

“Why the Past Matters” (2000)¹ *William Cronon*

In his wonderful book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, the neurologist Oliver Sacks tells the story of a man named “Jimmie” whom he describes in an essay entitled “The Lost Mariner.” In 1975, when Sacks first met him at the New York Home for the Aged, Jimmie was forty-nine years old. At first encounter, he seemed a perfectly normal person: intelligent, articulate, animated, able to talk at length about his childhood, his family, and his experiences in the Navy during World War II.

But it soon became clear as the conversation proceeded that there was something very odd and terribly wrong with the stories Jimmie told about his own life. He spoke with enthusiasm about what he would do now that both Hitler and the Japanese had lost the war: stay in the Navy, maybe, or go to college on the GI Bill. He described his plans for the future, always in a manner that seemed better suited to a man thirty years younger than to this gray-haired patient sitting in a New York mental institution. More and more perplexed by what he was hearing, Dr. Sacks finally asked Jimmie what year it was. Surprised that the doctor should ask so obvious a question, Jimmie replied, “Forty-five, man. What do you mean?... We’ve won the war, FDR’s dead, Truman’s at the helm. There are great times ahead.” Asked how old he was, his response was just as surprised: “Why, I guess I’m nineteen, Doc. I’ll be twenty next birthday.”

Odd as Jimmie’s story may sound, it is quite typical for people who suffer from the strange affliction known as Korsakov’s Syndrome—a disease of the memory, caused by trauma or organic illness, in which the patient loses the ability to process and retain short-term memories. Intelligence and other mental processes may otherwise be normal, so that you can meet a patient with Korsakov’s Syndrome and have an ordinary conversation without realizing that anything is wrong. Only if you leave the room and return a minute or two later do you realize the horrible truth: the patient no longer remembers the conversation you have just had. Indeed, the patient no longer remembers you, and you can have precisely the same conversation, over and over and over again. Doctors working with such people have the uncanny experience of meeting them for the very first time, each and every day, for years on end.

Subsequent research revealed that Jimmie had in fact stayed in the Navy after World War II, remaining in service until 1965. Then, after his retirement, he began to drink heavily, and it was alcohol that finally produced his case of Korsakov’s. In 1970, he turned up in an alcoholic delirium at Bellevue Hospital in New York. After sobering up under medical care, he proved, mysteriously, to have lost all memory of his life over the past quarter century. Everything prior to 1945 was there in his head in sharp detail; everything afterward was gone, utterly gone. And it was not just the years between 1945 and 1970 that had vanished; so too had Jimmie’s ability to create new memories of the events he was now living. It was as if his existence was bounded by the nineteen years of his childhood and youth, and by the single instant of the living present, a present that disappeared as soon as he experienced it, leaving no trace. Sacks writes, “All of us, at first, had high hopes of helping Jimmie—he was so personable, so likable, so quick and intelligent, it was difficult to believe that he might be beyond help. But none of us had

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ever encountered, even imagined, such a power of amnesia, the possibility of a pit into which everything, every experience, every event, could fathomlessly drop, a bottomless memory-hole that would engulf the whole world.”

Jimmie’s story is as vivid a proof as any I can imagine of how much the past does indeed matter to us. Although most people usually take it for granted and devote little time to studying or thinking about it, in fact the past is responsible for everything we are. It is the core of our humanity. The past is the world out of which we have come, the multitude of events and experiences that have shaped our conscious selves and the social worlds we inhabit. To understand how and why we live as we do, we cannot avoid appealing to the past to explain how and why we got to be this way.

But it is not the past alone that plays this crucial role in shaping our identities. No less important is the act of *remembering* the past, the backward reflective gaze in which we self-consciously seek to recall the world we have lost, the vanished landscape of our former selves and lives, in order to gather the signposts by which we find our way and keep ourselves from becoming lost. If the past is the place from which we have come, then memory and history are the tools we use for recollecting that place so we can know who and where we are. Memory and history turn space into place, investing what would otherwise be a purely biological or geological abstraction with a wealth of human meanings, and thereby turning it into the kind of place we choose to call home. Jimmie’s tragedy was to lose not just his past, but his memory and his history. In so doing he lost his place, his home—and a very large part of himself.

What is true of individual people is also true of societies. Much of what makes a nation a nation or a people a people—much of what they share in common to mark their collective identity—is an intricate set of remembrances that tie the present to the past. These collective memories take many forms, and in the United States they occur at all levels of our federal system, from the nation to the states to individual localities. Our common identity as Americans leads us to locate a part of ourselves in names like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, in great struggles like the American Revolution and the Civil War, and in laws and institutions ranging from the Declaration of Independence to the Emancipation Proclamation to the Nineteenth Amendment. Those of us who live in Wisconsin are apt to have a greater collective identification with the name La Follette or an eagle named “Old Abe” than our fellow citizens elsewhere in the United States. We are much more apt than other Americans to look at the Wisconsin landscape and see evidence of its glacial history than others who do not share our connection to this place. It is the possession of these shared memories of shared landscapes—many of which are not part of our lived experience except as memories—that give us our membership in these particular places. They give us a common place and a common past, and so tie us to each other so we can truly say that we are Americans, or that we belong to a place called Wisconsin.

There is, of course, some worrisome evidence today that our collective memory may be fraying in ways that undermine this sense of our having a common past. Not too long ago, there was published yet another study that reveals just how little even well-educated college students know or remember about our past:

- Only 8 percent of today’s graduating college seniors, for instance, could identify the phrase “government of the people, by the people, for the people” as having been spoken by Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address, probably the most

famous speech ever delivered on American soil, one that arguably changed the course of American history.

- Only 24 percent knew that Japan and Italy were Germany's chief allies in World War II.
- 84 percent did not know that Harry Truman was president when the Korean War began.
- 71 percent did not recognize Martin Luther as a key founder of Protestantism.
- 79 percent could not identify Plato as the author of *The Republic*.

If it is true that our knowledge of a common past is part of our common identity as members of a national culture and a civil society, one can wonder what such statistics portend for the future of America. But there is a deeper question that is worth asking first, which has to do with the relationship of memory to history for each of us as individuals and as members of communities.

The Backward Gaze

It is in the act of remembering that each of us, as children, comes to realize that there is something called “the past” which no longer exists but which we somehow know we have experienced as part of our own lives. One of the greatest peculiarities of the past is that it shapes so very much of who we are—and yet in a very real sense it no longer exists save for the traces of it we carry in our memories. Without us to remember and reconstruct it, there would be no past. Much of growing up has to do with the expansion of our capacity to remember, which evolves steadily as we age.

We begin as infants living as nearly as possible in the present, with just the barest sense that the world has ever been any different from the instant we now inhabit. Young children have no more understanding of the past than they do of the future, the world presenting itself to them as an endless stream of appearances that come and go with little comprehension of cause and effect apart from the most immediate connections. Beyond the span of time between a child's plaintive cry and a parent's comforting response lies a great void of forgetfulness. For an infant, the world revolves almost entirely around himself or herself, and so is very closely bounded not just in space but in time. Very young children know neither geography nor history beyond the reach of their own senses.

Only as we recognize the people around us as separate from ourselves do we begin to comprehend that they exist even when we are not in their immediate presence. This basic sense that the world persists even when we are not actively witnessing it is so obvious a feature of our adult consciousness that we barely think of it as relating to memory at all, but that is precisely what it is. Our conviction that the people and things we care about will be there when we awaken or return from a time away could hardly be more fundamental to the way we experience our place in the world, and our confidence about this crucially depends on memory. That is why the lived reality of Oliver Sacks's Jimmie is so alien and inexplicable to us: he is a man for whom the world ceases to exist the moment he turns his back on it. He has no history. This is not the way most of us live our lives.

Once we know that the world exists in our absence, we can begin to make the next great discovery in our exploration of memory, which is that the people and places around us *change*: things as we see them today are not quite what they were yesterday. The longer we live, the greater this sense of disconnect: if today seems different from

yesterday, it is even more different from last year, to say nothing of a decade or a quarter century or a whole lifetime ago. In the end, we reach old age inhabiting a world that often seems so remote from the one in which we spent the bulk of our lives that we sometimes feel ourselves to be strangers in a strange land, more at home in our memories than in the present we now inhabit.

And yet there is more to memory even than this. At the same time we recognize that the world changes, we also begin to realize that we ourselves are not the same either. All of our experience of growth and transformation flows from this most basic insight of memory: if we remembered nothing, we would never know change, for it is only by referring backward to the seemingly fixed signposts of the past that we can know how far we have journeyed in space and time in our migration from past to present. Indeed, one could even say that our ability to project ourselves into the future, imagining alternative lives that lead us to set new goals and work toward new ends, is merely the forward expression of the experience of change that we have learned from reflecting on the past. This is a key reason why the optimistic embrace of “progress” that characterized so much of nineteenth-century thought was tied to an equally powerful embrace of history: the two go hand in hand. To the extent that we live our lives as if we could choose to make them different—improving ourselves, striving to make the world a better place—we are acting on the lessons of remembered change. It is not too much to say that our ability to remember the past permits us to imagine the future.

Furthermore without the sense of change that is one of memory’s greatest gifts, we would have great trouble recognizing cause and effect, and without cause and effect, it would be very hard for us to act in the world with any sense of agency or moral responsibility. Our awareness of the past gives us our ability to analyze the two crucial states we think of as “before” and “after,” and these in turn lead us to ponder what it was that led the “before” to become the “after.” Out of such pondering come the principles and judgments that serve as our compass for action: our practical tools for intervening in the world around us—our technologies, our laws, our institutions—and also the moral precepts by which we try to distinguish good actions from bad. Without memory, none of these would be possible. Memory permits us to act in the world as moral agents: without memory, moral responsibility would be nearly impossible.

This experience of change leads us to think of the past not as a random collection of people, places, objects, and experiences, but as a series of events that form meaningful sequences. Just so do we transform the raw material of the past into narratives that permit us to speculate about what caused what, why people acted as they did, how a particular event happened, and what lessons we should extract from it. From the point of view of the universe, the past (if it exists at all in any meaningful sense) is an intricate, chaotic dance of complex states, each leading one to the next; but as transmuted by our human memories, the past is a vast collection of *stories*.

Indeed, one could say that the chief difference between history and the past which history describes is that history is a form of storytelling that has nothing to do with nature and everything to do with human self-understanding. The past is an infinitude of undigested happenings; human history, on the other hand, consists of the stories we choose to record in remembering what we care most about in ourselves and in our world. What we learn as we grow into adulthood is that memory is our most important tool for telling stories, and that stories in turn are our most important tool for telling ourselves

what we want our lives to mean. Stories about the past transform the inhuman universe into a human world of moral meaning.

Stories of Times Before

Our experience with personal memories of our individual pasts eventually leads us toward the broader reflections on our collective past that we commonly call *history*. We move from memories of our own lives to memories of other people's lives, and from there to a reconstruction of pasts which we ourselves did not experience. Perhaps this is why the first formal encounter with history for many of us is autobiography and biography, narratives of lives which, however different from our own, are nonetheless recognizably people like ourselves. Take, for example, the life of Juliette Magill Kinzie, the woman for whom the old Indian Agency House in Portage, one Wisconsin's oldest historic sites, was first built in 1832. Kinzie lived in the Indian Agency House, near the portage on the banks of the Fox River opposite Fort Winnebago, between 1830 and 1833. She was an able and intelligent woman and was married to a man of substance in that tiny frontier community. But we probably wouldn't remember her at all if she hadn't chosen to "make history" as we now remember it by writing a memoir about what her life in that house was like. By publishing *Wau-Bun, the "Early Day" in the North-West* in 1856, more than two decades after she left Wisconsin, she arranged her memories into a series of stories that became one of our most important records of life on the Wisconsin frontier in the 1830s. She told stories about her own experiences, and she also set down stories she had heard from others who had come before her.

It is this act of recording the past—of setting it down as stories—that transforms it into history and translates it into a frame of reference that people in the future can understand and with which they can empathize. And so we get the engaging story of Juliette Magill's marriage to John Kinzie in August 1830, followed by their long journey the next month from Detroit to Michilmackinac to Green Bay, and thence up the Fox River to the Indian Agency opposite Fort Winnebago at the site of the portage between the Fox and Wisconsin rivers. We learn of their lives there with the Ho-Chunk and other native peoples, of their meetings and tradings and journeys. We learn of Juliette Kinzie's household, her struggle to conduct a respectable domestic life on a frontier far from her native Connecticut. And we learn the story of how her house came to be built, an outpost of New England civilization in Wisconsin Territory.

The pleasure of reading a book like *Wau-Bun* is the way it can make a time and place far distant from our own come alive, permitting us to imagine what ordinary life might have been like back then. It is this shock of recognition—of learning to see the ordinary in lives that might otherwise seem quite exotic and extraordinary—that turns the dead past into a story that can once again spring to life in our own living memories. If we can tell stories about the past—seeing Fort Winnebago and the Indian Agency House through Juliette Kinzie's eyes—we can learn how we ourselves are connected to a world that would otherwise be lost to us.

As evidence for what can happen when the past becomes a living memory, and when the act of studying history leads to a deepened sense of place, consider the Indian Agency House in Portage. After the Kinzies departed in 1833, it became a tavern and eventually a farmhouse belonging in turn to James Martin, George C. Tallman, James B. Wells, and finally, in 1878, to the Edward S. Baker family of Portage. When Baker died

in 1928, the building had fallen into serious disrepair, and its fate seemed uncertain. Given its historic significance, Martha Merry Buell, chair of the Committee on Landmarks and History of the State Federation of Women's Clubs, sought to preserve it permanently as a historic landmark. She was led to her crusade by a reading of Juliette Kinzie's *Wau-Bun*. Everything I've said so far suggests that this was no accident: important as the building was as a landmark in its own right, it might very well not have been preserved had Juliette Kinzie's memoir not been so magically capable of breathing life into the rundown and ramshackle old structure.

Thus it is no exaggeration to point to *Wau-Bun* as perhaps the single most important reason why we can still visit the Indian Agency House today. Over and over again, those who campaigned to save the building turned to this book as the mainstay of their support. Mrs. Buell was soon joined by other prominent Wisconsin women in efforts to preserve the building. Aided crucially by Louise Phelps Kellogg, historian and director of research at the State Historical Society, they and a group of other supporters from women's clubs in Portage, Madison, Milwaukee, and elsewhere put together a statewide coalition supporting their cause. To raise money for the project, they persuaded George Banta, Jr., a Menasha printer who would go on to be president of the State Historical Society, to reprint a new edition of *Wau-Bun* (edited by Louise Kellogg). Banta agreed to donate all proceeds from the book's sales to a fund for maintaining the building. At the same time, Mary Katherine Reely of the University of Wisconsin Library School put together a theatrical performance to dramatize key events in the book, and this was performed for appreciative audiences in Portage, Madison, and elsewhere.

At every stage in the struggle to save the Indian Agency House, Juliette Kinzie and her book *Wau-Bun* were ready at hand to breathe life into the old building by giving it a *story* and thereby making it live again in memory. Without this memoir—this book of remembrances—there's a very good chance that this building would be little more than ruined foundations on an abandoned homestead. The physical structure survives today because Juliette Kinzie told stories about it—and because the Colonial Dames have worked so hard to make sure those stories are not forgotten by the forgetful present. Indeed, the Colonial Dames are every bit as important to the story of the Indian Agency House as Juliette Kinzie is, for the history of the past half-century is the story of devoted volunteers working to furnish, maintain, and interpret the building to visitors who might never otherwise have heard of Juliette Kinzie and her life on the Wisconsin frontier in the 1830s. In -just this way, we write and rewrite history for ourselves, for in the act of remembering and preserving the past we make history ourselves, extending its story ever forward into the present.

Killing the Past

Many of us are drawn to this act of transmuted inert documents into living history through our interest in our own past and, by extension, that of our ancestors. Beginning with ourselves, we seek to trace a path backward to all the people whose lives led up to our own. It is no accident that the heaviest and most avid users of the State Historical Society's library in Madison—to say nothing of libraries and archives across the nation—are genealogists. There is something exhilarating about the effort to reconstruct one's own family tree. In so doing, we pay homage to those who have gone before and learn more about our own immediate past. We also know at first hand what

every historian experiences: the pleasure of playing Sherlock Holmes, of following clues and leads down improbable pathways to discover evidence of events we'd never even heard of when we began the backward journey.

Genealogy is a wonderful pastime, one of the most important avenues by which folks who are not professional scholars develop their feeling for the past. But family trees should be only the beginning of the historical adventure. For the past to come fully alive, we need to plant each of our family trees in the larger forest of history, the better to see its true context. Looking too closely at just one tree can lead to the parochial habit that professional historians label "antiquarianism." The danger of antiquarianism lies in loving the past for the past's own sake, neglecting to translate its artifacts to render them meaningful to the living present. An antiquarian tends to assume that his or her own love for precious historic objects is automatically shared by others, when in fact it is the *kindling* of this love that is history's most crucial project. For those in whom the past already lives as memory and history, a historic building or landscape, a museum full of past objects, indeed a whole library's worth of books and documents, are all vivid reminders of the world out of which we came. For those who do not already share this love, on the other hand, they are inert, dead objects.

Antiquarians tend to take the significance of the past for granted, regarding all objects and documents from a beloved time as being equally powerful and resonant. And so the past world that antiquarians construct, like each of our family trees, can too easily remain private and inaccessible for all but the small circle for whom it already carries meaning. This contrasts sharply with the world of academic scholarship, which today tends to view individual people as exemplars of broader phenomena, emphasizing processes that transcend the individual and the local. "Significance" is everything for professional scholars, as suggested by all those long-ago essays of Frederick Jackson Turner with titles that began with the word "significance": the significance of the frontier in American history, the significance of the section, the significance of history itself. Scholars pride themselves on asking big questions, studying important phenomena, and offering wider views.

For just this reason, academic historians are often dismissive of "mere antiquarians" for not paying attention to the really *significant* stuff back there in the past. Professional scholars look at local events and private lives and see in them matters of much greater importance. They look for windows on the inner workings of past societies, class relations, attitudes between men and women, struggles over power, the unfolding of past politics. They are interested in Big Doings like the American Revolution or Civil War, or in small doings endlessly repeated, like the ways parents raised children, or in the ways white people interacted with people of color, or men with women.

Our best exemplar in Wisconsin of this scholarly search for significance is of course Frederick Jackson Turner and his work on frontier history. Turner took the local histories and landscapes of his hometown of Portage and his home state of Wisconsin, discovering in them the templates for all of American history. His frontier thesis became a model for telling the story not just of Wisconsin, but the nation as a whole. Viewed through such a lens, Turner's local history became an exemplar of national and even world history. This impulse to move from the particular toward the general, from the local to the global, from the personal to the social, is what professional scholars mean

when they emphasize “significance” and berate antiquarians for not paying enough attention to what really matters.

But scholarly history has its own vices, many of which can be just as deadly as any antiquarian sins in killing the past and rendering it inert. Scholarly work can become so turned in upon itself that it neglects all effort to engage the public in making history meaningful. In its own way, it can become just as inaccessible as the antiquarianism that scholars so love to criticize. Sometimes this is accomplished by jargon and technical vocabulary; or by excessive fascination for the self-referential minutiae of scholarly debate; or by prose laden with abstract nouns, passive verbs, and a complete absence of concrete, sensuous reality; or by so excessive a focus on Big Processes that living, breathing women and men vanish altogether. It all leads to the same thing: the past dies. Too frequently, academic history forgets the most basic historical project, on which all else depends: the simple task of telling tales that resurrect the past and make it live again. Thus, while they favor different means, scholars and antiquarians wind up committing the same essential sin against history, denying it the audience—and therefore the living memory—it so richly deserves.

History as Living Memory

Here, then, is the answer to the riddle of the dead past. Here, surely, is the reason why only 8 percent of college students recognize the Gettysburg Address when they hear it. No one has made the past come alive for them; it remains far less compelling than MTV or Nintendo or the World Wide Web. All around us we see evidence of the dead past—by which I really mean the deadness with which so many people encounter the past, having no idea how or why they should breathe life into it. For them, there is only the stupefying inertness of artifacts, family trees, historic buildings, museums; the dry deadness of documents; the boring obscurity of academic vocabulary; the inaccessible abstraction of disembodied ideas removed from the rich natural and cultural landscapes that are their true homes. The particular choice of murder weapon does not much matter, since all do a perfectly adequate job of killing the past as living memory. Just so do we run the collective risk of becoming like Oliver Sacks’s Jimmie: forgetting the past the instant we turn our backs on it, thereby losing ourselves as we navigate our way into an unknown future. If our collective identity and our civic life depend on our sense of a common culture and a common past, this forgetfulness can be very dangerous indeed.

So how do we reconnect with the past? The answer, I think, is that we tell stories about it. Every historical story can be divided into one of just two types. The first tells how we got to where we are today; the second tells how very different the world was out of which we came. The first can be labeled a “presentist” story, because its job is to explain how the past led up to the present; the second can be labeled with the phrase, “the past is a foreign country,” since its job is to remind us that the past and its people had their own reasons for being, and only incidentally produced the world we now inhabit.

The two may seem to diverge, or even oppose each other, but in fact they ultimately flow together and become the same story. Both are indispensable to good history. More often than not, we are first drawn to the past because of the way it connects to us personally. That is why family trees and local histories so frequently invite us into the project of exploring the world out of which we came. We begin our backward journey in an effort to understand ourselves. But the more we explore, the more we discover that

those folks back there had lives of their own, very different from ours, and fascinating in their own right. And so we become intrigued with them not just for what they tell us about our own lives, but for their own sakes as well.

In the end, what saves the past is the stories we tell about it. It is our stories that take dead objects and boring documents and make them live again. It is Juliette Kinzie's *Wau-Bun* that still fills the Old Indian Agency House in Portage with ghosts and intrigues us with the way they haunt it. That is why we need not just buildings but also books, not just archives but also historic structures, not just museums but also stories. History, at the most basic level, is the act of making the past live again in the present. History means taking Juliette Kinzie by the hand and remaking our childhood journey outward from the self, rediscovering the world we have lost, recovering our common past and our public selves. In this great human act of reconstructing the past—merging books and words and objects and images and buildings and landscapes, re-creating the whole world that once contained them all—we soon realize that each is inextricably tied to the others, that the parts form a much greater whole, and that each would be radically diminished in the absence of the others. We need the words, the images, the sites, the objects, the museums, and most of all the stories to make sense of each other, to make the past come alive, to render it meaningful to the present. If we are to reclaim the collective memory that defines and enriches our civic life, we need the Old Indian Agency House, but, equally, we need Juliette Kinzie's *Wau-Bun*.

Few have said it better than Frederick Jackson Turner, in a little-known essay entitled "The Significance of History," which he delivered to a group of Wisconsin schoolteachers on an August evening in 1891, long before he became famous as the author of the frontier thesis: "History, I have said, is to be taken in no narrow sense. It is more than past literature, more than past politics, more than past economics. It is the self-consciousness of humanity—humanity's effort to understand itself through the study of its past. Therefore it is not confined to books; the subject is to be studied, not books simply. History has a unity and continuity; the present needs the past to explain it; and local history must be read as a part of world history.... Historical study has for its end to let the community see itself in the light of the past, to give it new thoughts and feelings, new aspirations and energies.... The man who enters the temple of history must respond devoutly to that invocation of the church, *Sursum corda*, lift up your hearts. No looking at history as an idle tale, a compend of anecdotes; no servile devotion to a textbook; no carelessness of truth about the dead that can no longer speak must be permitted in its sanctuary."

Like Turner, I end by declaring that the past matters because private and public memory are crucial to all that makes us human. It is remembering and storytelling we care about, not the raw past, because only by being perennially resurrected in the mind of each new generation does the past become meaningful. Only thus does it become a living memory which in turn gives meaning to our present lives by reminding us who we are—as individuals, as a state and nation, as a people. It is living memory that gives us the usable past. It is living memory that gives us the places and landscapes that make our lives meaningful.

So let us go out as Professor Turner would have us do and honor the past by lifting up our hearts and striving to do justice to those who have gone before. Let us seek to know the worlds we have lost, the people and creatures and institutions and landscapes

and ideas that have made the world we now inhabit. Let us take a past that would otherwise be dead and forgotten, and tell stories to make it live again. In remembering it, we remember ourselves.