation to the study of history. Also, Gaddis' humor makes a philosophical discussion of history a little less tense and certainly more cheerful. All in all, this book is very readable for a historiography and may appeal to non-historians seeking a perspective on history. The chapters read more like the text of a speech than a textbook so the minimal 140 or so pages will make this a very easy read.

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