Lynn Hunt, *History. Why It Matters*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018.

Lynn Hunt Truth in History.

﻿1

**Now More Than Ever**

Everywhere you turn, history is at issue. Politicians lie about historical facts, groups clash over the fate of historical monuments, officials closely monitor the content of history textbooks, and truth commissions proliferate across the globe. As the rapid growth in history museums shows, we live in a moment obsessed with history, but it is also a time of deep anxiety about historical truth. If it is so easy to lie about history, if people disagree so much about what monuments or history textbooks should convey, and if commissions are needed to dig up the truth about the past, then how can any kind of certainty about history be established? Are heritage sites and historical societies set up to provoke, console, or simply divert? What is the purpose of studying history? This book lays out the questions and offers ways of answering them. It will not resolve all the quandaries, since history is by definition a process of discovery and not a settled dogma. But it can show why history matters now more than ever.

(pp.1-2).

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**Truth in History**

Determining historical truth is crucial. Without it, the lies of politicians or Holocaust deniers cannot be countered; monument and textbook controversies will never be resolved; memory wars will continue indefinitely; and the public will have no confidence in the history that is presented to them. Historical truth is two-tiered: facts are at issue in the first tier, interpretations in the second. Although it is possible to separate them for the purposes of discussion, in the actual practice of history they turn out to be interlocking. A fact is inert until it is incorporated into an interpretation that gives it significance, and the power of an interpretation depends on its ability to make sense of the facts.

(p.30)

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The interpretations make the facts relevant. The world is filled with mountains of historical facts, but we only care about a tiny number of them at any given moment. We care about those facts that enable us to tell the story we want to tell. Telling the story draws our attention to the facts but also frequently stirs up disputes. Historians can tell very different stories about the same event by choosing to emphasize different facts. This cacophony casts doubt on the truth of any one interpretation. If there is so much disagreement about interpretations, how can history make any claim on the truth about the past? Is it just your story vs. mine?

(p.38)

[………….]

﻿The great variability of interpretations casts doubt on the possibility of historical truth. Since historians always write from points of view that are shaped by their personal histories and social contexts, their accounts cannot claim to be entirely objective.

(p.39)

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﻿An interpretation cannot rely only on the facts that fit; it has to stand the test of possible counter-arguments. Although the close connection between facts and interpretations inevitably raises doubts about historical truth, it also creates constant incentives for more research to resolve those doubts.

(p.42)

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Even when a historical interpretation is based on true facts, is logically coherent, and as complete as a scholar can make it, the truth of that interpretation remains provisional. New facts can be discovered, and the benchmark for completeness shifts over time.

(p.54)

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﻿Do these few examples show that historical truth is impossible? Although they do indicate that absolute truth is impossible, a closer look reveals that the standards of historical truth are incredibly powerful because they facilitate criticism. Have all the relevant facts been considered? Is an explanation, for example, of American identity complete if it ignores the contributions of the French, Spanish, Native Americans, or African Americans? Is a history of Britain entirely coherent if it fails to take account of the Welsh perspective? Historical interpretations are by their nature fragile constructions, always subject to new discoveries and new notions of completeness. The same techniques that were used to reinforce ethnic or national identity and create a sense of European superiority can also be used to challenge the ethnic or national narratives and undermine the Western sense of superiority.

(pp.59-60)