Yo, Clio! Can historiography save marketing scholarship?

Stephen Brown

Ulster Business School, University of Ulster, Newtownabbey, UK

Abstract

Purpose – Felicitous writing is enormously important. However, the art of writing well is rarely addressed by marketing scholars. This paper seeks to argue that the marketing academy has much to learn from historiography, a sub-discipline devoted to the explication of historical writing.

Design/methodology/approach – Although it is primarily predicated on published works, this paper is not a conventional literature review. It relies, rather, on the classic historical method of “compare and contrast”. It considers parallels between the paired disciplines yet notes where marketing and history diverge in relation to literary styles and scientific aspirations.

Findings – It is concluded that marketing writing could benefit from greater emphasis on “character” and “storytelling”. These might help humanise a mode of academic communication that is becoming increasingly abstruse and ever-more unappealing to its readership.

Research implications – If its argument is accepted by the academic community – and, more importantly, acted upon – this paper should transform the writing of marketing. Although the academic reward systems and power structures of marketing make revolutionary change unlikely, a “scholarly spring” is not inconceivable.

Originality/value – The paper’s originality rests in the observation that originality is unnecessary. All of the literary-cum-stylistic issues raised in this paper have already been tackled by professional historians. Whether marketers are willing to learn from their historical brethren remains to be seen.

Keywords Historiography, Writing marketing, Art vs science, Storytelling, Narratives, Marketing, Research work

Paper type Research paper

History should be good reading (Jacques Barzun, 1974, p. 109).

November 12, 1957, was an auspicious day at Oxford University, one of many auspicious days in the history of that venerable academic institution. It was the day when Hugh Trevor-Roper, the newly-appointed Regius Professor of History, delivered his inaugural lecture (Sisman, 2010). Trevor-Roper, in classic Oxonian fashion, was a controversial appointment. Despite his prodigious intellectual abilities and a way with words that was second to none in the academic firmament, Trevor-Roper had failed to produce the historical opus, the masterwork, the definitive contribution, that was expected of him. He owed his reputation, rather, to a best-selling book about the last days of Hitler, a series of combative contributions to the “rise of the gentry” debate, and a number of characteristically pugnacious appearances on national television and radio (Rowse, 1995). Indeed, compared to his principal rivals for the prestigious Regius professorship – a personal chair that is within the gift of the reigning monarch – Trevor-Roper was very much the outsider, on paper at any rate (Sisman, 1995). However, a time-honoured combination of string-pulling, political manoeuvring and the ever-dependable old boy network ensured that Regius Professor Hugh Redwald Trevor-Roper took to the stage that dank November evening (see Sisman, 2010, pp. 278-97).
Read today, the first half of the rebarbative historian’s inaugural lecture belies his reputation as a wordsmith of genius. “History: Professional and Lay” is fey, mannered, intellectually incestuous and self-congratulatory in that self-deprecatory English way (Trevor-Roper, 1957a). The second half, however, is a rhetorical tour de force that cannot fail to strike a chord with contemporary marketing scholars. History, according to the Regius Professor, was in a parlous state. The high priests of the academy – the “professionals” of Trevor-Roper’s title – had lost touch with the “laity”, members of the general reading public and society at large. The customer, in other words. History, he further claimed, had foolishly forsaken its humanistic roots in chimerical pursuit of scientific status:

The view which I wish to express springs from the conviction that history is a humane study and that the study of the humanities requires a different method from the study of the sciences. It may be that human history will one day be reduced to an exact science; but at present, although scientific laws are relevant to it and condition its course, these laws are the laws of other sciences – of economics or geography or statistics – they are not the laws of history. Indeed, if history ever should become an exact science, with established laws of its own, we should then cease to study it as we do (Trevor-Roper, 1957a, p. 7).

The growing hegemony of scientific history, Trevor-Roper warned, was giving rise to a situation where academic monographs were becoming ever more rigorous yet ever less readable, ever more arcane yet ever less accessible, ever more detailed yet ever less discerning, ever more professional yet ever less palatable, ever more specialised and ever more specious:

This is the lesson which we must always remember when we demand, as we so often do, more and more research, more and more funds for research, more and more professionalism and specialisation in humane subjects. For humane subjects, called into being ultimately to serve the laity, not to discover some recondite but unimportant truth, can only bear a limited amount of specialisation. They need professional methods but always for the pursuit of lay ends (Trevor-Roper, 1957a, p. 10).

Trevor-Roper’s jeremiad, it should be acknowledged, was rather less successful than it could have been. His passionate preachment on behalf of liberal arts history was not helped, at the time, by his spectacularly savage attack on Arnold Toynbee’s Study of History, a much-lauded example of old school historical writing (Trevor-Roper, 1957b)[1]. Trevor-Roper’s valorisation of humanistic history was further undermined by the fact that his principal competitor for the Regius Professorship, A.J.P. Taylor, was a master of populist history and had done more to make the subject accessible to the masses than the conspicuously elitist Hugh Trevor-Roper (Burk, 2002). It was also out of kilter with contemporary scholarly sentiment, which saw science as the solution to society’s ills and was delivering ever-rising standards of living (Snow, 1959). This, remember, was the era when British consumers “never had it so good”, when the “affluent society” was powering ahead, especially in North America and, not least, when the modern marketing concept was emerging from its chrysalis, advertising’s creative revolution was in full spate and motivation researchers were the masters, reputedly, of marketing’s dark arts (Epstein, 1999; Halberstam, 1993; Levitt, 1960a; Levy, 2006a)[2].

Be that as it may, there is still something timeless, something elemental, something imperishable about Trevor-Roper’s sermon on the mount. As this paper will attempt to
demonstrate – through its invocation of Clio, history’s much-tormented muse – the Regius Professor’s words of wisdom are as relevant to early-twenty-first-century marketers as they were to mid-twentieth-century historians. This article, therefore, commences with a comparison of these two, seemingly disparate yet strangely similar, academic disciplines; continues with an attempt to draw three salient lessons from the abundant literature on historiography; and, after a few necessary caveats, concludes with the claim that the sub-discipline of marketing history can serve as a beacon for our field as a whole.

FYI

It does not take much imagination to appreciate, approximately 55 years after Hugh Trevor-Roper’s wake-up call, that his concerns can be transposed, pretty much intact, to contemporary marketing scholarship. The situation he described in his inaugural is the situation marketing now finds itself in. Our ever more enthusiastic pursuit of marketing science has created a discipline that is high on output but low on insight, a discipline that is methodologically robust but stylishly bereft, a discipline that is undeniably rigorous yet dispiritingly recherché, a dilettante discipline that, to paraphrase Trevor-Roper, is burrowing deeper and deeper into its own dogma and losing touch with reality (Hackley, 2009a). Marketing practitioners, certainly, seem to derive very little benefit from our learned journal articles (Tapp, 2005), if they bother to read them at all (O’Sullivan and Butler, 2010), and while some critical thinkers argue that the relevance of marketing scholarship is irrelevant – since it is an end in itself, untrammelled by the quotidian needs of marketing managers – such sentiments are hard to sustain in a predominantly applied discipline whose academic clergy perform pastoral duties for an admittedly amorphous laity, what we now call “stakeholders” (Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008).

This intellectual drift, needless to say, has not gone unnoticed by the professoriate. Our leading journals are full of hand-wringing lamentations and anguished wails of the woe-is-us, what-just-happened, where-do-we-go-from-here variety (e.g. Reibstein et al., 2009). An editorial in the Journal of Marketing tells the academic community to shape up science-wise or ship out (Bolton, 2005). An editorial in the European Journal of Marketing says it is time to get real, get relevant, get rigorous (Lee and Greenley, 2010). An editorial in the Australasian Marketing Journal announces that the academy has gone walkabout (Brodie and McColl-Kennedy, 2010). An edited volume, featuring some of the biggest names in our field (Sisodia and Sheth, 2006), asks the rhetorical question “does marketing need reform?” (“Yes!” most contributors conclude.) Even the critical fraternity accept that there is an ever-widening chasm between academic production and practitioner consumption (Hackley, 2009b), though they do not consider this to be a serious problem, curiously.

While it would be an exaggeration to state that contemporary marketing scholarship has fallen into the mid-50s trap of shedding “pseudo-light on non-problems” (Amis, 1954, p. 25), there’s no denying that history’s post-war crisis is being re-enacted, after a fashion, in post-modern marketing. Marketing, if anything, is in a rather more serious state than history back then, since our subject is widely seen to be losing its edge, possibly the plot:

Fifty years ago, when Drucker (1954) first posited the “modern” marketing concept, the notion of customer orientation was unusual, novel, noteworthy. Its adoption conferred significant
competitive advantage on the adopter. Half a century later, however, every organization is customer oriented, or claims to be. Every mission statement proclaims that customers come first, last and always. Every marketing department is staffed with MBA-emblazoned or degree-draped executives, all of whom have read Kotler from cover to cover, can rustle up a marketing plan with the best of them, and spend many a happy weekend on hug-the-customer refresher courses. Parity prevails. Ubiquity rules. Marketing may not be everything, but my goodness, it’s everywhere (Brown, 2006, p. 59).

Some readers, to be sure, will balk at such comparisons, arguing that that was then, this is now. Higher education has changed irrecoverably, after all. History and marketing are entirely separate fields, end of story. Drawing facile comparisons is not only unjustified but unhistorical (since it erroneously presupposes that history repeats itself). Others might grudgingly concede that, approximately 100 years after its inauguration, the marketing academy is at a broadly similar stage of intellectual development as history was when it clocked up its scholarly century and Trevor-Roper sat down after his heartfelt attempt to discipline the discipline.

**IMHO**

There is no need to apologise, however, nor crave readers’ indulgence. Because the foregoing comparison is entirely apt. History and marketing are closer than many imagine. The science or art debate, for example, has long been waged in history, as it has in marketing (Iggers, 1997). History, like marketing, is an enormously catholic field of study, with countless specialist subdivisions, each with their own journals, associations, annual conferences, preferred research methods and so on (Burke, 2001). History regards itself as a bridging or integrative discipline that draws upon the theoretical repertoire of adjoining domains instead of developing autonomous theories of its own (Carr, 2002). The same is true of marketing. History, as the above discussion indicates, not only occupies an incessantly shifting borderland between “pure” and “applied” but it is acutely conscious of its wider societal remit, not least among antiquarians, genealogists and amateur historians generally (De Groot, 2008). Ditto marketing.

And the parallels do not stop there. The roots of marketing scholarship, according to Jones and Monieson’s (1990) seminal study of our field’s founding fathers, are firmly planted in German historicism. Many prominent pioneers of marketing thought, including R.T. Ely, E.D. Jones, H.C. Taylor and E.F. Gay, were trained in the German historical method that was inaugurated by Leopold von Ranke and his disciples in the mid-nineteenth century (Keynon, 1993). It is no accident, furthermore, that many of the monuments of marketing thought are built on historical foundations or predicated upon grandiloquent appeals to historical precedent. Levitt’s (1960b) immortal “Marketing Myopia”, for instance, was essentially a work of revisionist history, insofar as it traced the tortuous evolution of the oil industry, the railroads industry and the motion picture industry, among others. The celebrated Consumer Odyssey, which did much to establish the legitimacy of interpretive research methods (historical among them), was consciously modelled on Homer’s legendary Odyssey (Belk, 1991). More recently, the case for Service-Dominant Logic was almost entirely built on historical argument (Brown, 2007), nothing less than a subterranean stream of economic thought allegedly overlooked by the academic mainstream (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). It thus seems that those who wish to change the field – or precipitate a paradigm shift – do so
by marshalling historical evidence. History, as Karl Marx (1983, pp. 287-8) once brilliantly demonstrated, isn’t written by the winners, it’s rewritten by the wannabes:

Men make their own history, but not spontaneously, under conditions they have chosen for themselves; rather on terms immediately existing, given and handed down to them. The tradition of countless dead generations is an incubus to the mind of the living. At the very times when they seem to be engaged in revolutionising themselves and their circumstances, in creating something previously non-existent, at just such epochs of revolutionary crisis, they anxiously summon up the spirits of the past to their aid, borrowing from them names, rallying cries, costumes, in order to stage the new world-historical drama in this time-honoured disguise and borrowed speech. Thus Luther masqueraded as the Apostle Paul; the revolution of 1789-1814 camouflaged itself alternately as Roman republic or Roman empire and the revolution of 1848 could think of nothing better than to parody sometimes 1789 and sometimes the revolutionary tradition of 1793-1795.

BTW

The concordances between history and marketing are not exact, admittedly. The former, it is fair to say, is rather less applied than the latter. Marketing students, by and large, are educated with a specific career path in mind. History graduates, by contrast, are not trained to perform a particular professional function (although they can pretty much cope with anything, given the wide scope and grand scale of their education). Historians, moreover, have devoted much more academic energy to the “art or science” debate than marketers. Marketing’s artistic credentials, if truth be told, are rarely assessed, much less assayed (Brown, 1996). The debate has always been about science or non-science, the extent to which marketing scholarship meets “scientific” criteria, variously defined (Hunt, 2003). This state of affairs may be attributable to our discipline’s root system, embedded as it is in the Germanic practices of scientific history (Jones and Monieson, 1990). But whereas the history-is-an-art issue comes up with monotonous regularity, the case for marketing-as-an-art is only occasionally articulated (Holbrook, 1995; Hackley, 2009a). In this respect, the strapline for the Journal of Marketing speaks volumes: “advancing the practice and science of marketing”. Art is the great unmentionable.

Another major difference between the disciplines concerns writing. History sets great store by good writing. It is a literary-minded profession and literary matters are taken very seriously indeed. Historiography, succinctly defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as the “writing of history”, is a specialised sub-discipline with a long and winding track record (Hale, 1964; Warren, 1998)[3]. The literature on historiography is legion (Burrow, 2009; Geyl, 1962; Igers, 1997; Nash, 1969; Tosh, 2000). The literary styles of its greatest exponents, such as Gibbon, Carlyle, Macaulay and Michelet, are analysed in minute detail and the literary qualities of an historical work are integral to its reception (Barthes, 1992; Gay, 1974; Millgate, 1973). True, few aspiring historians are specifically trained in the art of writing, but the discipline recognises the significance of literary felicity. As Ludmilla Jordanova (2006, p.161) points out in her popular primer, “the most important act historians perform is that of writing, because it is through writing that their disparate ideas are integrated into a single whole. Historical ideas, accounts and claims are apprehended by others via the written, and to a lesser extent the spoken, word. Writing is the foremost act of interpretation”.

Can historiography save scholarship?
There is no marketing equivalent. Markeography is not a recognised sub-discipline, nor for that matter is “marketingraphy”. The case for fine writing is rarely made in the corridors of marketing power and the acquisition of writing skills is not considered sufficiently important to warrant inclusion in doctoral programmes (Brown, 2004).[4] It is generally acknowledged that there are some excellent writers in marketing academia, both past (Theodore Levitt, John Howard, Stanley Hollander) and present (Morris Holbrook, Linda Scott, Donald Dixon). We all have our personal favourites, those writers we turn to when “comfort reading” is called for (I’m particularly partial to an heroic dose of Wroe Alderson; but that’s because I like to suffer). The stylistic devices employed by prominent thought leaders, such as Philip Kotler, Sidney Levy and Shelby Hunt, have also been studied in some detail (Brown, 2005; Harris, 2007). The case for limpid prose has been made on numerous occasions (e.g. Witkowski and Jones, 2006). There is no shortage of how-to-do-it advice (Witkowski, 1991), what is more, and how-not-to-do-it warnings by critical thinkers (Hackley, 2003).

Compared to our historical brethren, nevertheless, writing is somewhat neglected by marketing’s academic community (Hackley, 2007). This is true even when allowance is made for history’s learned lineage, which is half a century longer than marketing’s. This is true even when account is taken of visual considerations, which are rather more prominent in marketing than history (though the latter, as Witkowski (1996, 2003) shows, are not negligible). This is true especially when consideration is given to the prevalence of writing in the marketing profession. Academic esteem and career progression are almost entirely predicated on publications – written publications – in prominent journals. Everyday academic endeavour involves constant exhibitions of literary ability: articles, books, case studies, lecture notes, working papers, scholarly monographs and much, much more. Marketing practice moreover is profoundly literary in ethos. Plans, reports, memos, emails, sales brochures, advertising copy, website updates and what have you are part and parcel of the daily round in marketing departments worldwide (Brown, 2004).

Yet the writing of marketing remains shrouded in mystery. It appears to be a skill acquired by osmosis, if at all (Hogg and Maclaran, 2008). It appears to be an aspect of scholarship that is unworthy of serious attention. It appears to be, arguably, a tad too artistic for academic comfort, particularly in a discipline that aspires to scientific respectability. The fact that the writing and rhetoric of science is widely studied – and widely admired, especially that of gifted communicators such as Richard Dawkins, Edward O. Wilson and Stephen Jay Gould – is neither here nor there for the academic marketing mainstream (Carey, 1995; Gross, 1990; Selzer, 1993). Writing, it seems, does not really matter in marketing.

**OMG**

In light of the lack of marketing writing on writing marketing, it may be helpful to turn to historiography. Given the richness of this particular sub-discipline and given the family resemblances between marketing and history, any such examination should prove instructive. Indeed, when the historiographical *oeuvre* is considered and evaluated, three key things are apparent. The first of these is the lack of consensus on what good historical writing comprises. As Jones (1991) shows in his overview of the principal historical paradigms, or traditions, historiography is a many splendored thing with many and varied modes of expression. True, a basic distinction can be drawn between “scientific” schools of thought, which rely on the rhetoric of hard facts...
– statistical inference, hypothesis testing, theory development and so forth – and “traditional” historical research which uses discursive or narrative forms of expression (Fogel and Elton, 1983). This distinction, however, is not clear cut and many works of historical scholarship combine both (Jones, 1991).

There is a clear lesson here for marketing, inasmuch as there is a widespread presumption within our discipline that one type of writing is best: namely, the short sentences, unadorned prose, neutral tone, no-nonsense, style-less style that is standard throughout the social and physical sciences. This is the unfussy style of Fowler (2004), the plain and simple style of Strunk and White (2003), the prosaic style advocated by George Orwell (1962). However, it is a style that is flouted by many of the acknowledged stars of marketing poetics (such as Ted Levitt, Morris Holbrook, John Sherry and Russ Belk) and numerous literary superstars for that matter (James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, David Foster Wallace, for instance). This is the efflorescent style that best-selling novelist Jonathan Franzen (2007) defends in his deliriously didactic essay, “Mr Difficult”.

My point is not that marketing should aim to become more difficult – it is pretty troublesome as it is – but that a wider palette of writing styles should prevail (see Fish, 2011; Haslett, 2011). The commonplace belief that marketing scholarship must be written in flat, transparent, essentially disinterested prose cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged. Marketing scholars should seek to be more expressive, more exciting, more extravagant than before (Hackley, 2007). Many dry-as-dust marketing scientists may shudder in horror at the prospect, though if it gets people reading – ordinary people, really reading, picking up marketing journals with pleasure in mind – where’s the harm in it? As the formidable historian G.R. Elton (1967, pp. 136-138) analogously observed a generation or so ago:

In the earlier part of this century, a good many scholars seem to have thought that the more readable their colleagues were the less they merited consideration. Difficult things, real problems could not be dealt with in lucid or attractive language but required obscure technical terms, and a style, which reflected the agonising processes of thought that had gone into their analysis. Any historian who expressed himself well and showed some respect for the remarkable possibilities of the English language was automatically assumed to have achieved ease of expression by sliding over the difficulties of the matter . . .

In those years, it seems to have been the fashion to think that only a particularly austere and even repulsive style of writing could entitle the historian to the name of scholar and some men appeared to reserve a special vocabulary and syntax for the occasions on which they wished to claim that distinction . . . The learned dullness of those histories stands as a monument to a mistaken puritanism. This gild attitude to scholarship promoted real delight in involution, in being comprehensible only to what were sometimes called one’s peers. The stumbling solemnity that often hung about that attitude reflected a measure of uncertainty about the activity engaged in: mumbo-jumbo, private language, the barriers of technicality are not so much intended to keep the mob out as to pretend that there is something of value inside the zareba. Intellectual enterprise, which prefers to hide behind obscurity and mere clumsiness cannot be very sure of itself or its own ultimate worth.

LOL

A second point arising from our historiographic considerations is that a cyclical pattern in historical writing is discernible (Ferguson, 1997). Old-fashioned narrative
history, like Count Dracula and his creatures of the night, keeps rising from the grave despite academics’ repeated attempts to drive an analytical stake through its heart. Whether it be Edward Gibbon’s garrulous yarns of the degenerate Roman empire, Thomas Carlyle’s hyperbolic account of the French Revolution, Arnold Toynbee’s majestic excursus on the rise and fall of civilisations, A.J.P. Taylor’s puckish prognostications on the First World War or Simon Schama’s rousing evocation of the Dutch golden age, superlative storytelling is an integral part of – arguably the main reason for – history’s inexhaustible appeal (Wells, 2008). Thomas Babington Macaulay, the prodigious Victorian polymath, famously set out to write a work of history “which shall for a few days supersede the last fashionable novel on the tables of young ladies” (Edwards, 1988, p. 126). And, directly inspired by the dashing novels of Sir Walter Scott, that’s precisely what he did with his *History of England*, one of the bestselling books of the nineteenth century (Keynon, 1993). Granted, Macaulay was later dismissed as a charlatan by J.B. Bury (1903), the principal instigator of rigorous scientific history in Great Britain, but this dismissal only acted as an incentive to G.M. Trevelyan (1914, p. 14), who picked up where his great-uncle left off and made a case for narrative history that rebutted Bury’s bluster:

> It is because the historians of today were trained by the Germanising hierarchy to regard history . . . as a “science”, that they have so much neglected what is after all the principal craft of the historian – the art of narrative. It is in narrative that modern historical writing is weakest, and to my way of thinking it is a very serious weakness – spinal in fact. Some writers would seem never to have studied the art of telling a story. There is no “flow” in their events, which stand like ponds instead of running like streams. Yet history is, in its unchangeable essence, “a tale”. Round the story, as flesh and blood round the bone, should be gathered many different things – character drawing, study of social and intellectual movements, speculations as to probable causes and effects, and whatever else the historian can bring to illuminate the past. But the art of history remains always the art of narrative. That is the bed rock.

Historical scholarship, as Trevelyan eloquently demonstrated (Cannadine, 1993), lends itself to narrative (Megill, 1989). “What happened next?” is a question that historians not only seek to answer but it is the hook that novelists, playwrights, movie-makers and similar storytellers routinely rely upon (Bruner, 1986, 2002). The narrative instinct is deeply embedded in the human psyche (Turner, 1996). It is a cultural universal. We are storytelling animals who spend inordinate amounts of time attending to, passing on and making up compelling narratives. For some evolutionary psychologists, storytelling is nothing less than a survival mechanism that gave humankind evolutionary advantages over rivals and predators (Boyd, 2009). This may or may not be so, since it signally fails to account for people’s preference for fictional over factual narratives[5]. Many interpretive researchers, moreover, are understandably chary of the reductive reasoning that prevails in EP (e.g. Miller, 2009). It cannot be denied, nonetheless, that storytelling meets some kind of deeply felt human need or indeed that few academic disciplines have demonstrated the primal power of storytelling more judiciously than history (Samuel, 1994).

The narrative turn in the human and social sciences has not left marketing unaffected. We are regularly regaled with great brand stories, stirring tales of corporate derring-do, cogent analyses of consumer narratives, detailed studies of storytelling in organisations, and attempts to extract meaningful marketing lessons
from novels, movies, TV series, etc (e.g. Beverland, 2009; Gabriel, 2004; Hopkinson and Hogg, 2006; Levy, 2006b; Shankar et al., 2001). It is fair to say, though, that the academic article remains unaffected by this narrative impulse. We are happy to discuss the importance of narratives, collect the narratives of informants and consider the component parts of the narrative process. But with the noteworthy exceptions of Morris Holbrook (1995) and Elizabeth Hirschman (1991), relatively few marketing scholars write narrative articles (that is, articles shaped like stories with a beginning, middle and end). The vast majority of our publications follow the give-me-the-facts formula that characterises conventional social science: introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, conclusion (Brownlie et al., 2009; Witkowski and Jones, 2006). We scholars talk the talk about stories yet fail to walk the walk when writing marketing. Marketing does not have a Macaulay. There is no Thomas Carlyle of consumer research. Marketing history’s Hugh Trevor-Roper is conspicuous by his absence[6].

Turning ourselves into scholarly storytellers is easier said than done, admittedly. The institutional apparatus of marketing is stacked against any such “aberration”. The established conventions of academic articles, the editorial guidelines of prominent journals, the don’t-rock-the-boat demands of double-blind reviewers, the interference of eager copyeditors and house style zealots, the academic reward system which militates against innovators or troublemakers, and even conventions like the Harvard referencing system, which turns the simple act of reading into a parentheses-peppered obstacle course, are sufficient to keep would-be storytellers out of the scholarly citadel. Buckets of boiling oil help too. However, this failure to make our writing more readable, more compelling, more story-like, more unscientific – non-scientific, rather – is a one-way ticket to obscurity, obloquy, oblivion. Not now perhaps. Not while marketing is in full bloom, with ever-growing numbers of students, scholars, specialisms. But in the fullness of time, when the bloom goes off the rose. Many maintain it is already withering (Hackley, 2009b).

WTF

Although there is much to be said for adopting a storytelling approach, if only because it will add variety to marketing’s academic monoculture, the third key point arising from our study of historiography is that narrative is insufficient in itself. Narrative is not a panacea. Narrative is not a magic formula. Embracing once-upon-a-time does not guarantee happily-ever-after. Only if the stories are cogent, credible, compelling, captivating, convincing, congenial, will they supplant the “learned dullness” (Elton, 1967, p. 138) of the standard marketing article. Writing compelling narratives is no easy task. There is more to penning page-turning prose than “this happened, then that happened, then the other occurred unexpectedly”. Plot twists may be of paramount importance according to Aristotle’s hierarchy of dramatic effects, which places plot ahead of character, dialog, music and spectacle. But many renowned writers disagree (Faulks, 2011). For E.M. Forster (1990), character is key. For Henry James, character pips plot (Sutherland, 2010). For David Lodge (1992), character is the single most important element of the novel. For George Orwell, character is everything, even in detective fiction where plots are presumed to predominate (Parrinder, 1973). For Iris Murdoch, the creation of free and independent characters is the mark of a great novelist (Wood, 2008). For innumerable writers of “how to write” books, character is the rock
It is hard to disagree with this authorial assessment. Plot twists and turns fade rapidly from our memories but characters like Scarlett O'Hara, Sherlock Holmes, Huckleberry Finn, Hannibal Lecter, Hester Prynne and Holden Caulfield, stay with us forever (Faulks, 2011). The same is true of narrative history’s greatest hits. William III leaps off the page in Macaulay’s *History of England*, as does General James Wolfe in Schama’s *Dead Certainties*. Thomas Carlyle brings Marie Antoinette to life in *The French Revolution*. David Starkey does likewise with Good Queen Bess. Plutarch’s pen portrait of Alexander the Great continues to call down the years, as Michael Wood’s supposed “search” for the imperious emperor attests. Even Leopold von Ranke, the prime mover of scientific history, was no slouch when it came to characterisation. His dramatic description of the assassination of King Henri IV, in the closing pages of *History of France, Book VII*, is nothing less than a showstopper:

> The effect is stunning. Ranke has staged a memorable scene in a few tautly written paragraphs; he has individualised the main actors with a handful of choice adjectives; he has aroused grave suspicions about a major power and an august institution with three pointed anecdotes. By ringing down the curtain . . . Ranke has secured for Henri IV the most monumental stature. Just as Hamlet, dead, dominates the closing moments of his play, so Henri, dead, dominates his country as Louis XIII begins his nominal reign (Gay, 1974, pp. 60-61).

Historians’ preoccupation with character is not confined to the “great man” school of thought (Hughes-Hallett, 2004). It is equally evident within the “microhistory” movement, where hitherto unsung heroes personify the historical forces that great men previously embodied (Levi, 2001). Ginzberg’s (1980) *The Cheese and the Worms* and Davis’s (1983) *Return of Martin Guerre* are much-admired examples of the genre. The perennial popularity of historical biography likewise attests to humankind’s obsession with famous, infamous and otherwise noteworthy individuals, be it Luther, Lincoln, Lenin, Leonardo, Liberace, Lucrezia Borgia, Lorenzo de Medici or, indeed, Lucky Luciano. Personification, like storytelling, is a primordial human instinct, a way in which people make sense of the world. We assume, as Guthrie (1995) notes, that the human and non-human worlds are congruent. Hence, we see faces in the clouds, the man in the moon, white horses in the waves and, *Annales* school notwithstanding, are inclined to attribute historical changes to larger-than-life figures (Graham, 1997).

In this respect, arguably the most striking shortcoming of the academic marketing literature is its absence of character (in every sense of the word). Our published articles are not only bland and written in a nondescript manner, but they are devoid of human interest. Real people, characterful people, people who rise from the text alive and kicking, are nowhere to be found. Yes, the aggregated results of questionnaire surveys and laboratory experiments and econometric models and PoS data mining exercises fill the pages of our foremost journals. Yet all sense of individuality is lost. Yes, interpretive researchers incorporate quotes from their focus groups and depth interviews and ethnographic endeavours, to convey some sense of real people talking. Yet this is little more than a glib rhetorical device, an act of academic ventriloquism. The informants in most interpretive articles are ciphers, assemblages of disembodied attributes that illustrate the author’s thesis. Indeed, when the actual person is described – often in tabular form, with demographic and occupational information
appended – the resultant pen portrait is closer to a charge sheet than a character sketch. Living, breathing human beings have been replaced by inhuman apparitions. They are not so much ghosts in the machine as ghouls in the manuscript.

If anything, in fact, the situation is gradually getting worse. In the early days of interpretive marketing research, it was not unusual for articles to commence with biographical anecdotes concerning key informants or even an autobiographical confession from the researcher in question. Belk et al. (1989) is a classic case in point. Contemporary interpretive articles, conversely, tend to begin in the standard social science manner, with a summary of extant literature and the identification of an alleged “gap” which the paper fortuitously fills (e.g. Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). People, when they do appear, are subordinate to the argument. They are stock characters, in effect, stereotyped, anonymous, anodyne caricatures that E.M. Forster aptly identified as “flat”. Round characters are rarely found in marketing, certainly not in the burgeoning literature on consumer tribes, customer co-creation, hive minds, swarm intelligence and so forth, which submerge the individual into the mass. Cultural research is equally bereft, since it replaces the pro-active individual with post-hoc historical forces, which mysteriously determine the fate of all marketing activities (Holt, 2004). Character does not count.

The picture is not completely bleak, however. Morris Holbrook’s (1995) autobiographical writings portray the author as an endearingly hapless antihero, though the fact that the protagonist is a tenured professor at an Ivy League business school stretches readers’ suspension of disbelief to its elastic limit. Marketing history, moreover, is noteworthy for its characterful contributions. A quick flick through back issues of the Journal of Historical Research in Marketing, or the published proceedings of the CHARM conferences, reveals that marketing historians are not only narrative minded but character inclined (Pollay, this issue; Savitt, this issue). True, very few articles on marketing history go the whole hog and commence with a character sketch or pen portrait, much less begin in media res. However, our sub-discipline’s biographical bent is perhaps the last best hope for our field (Jones, 1998, 2012). Marketing history may not save us, but at least it offers a lifeline.

TLDR

The foregoing inferences, I grant you, are unlikely to find favour with marketing’s academic community. The defenders of mainstream marketing scholarship will dismiss the “lessons” out of hand. Marketing is a science not a liberal art, no discussion necessary. Even ostensibly sympathetic interpretive researchers will doubtless question the characterisation component. Drawing upon postmodern philosophy, they will challenge the very idea of “character”, arguing that twenty-first century individuals are made up of multiple selves, multiple personae, multiple roles that are adopted and abandoned as situations demand. Character, they will argue, is an old-fashioned construct, hardly worth bothering about. The same philosophically informed scholars may also refer to postmodernism’s disdain for conventional storytelling, noting its dismissal of the deeply-embedded “metanarratives” beloved by numerous narrative historians, such as Hegel, Michelet, Burkhardt, Croce and the notoriously Whiggish Macaulay[8].

Although such antipathetic arguments have merit, especially for those who subscribe to postmodern philosophical principles, such as they are, historiography
helps clarify matters once again. History, like most of the liberal arts and humanities, has not been immune from postmodern incursions (Ankersmit, 1994; Jenkins, 1991; Munslow, 1997). If anything, indeed, the postmodern “debate” proved much more divisive in history than it ever did in marketing. Historical writing was the principal battleground and the exchanges were the academic equivalent of Wellington’s “heavy pounding” (Jenkins, 1997). Postmodernists dismissed mainstream historical scholarship as a tissue of textual tropes and linguistic devices – truth didn’t come into it – and the pre-postmodernists responded in kind, with ferocious defences of time-tested historical methods (Appleby et al., 1994; Himmelfarb, 1994; Marwick, 1995). As with so many much-vaunted intellectual “crises”, marketing’s included, the root cause of the clash comprised a power struggle between ambitious yet marginalised scholars and the comfortably entrenched academic establishment, who were quite happy (pace Walpole) to let sleeping texts lie.

Now that the intellectual dust from history’s uncivil war has settled, it is clear that historical writing has benefitted from the confrontation. Traditional historians have been forced to face the fictive character of their craft – historical truth is textually mediated – and power-hungry postmodernists now concede that there is a very real difference between history and fiction (Jenkins and Munslow, 2004). The upshot has been a renewed emphasis on good writing, a greater appreciation of the importance of literary style and, not least, an upsurge in the popularity of sweeping narrative histories by high-profile media dons like Simon Schama, Niall Ferguson, Bettany Hughes and Mary Beard (De Groot, 2008). According to Richard J. Evans, a robust defender of the faith and one of the foremost combatants in history’s battle of the books:

Postmodernism in its more constructive modes has encouraged historians to look more closely at documents, to take their surface patina more seriously, and to think about texts and narratives in new ways. It has helped open up many new subjects and areas for research, while putting back on the agenda many topics, which had previously seemed to be exhausted. It has forced historians to interrogate their own methods and procedures as never before, and in the process has made them more self-critical, which is all to the good. It has led to a greater emphasis on open acknowledgement of the historian’s own subjectivity, which can only help the reader engaged in a critical assessment of historical work. It has shifted the emphasis in historical writing – though not in writing about history as a discipline – back from social-scientific to literary models, and in so doing has begun to make it more accessible to the public outside the universities (and indeed to students within them). It has restored individual human beings to history, where social science approaches had more or less written them out. And it has inspired, or at least informed, many outstanding works in the last decade or more … making their emphasis on poetry and imagination feel contemporary once more, but poetry and imagination that are disciplined by fact (Evans, 1997, p. 248, p. 251).

It remains to be seen whether marketing will follow in historiography’s footsteps. The lack of a strong artistic tradition in marketing writing may count against it. There is no real poetic past to recuperate. The tradition, as Hugh Trevor-Roper (1983) showed in his landmark study of the Scottish kilt, will have to be invented anew. Just as historiography owes its formal origins to the bestselling novels of Sir Walter Scott (Keynon, 1993), so too marketing scholarship must seek inspiration in the writings of novelists, movie-makers and investigative journalists such as Naomi Klein, Morgan Spurlock, Michael Moore and Malcolm Gladwell, who not only have an unerring eye for apt characterisation but bring marketing matters to large audiences in a way that we
hidebound academics can’t. Or won’t[9]. In this regard, Hugh Trevor-Roper’s (1957a) inaugural lecture remains instructive. History’s ever-increasing obsession with arcane detail can only be combatted, he claimed, by infusions from laymen, outsiders, non-historians whose ideas act as a catalyst, even if hopelessly wrong-headed:

The clergy, in any subject, by a kind of natural law, tend to bury themselves deeper and deeper in the minutiae of their own dogma; thus buried, they tend to forget the outer world which may be radically changing around them; and often it takes the less concentrated mind of the layman, who is more aware of these changes, sometimes even his impatient boot, to bring them up to date. The lay spirit not only forces the unwilling professional to jettison, at intervals, his past accumulations; it also poses new problems and suggests new methods and new purposes (Trevor-Roper, 1957a, p.11).

Maybe it is time for marketing to heed to forthright historian’s words of wisdom. There may be no lessons from history – apart from the hoary chestnut that history does not contain lessons – but there are indeed lessons from historiography, as this article has attempted to demonstrate. Clio, admittedly, may not appreciate my profane salutation, much less being button-holed by a marketing barbarian. She would surely agree, though, that good writing, compelling storytelling and colourful characterisation might help marketing out of its current quandary, especially if historians play a lead role in that process. Marketing history, Clio might be inclined to contend, is not the black sheep of our scholarly family; it is a growing goose with golden eggs aplenty.

BFN

A total of 23 years after his inaugural lecture, Hugh Trevor-Roper resigned his Regius Professorship for a post at Peterhouse College, Cambridge. His valedictory address, delivered in the same overcrowded examination hall as its provocative predecessor, returned to the theme of his inaugural (Trevor-Roper, 1980). Historical science, though valuable in many ways, not least its excavation, examination and evaluation of source material, is insufficient in and of itself. Historical imagination is also necessary, Trevor-Roper maintained, and the absence of imagination means impoverishment. The more rigorous, recondite, recherché history becomes, the more it rarefies the subject and reduces its appeal to the common man. The attainment of scientific objectivity is no substitute for the free play of the human imagination. Historical science won’t wash. Historians’ “chemical distillations”, he noted with a wry scientific allusion, “will be rejected in favour of less antiseptic water, fresh from the spring” (Trevor-Roper, 1980, p. 357).

Trevor-Roper’s plea on behalf of historical imagination applies with equal force to marketing academia (Levitt, 1986). This article has argued that marketing is going the way of scientific history, into an ever-more impenetrable professional shell that means next to nothing to the “laity”, let alone our discipline’s principal stakeholders, students and practitioners. History, as we have seen, pulled back from the brink by recognising that there is much to be said for stylish writing, appealing storytelling and good old-fashioned characterisation. If marketing is to do likewise, it needs someone to make the case for creativity, imagination, art[10]. Marketing historians, IMHO, are very well placed to provide that lead. Cometh the hour, cometh the historiographer.
Notes
1. Trevor-Roper’s ruthless demolition of Toynbee’s world-wide bestseller has been described as “one of the most savage and cruel … attacks by one historian on another ever written” (see Sisman, 2010, p. 289).
2. The emergence of the “modern” marketing concept was, of course, rather more complex than standard textbook accounts suggest (Fullerton, 1988; Jones and Richardson, 2007; Tadajewski, 2006).
3. The *OED* includes a second definition, “the study of history writing”, though the term “historiography” is actually much more diffuse than this. As Jones (1991) explains, some consider methodological concerns and philosophical issues and data source evaluation to be part of historiography’s broad canvas. There is no consensus on such matters, though most agree that words-on-the-page are integral to the subject.
4. Note, I am not claiming that writing is completely ignored in marketing. The literary devices employed by advertisers, for instance, are widely studied (e.g. Sedivy and Carlson, 2011). Compared to the academic discipline of history, however, the writings of marketing scholars are somewhat neglected.
5. As Boyd (2009) notes, humankind much prefers to take its narrative medicine in fictional forms. This preference is problematic for evolutionary psychologists, since it runs counter to their stories-aid-survival construct, which should favour fact-based, truth-telling information exchange (Dutton, 2009). However, “the appetite-for-the-true model spectacularly fails to predict large components of the human appetite for information. In modern societies, most people prefer novels to textbooks, fiction films to documentaries” (Boyd, 2009, pp. 129-130).
6. FYI, literary critics usually draw a distinction between “story” (the events themselves) and “narrative” (the arrangement of these events), but the terms are often used synonymously (Sutherland, 2010), as in this case.
7. A good example of this contention is found in Newman and Mittelmark’s (2009) *How Not to Write a Novel*. Most protagonists, they cruelly observe, “have all the depth of a sock with a face drawn on it in magic marker” (p. 53). Antagonists, meanwhile, “kill, torture and main with improbably sadistic glee. ‘I smirk at your pain!’ the villain exults over the dying infant” (p. 54).
8. As the literary style of postmodernist thinkers is notoriously incomprehensible – it exemplifies the “status” style described by Franzen (2007) in “Mr Difficult” – avowed postmodernists may also question my avocation of readable writing, pleasurable writing, sparkling writing. Wilful obscurantism doesn’t help anyone, in my opinion. Michel Foucault, Hayden White, Fredric Jameson and similar historical thinkers are not the stylistic role models I have in mind.
9. It is no accident, I feel, that many popularisations of marketing ideas, such as those by Klein and Gladwell, often begin with a character sketch of some kind, a human interest story that captures readers’ attention before more abstract issues are introduced. Academics’ reluctance to humanise their arguments is a fatal rhetorical flaw, in my view.
10. Just to reiterate, I am not suggesting that rigour should be abandoned. We need to realise, though, that rigour is not enough. Indeed, we would do well to wind the clock back to G.M. Trevelyan (1914, pp. 30-31), who contended that history consists of three elements: the scientific, the imaginative and the literary. The first comprises the accumulation of facts and the evaluation of evidence. The second selects salient facts and makes sense of their meaning. The third and most important, however, calls for the creative “exposition of the results of science and imagination in a form that will attract and educate our fellow-countrymen.” Writing, he concludes, “is not a secondary but one of the primary tasks of the historian”. As with history, so with marketing.
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**About the author**
Stephen Brown is Professor of Marketing Research at the University of Ulster. Best known for *Postmodern Marketing*, he has written numerous books including *Fail Better, Free Gift Inside* and *The Penguin’s Progress*. Additional biographical details are available on his web site: www.sfxbrown.com Stephen Brown can be contacted at: sfx.brown@ulster.ac.uk

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