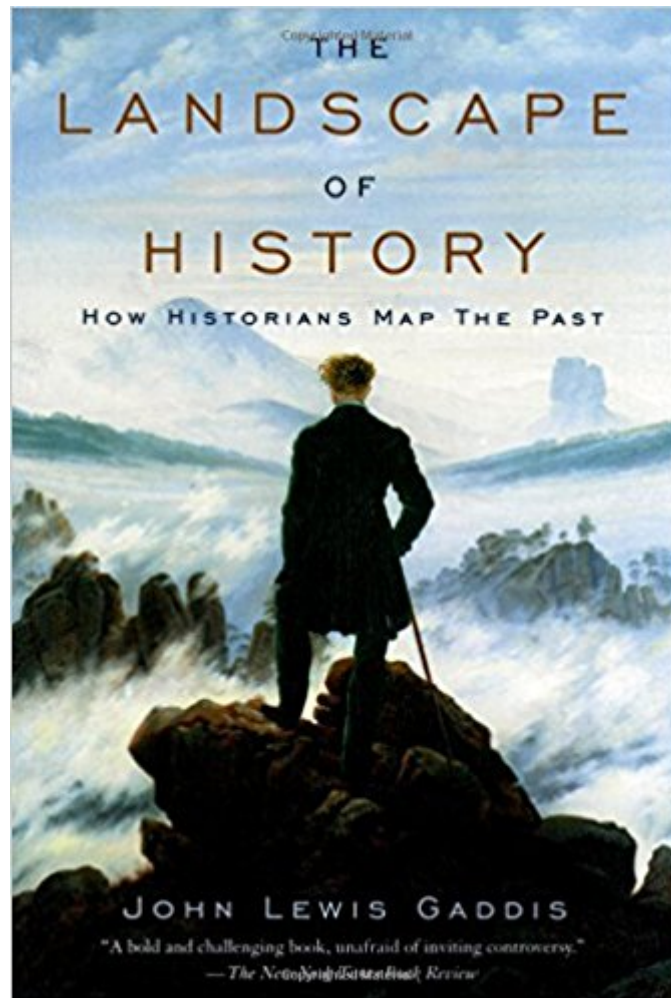




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# The Landscape Of History: How Historians Map The Past



## 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

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## Customer Reviews

Two classics of historiography, *The Historian's Craft* by Marc Bloch (1953) and *What Is History?* by E. H. Carr (1961), have prompted notable cold war historian Gaddis to offer his own abstract of what historians do. Does the methodology of historians captivate readers of popular history? Those sensitive to a historian's attitudes might be intrigued by this disquisition into the "ductwork" installed in every piece of historical writing. In discussing ductwork, the concepts by which a historian selects facts, comprehends time and space, and ultimately presents the past, Gaddis hews to two central tenets: that there is, somewhere, an objective truth in history, and that history is a science. Those ideas have been severely challenged, especially by social scientists enamored of quantitative methods. Gaddis dismisses quantification alone as unworkable and inappropriate and says historians must combine the techniques of many disciplines. A technical but provocative inquiry for sophisticated history readers. Gilbert Taylor Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to the Digital edition.

"Will... never allow either the reader of history or the writer of it to think about the past in quite the same way as before."--*The New York Times* "A masterful statement on the historical method.... Gaddis' characterization of the social sciences will surely spark debate even as it illuminates important intellectual connections between the disciplines. Delightfully readable, the book is a grand celebration of the pursuit of knowledge."--*Foreign Affairs* "A bold and challenging book, unafraid of inviting controversy. It provides a strong statement for our time of both the limits and the value of the historical enterprise."--*The New York Times Book Review* "A real tour de force: a delight to read, and a light-hearted celebration of the odd, 'fractal' patterns that intellectual and other forms of human and natural history exhibit."--William H. McNeill "Turns the old argument over science and history upside down."--*The Washington Post Book World* "Never before have I come across a book that so illuminated the craft of the historian."--Michael Pakenham, *The Baltimore Sun* "This is another of those books that rewards the effort it requires. Besides providing invaluable insights into how the historian goes about his business, it teaches--like all really good books--of life beyond its boundaries."--Colin Walters, *Washington Times*

This book is certainly a good introduction in history as a science. Questions regarding it's methodology, it's subject, it's aim are discussed, using metaphors and philosophical analysis. Moreover, it offers an introduction to philosophy of science in general (i.e.: more than just history), suggesting, among other proposals, that the natural sciences have become more historical in nature, rather than history having become naturalised. Lighthearted in tone, well-written (as a

non-native speaker, I really enjoyed reading this book), but engaging and seriously arguing for it's thesis, I would recommend this book for everyone, in particular for those interested in the relation between the human sciences and the natural sciences.

This is a necessary part of any historian's library.

This was okay - a little interesting here and there, but as a whole, I found it boring. I had to read it for a MA world history class and it just wasn't for me. Again, there were some interesting parts, but once the class is over I'm going to sell it. If you are incredibly into history, I'm sure you'll enjoy it far more than I did, but it was too slow moving for me to enjoy.

Gaddis is a giant in the field of history, most notably for his exhaustive studies on the Cold War. What he attempts to do here is give a detailed, scientific description of how the historian does what he does. Contary to some of the other reviewers, I did not find this an easy read. More on that in a minute, first I'll say what I did glean from the book. Gaddis starts off comparing the historian to a geographer. Much like a map-maker is incapable of mapping a large area of terrain while standing on that terrain, a historian cannot accurately describe an event if they are involved in it. You must be outside it, or above it to get all the perspectives and deliver an objective view of the overall situation. This section was good. Gaddis also tries to argue that history is more of a scientific process than many people realize. In fact, he claims that the historical method has more in common with that of a geologist, physicist, or paleontologist than a social scientist. To argue this point, he uses an array of scientific jargon, analogies, and metaphors. He writes as if he is trying to convince a scientist of the scientific validity of the historian's craft. In fact I read that this book is essentially an expansion of some speeches he gave to science students, attempting to do just that. This is why I had some difficulty with the book. I have virtually no science background and therefore found much of the scientific jargon to be over my head. For Pete's sake, one of the reasons that I'm a history major is because I'm no good at science! Anyway, I do not dispute Gaddis' knowledge or talent in his chosen field, that is not an issue. But I would just offer the warning that if you are not reasonably well-versed in basic scientific concepts, this book will be a challenge. Needless to say, those with a basic understanding of science will no doubt get much more out of this book than I did.

Too many metaphors. On several occasions it seemed the author just wanted to fill in pages. It is almost certain that this 150 pages book could have been explained in a decent well written 20 to 30

pages summery. Overall the books is dull and lacking; more like a well written prose that lack on meaning.

An excellent read!

This book is an entertaining and easily readable book about how historians map that unusual and mysterious landscape known as the past. Examining the relationships between history and the 'hard' sciences and how their methods have become joined over the course of the 20th and early 21st centuries, and filled with well-thought and humorous barbs against both reductionism and relativism, this book gives historians the grounds to feel supremely proud and awesomely humble about their field and their approach. This book should be either required or recommended reading for any class in historiography as a brief but vital apologetic for the historical craft. Clio, that famous muse of history, would be proud to be defended so ably and so cleverly, and so should the proud student of history.

This is a brilliant book written in a very concise and easy to comprehend manner. The connections between History, Social and physical sciences are so much better than you get from most philosophy texts.

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