

Thank you very much indeed.... Can you all hear me, it's a stupid question because if you couldn't you couldn't hear me. Anyway I hope you can. It's a great privilege to be introduced by Professor Hennessy, we first knew each other before Peter had gone straight as a historian, and an academic, was a jobbing hack, like I remain in most of my ways.

What I thought I would do to provoke, I hope, some questions and thoughtful discussion and so on is to talk about that jagged edge that Peter was describing between History and Journalism. I thought I would start off explaining how I got sort of into the History business. I'm not a proper historian obviously, I don't spend weeks and weeks, months and months with the primary source material I don't have time for that I'm a secondary historian coming at it in my own way and I will talk about that a little bit later on.

Nevertheless I've sort of moved from day to day-jobbing journalism to a kind of history. I should explain how that happened possibly first of all which was really those long long cold nights standing outside number 10 Downing Street waiting to go on to the ten o'clock news with a certain feeling of frustration. Two things happen, two kinds of frustration, one physical, in essence that after you've done your six o'clock news piece unless you're doing a news package you have a long period of time hanging around, everybody else is out drinking or eating its Westminster, but you really can't do that you have to stay focused. I think only once did I appear on air on the ten o'clock news the worse for wear and it remains with me as one of the most scalp crawlingly appalling 30 seconds of my life. I hadn't expected to be on the ten o'clock news and I arrived after a few drinks and not enough to eat and Tony Blair had just suffered an embarrassing reverse of some kind in the HOC hadn't been expected and on air I was intending to say that he'd provoked it, he'd in effect taken a sharpened stick and dug it

into an anthill, but just as I got half way through the sentence the word anthill disappeared from my brain and I was left saying that he took a sharpened stick and dug it into a great hill of flying flies. And the really disconcerting thing given that the ten o'clock news had around 5 million people watching is that nobody much noticed this... except the BBC receptionist in the next morning when I walked in who looked up at me and said in a rather old fashioned way... slightly Salvador Dali last night Andrew.

At any rate I had to find other ways of occupying my time and one of them was to settle down and try to write a rather eccentric book of history about British journalism which is an area if anyone is looking for work which remains hugely under discussed and under written about as a subject for historians.

But the other and more pertinent reason for my frustration was the strong sense that I didn't really, I couldn't join the dots up, day after day, week after week I might be reporting a row about an NHS computer, or about Animal rights and fox hunting, or whatever it might be or Iraq and yet the journalist is obliged to come skimming off the top of the waves all the time, never getting underneath the surface to see how things connect and there was a growing sense that I had that I really wanted to go back, I didn't train as a historian, I've always liked history, always read history, that I wanted to go back and join the dots up and to see how we got here in various different guises. What had happened to the NHS over that period that I was supposed to be reporting on. When I said that spin had overtaken the Blair government, how did that connect to what happened under Wilson or Thatcher, or going much further back under the governments of people like Winston Churchill. So I became increasingly interested in modern, contemporary history if you like and that is what led me to what I now do.

I think if you go right back to the beginning there has always been a certain fellow feeling or parallel working between journalists and historians. You go right back to Herodotus and Herodotus was in fact a journalist in many ways. I mean he spent his time wandering around talking to people getting first hand information. He's described by John Barrows who has written a wonderful history of histories a sort of work of historiography as an enormously garrulous and entertaining man somebody who in many ways would make an absolutely perfect journalist.

I've written a few notes. This is what John Barrows says about Herodotus. He had an omnivorous, humane and tolerant curiosity about the world and about humanity in all its aspects and variety, which makes him a kind of ideal journalist as well as an ideal historian.

Now the other quote that I suppose everybody knows about journalism and history is that journalism is the first rough draft of history. That was probably said first by a rather tragic figure actually called Phil Graham, who was the proprietor owner of the Washington Post and I think by and large its wrong. I think by and large although Journalism and History inhabit very close overlapping parallel worlds they are more different than they are alike. And that is to do with the institutions that we inhabit variously and severally. As you get older one of the things that happens to you, you understand that much less than you thought of what you achieved in life and what you've done and your failures as well. Has been down to you and much more of it has been down to the institutions that you've been part of. A theme that I will come back to a little later.

Journalism and History both come out of the same human instincts. Of standing up and looking up and wondering what's going on. Journalism is the instinct which says, what's happening now, why is this happening,

what's going on immediately around me. And journalists of course tend to forget what happened yesterday and the day before and the week before that and ask the question as if it had never been asked before every morning we get up. Whereas the instinct for history is how did we get here, who are we, but above all how did we get here, how did we come to this place. And those are quite different instincts.

You could find all sorts of differences between journalists and historians. If I had been giving this speech ten years ago I would have said of course, journalists are by and large better paid than historians but more respected. Well, the more respected part remains the case if Peter Hennessy describes me as a part time historian or essentially a historian I take that as a huge compliment. If I say to Peter Hennessy Peter, you're really a journalist he's likely to win. That's something that's really the fault of journalists over the last 20 years or so. Not Peter. There is that distinction and of course it's no longer the case that by and large journalists are much better paid than historians, certainly not in the age of Simon Schama, and Starkey and these characters, and Neil Ferguson who are earning fabulous sums of money as television historians. Another way I might have put it once upon a time is that journalists are polemical ideological in a way that historians can't be. But actually if you look at the rise of revisionist historians and the counter attacks by historians of the left and I think of what I was able to say in the BBC series about people like Harold Wilson, or George Brown or even Margaret Thatcher, historians seem to me to get away with a great deal more than journalists these days when it comes to polemic. The polemical historian is now one of the caricatures of modern public life in this country. So you can't look at the differences that way.

I come back to the first major difference being the tools of the trade. Journalists and historians both set off on the same sort of quest, looking for

some kind of notional truth out there. They both have, if they are any good, the same inflamed curiosity I suppose is the best way to put it. I don't know if its vulgar to quote Victor Hugo, actually it is very vulgar to quote victor Hugo because Im thinking of victor Hugos famous quote when he said Intelligence is curiosity with an erection. And in a sense, it's a hugely sexist and offensive quote but he was a 19th century Frenchman and in a sense journalists and historians feel the same instincts but they have very very different tools of the trade.

When I was a daily journalist for badget and the economist, awful newspapers or indeed for the BBC I would spend most of my time talking to people face to face, reading recently published official documents and engaging in subterfuge. What kind of subterfuge? My first breakthrough was a series of apparent leaks from the public accounts committee in the HOC which revealed before publication week after week after week what they were about to say. It caused a huge row and leak enquiries and all sorts of things and officials were questioned, MPs were hauled in by the committee chairman and questioned and in fact all I was doing is that I had spotted that the National Audit Office which provides the raw material for the public accounts committee, you could get their published report on whatever it might be, forestry or whatever and you knew perfectly well the MPs would simply flam up the language a bit and as you watched the two reports it was quite clear how they flamed up the language and come up with a couple of fairly predictable recommendations. So all I was doing was reading the original national audit office accounts and them flaming up what the public account commission was going to say and week after week or month after month I was getting it absolutely right and causing enormous offence. A very easy and obvious form of subterfuge.

George Jones of the Daily Telegraph was known every year for producing apparently extremely accurate leaks about public sector pay deals. And all he was doing was going back and looking at the previous year working out what he thought the nurses and the police were likely to be offered and then reporting it and again and again year after year it was just supposition, but it looked absolutely brilliant. Those kind of subterfuges of course are not used by historians.

Final example of how the average political journalist works and my background obviously is in political journalism would be when I got quite a good story if I don't say so myself for the BBC about Gordon Brown and Tony Blair finally coming to a very difficult agreement in the second Blair government that there was to be after all no attempt to take Britain into the Euro in the course of that Parliament. Now it was fairly obvious to me as it was to many journalists that something like this was likely to happen. You looked at the balance of forces in number 10 and in the treasury and you could tell the argument was going on and you could tell that Gordon Brown was likely to win it and that Blair was likely to step back, but we didn't know when and we didn't know quite the terms of it. And all I did was go to the Treasury and give the impression, I didn't lie, but I gave the impression that No 10 had been briefing me about the state of things, and got just enough from the Treasury press officers who were irritated and were responding to be able to then go to Alistair Campbell at No 10 and give him the impression that the Treasury had fully briefed me, he gave me a little bit more so I went back to the Treasury and after about half a dozen conversations on each side I had the full story, both the Treasury and No 10 were absolutely livid with the other and nobody knows or knew until now how the leak came about. The tools of the journalists trade are that kind of simple but hugely enjoyable subterfuge and of course proximity.

What the historian rarely has is close proximity to the politicians of the hour, or the politicians of the day. As one of the people and there are others in this hall who were there to, who flew around in Blair Force One after 9/11 assuring many Arab countries that after Afghanistan there was no question of going to war with another Arab country. We had extraordinary access for part of the time to people like the PM, some of the senior officials who were there on those flights and that gives you a kind of privilege and that is your source material we were able to cross question TB, eventually he stopped coming through the plane, but we had the chance at least to hear from his own mouth what he really thought about the WMD issue, whether he really thought there was any kind of nuclear threat and it has to be said that many of us formed the impression that there was a lot more to it than there was subsequently. By and large of course historians cant do that. But there is a great illusion among journalists that does need to be nailed and I've fallen for this myself or I've pompously expressed it myself in the past and it goes back to the first draft of history quote. Is that as a jobbing journalist or a political editor you are absolutely at the heart of where things happen, you see history in front of you taking place. Well by and large you don't. I don't I saw very much history in front of my nose. I was close to history I was in Downing Street when terribly important things happened but I was in Downing Street. But I wasn't inside I was within several hundred yards of extraordinarily important international conferences and haggling but I was never inside the room. All I could ever get was a second or third hand account which had been through the NO 10 mincer of what was acceptable to say to the press and so the great illusion of journalism is often that we're there, we saw it, therefore we know what happened.

Sometimes its true, perhaps the most exciting political story I covered was the fall of Margaret Thatcher in the sense that you could actually be around

the HOC and see white faced red eyed cabinet ministers coming and going and watch and overhear and talk to them as the arguments about her last hours in power were played out. That was fantastically exciting, but it doesn't happen very often. I suppose what I'm saying is that to return to a flying metaphor. For most political journalists to say that they were at the scene of history being made is no more true than for someone sitting in first class in an aeroplane to imply that they had been flying it. There is always a barrier, always a plastic door and a smiling air stewardess between yourself and what's really happening.

If you can imagine Alistair Campbell with a sex change and a skirt, the metaphor breaks down at that point. There are moments when as a journalist I really did see history taking place but they were few and far between. To this day if anyone says that the government did not directly bully the BBC ahead of the Hutton Enquiry I know they are either misinformed or lying because I was there, I was at the other end of the phone and I heard what was said and I won't forget it. If anybody says that journalists were not guided and encouraged to grossly misinterpret the intelligence after the Iraq war I know that's not true because I was so guided, and you get those great moments.

But for most of the time we see tiny fragments of what's happening and I found the frustration of not really knowing what was really going on and being unable to connect it to what had happened in the past increasingly difficult and I asked myself who is closer to the action whether it's a historian with access to Cabinet Papers, Dairies, Journals, possibly interviewing former politicians who were there at the time about some great crisis or the journalist standing outside in the street. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that the Historian is closer.

I was thinking about this very recently because I had on start the week a very eminent historian David Reynolds, who's just done a series of films and indeed a book about superpower summits, they are all very very interesting but I focused particularly on the summit between Regan and Gorbachov at Geneva, which was really the beginning of the end of the cold war. Now, a journalist would see that summit in a blur of images, you would see the people going in you'd see the motorcades, you would have brief press conferences afterwards and you would have briefings sometimes from people who had been in the room but more often from people who had only spoken to someone who had been in the room at the summit.

You would have a very very incomplete picture, and also, of course you would have all of the prejudices at the back of your head, you would know if you were broadly on the liberal left that Regan was a war monger because you had heard him sounding like a war monger. You might know that if you had been watching at that time that Gorbachov was a wholly committed reformer when in fact Regan in many ways was not a war monger. This is what the documentary shows, if you go back and look at what he was actually saying if you look at the private conversations behind the scenes with his advisors if you look at his reflections on the dangers of nuclear war at the time, it was a very different Ronald Regan than journalism would have witnessed and similarly a very different Gorbachov as well.

A lot of the time the Historian is going to get a much much closer picture. All the journalist gets is the skimmed of the surface impression. But I would say there are illusions on the side of the historians too. I'm currently trying to work on another history project and I'm looking at Britain at the time of WWI probably the most written about, most dissected, most analysed part of twentieth century history, certainly one of them and yet the more I look at

it the less I feel I understand the people who were making the decisions. Their mindset, their attitudes to patriotism, religion, to social status, to class to race to the rest of the world are so different from the way any of us now think that its very very hard to really get the sniff and the taste and the texture of what those people were like however many documents you've got.

So if journalism has the illusion that there isn't a door, has a problem with genuine proximity, in a sense I think historians have a similar sort of problem, but a very different one too. I started off by mentioning the word institutions because this is the final part of what I want to say about the difference and the contrast between journalism and history writing.

In many ways although we are both trying to spot patterns in the water, paint pictures that help us understand the world. The institutions that journalists inhabit and historians inhabit are so different that you are bound to get very different outcomes. Journalists are in a hugely commercial competitive market where they have to arouse above all interest, if you don't get peoples interest and excitement then you are absolutely lost. Things like balance, reflection and fairness come second.

Indeed it has to be said when I was working for the Economist when I first went into the building, and they are lovely people to work for. The only institution I know where on the one hand they are saying to the outside world everyone should work harder for less money but where you work for the economist yourself you have to write once a week, often not very much and they bring in the most magnificent buffet or they used to, on a Wednesday with fantastic fine wines because of the shock of having to sit there and put down a few words. And if your still working by about 4 o clock more wine comes round.

But I was taken to one side when I first went there and told that there was a secret motto for the economist, which was simply, simplify, then exaggerate, and it seemed to me cynically or not that that was a very very good motto. It's very very close to what Harmsworth said in the early days of the Daily Mail about the secret of good journalism. And I thought yes that's absolutely right, that is what we do. But its what journalists have to do.

The great HL Menkin one of my anti hero heroes, if I can put it that way, once said that the definition of a newspaper editor was somebody who separates the wheat from the chaff and then prints the chaff. And, there is a certain amount of truth in that but I wouldn't therefore go on to say simply that historians print the wheat. I've used that quote for a long time and I went back today to see if Menkin had said anything about historians and he's got an even shorter quote Im afraid to say about historians which is simply... a historian; a failed novelist.

Historians by and large come out of institutions like this that is institutions whose job is not instantly to arouse interest first but to teach and then to inform. The institutions of academic life allow proper historians, not me, but proper historians the time and the space to seriously investigate truth, what really happened. Whereas its been said that a journalist is somebody who knows a tiny amount about a vast range of things and keeps it that way to achieve objectivity. So historians tend to know a lot and in an ideal world absolutely everything about a small number of things and that gives them a particular authority that no journalist will ever have.

However, what keeps historians honest and interesting and worth reading is the same thing in many ways that keeps journalists, those journalists who are honest and worth reading, which is the institutional support and

surrounding, the culture of a university or a college or a newspaper or a broadcaster. You go into the Evening Standard or the Guardian or the Telegraph or the Times or any of the other institutions and you will become part of a culture, you will imbibe their traditions and the attitudes that that newspaper has held for some time. And if you simply then go out and lie or make stories up and are found out then you will be expelled from that institution because of the commercial effect on it and on the owners of that newspaper or broadcasting group. And in the end that is sort of if you are honest what helps keeps you honest. And of course academia is much like that but much much more so, not commercially but the authority and respect of the institutions depends on how the historians and other academics do their work

Why does this matter? This matters because so much of journalistic life and pseudo historical as well as historical life is moving into anonymous parts of the internet. Now, I'm a huge enthusiast for the World Wide Web and I use the internet all the time like most people in this room probably do, but I do become increasingly worried about the lack of authoritative backing for assertions and stories whisking round the internet all the time, and I wonder where that basic restraint that sense that I better not say this in case it's not true, I better make that third or fourth phone call, I better stay a bit late in the office and read that again to make sure it's right. Where those sorts of pressures are going to come from if the institutions of journalism start to fall apart or be disaggregated into the internet, where everybody is working from home, where bloggers sitting in an anonymous room, basically spouting opinion, which is what of course newspaper columnists do as well, but without that surrounding institutional support mechanism if that keeps spreading then I don't know where the instinct for objective truth is going to come from and that worries me.

And that is where I'd like to leave it, but I hope there are plenty of questions,  
thank you!