

Selectiveness¹ + Conflicting Interpretations + Distortion of Historical Facts = Inadequate Understanding of the Past: Some Key Limitations of History

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Abstract: *Some studies have shown that most individuals, groups of people, institutions and whole societies are still interested in, and use, history for several reasons and purposes, one of which is the value they find in the study of the past. At the same time, other studies have established that interest in history, as a subject studied in schools and as a repository of our individual and collective past, has declined appreciably partly as a result of some major shortcomings associated with the study of history. Of course, one cannot accurately measure the extent to which the shortcomings of historical studies have contributed to the contemporary decline in interest in the discipline. What is certain, however, is that history, like any other science, is saddled with some problems which make it unable to fulfill all the demands society make on it. In fact, there are several limitations of history we can talk about. Using both primary and secondary documents, this study examines selectiveness, conflicting interpretations, distortion of historical facts, and inadequate understanding of the past as some of the major limitations of history, from a 'cause-and-effect' perspective. The study examines the first three problems as some of the major causes of the last problem and concludes that in the final analysis, all four constitute some of the key shortcomings of history, and, thus, cautions consumers of historical studies to be very circumspect in their consumption of historical knowledge. The study finally argues that there is still need for more historical studies, in spite of these problems, because it is only through more historical analyses that we can reduce the impact of these same problems on historical reconstruction.*

Keywords and Phrases: *conflicting interpretations, distortion of historical facts, inadequate understanding of the past, limitations of history, selection, selectiveness.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Some people have asserted that the past is so unalterable that not even God could change it. Dean Inge, however, maintains that the study of history gives one the power denied to God, that is, the power of altering the past (Boahen, 1975: 4). Our interest in Inge's view is not so much in its attempt to endow humans with some controlling power over the past and, therefore, its conflicting position with the first statement, as in its position to show that humans can interfere with the past and, thus, make historical events appear different from their true nature or form or what they really were in the past. Inge's assertion shows that everyone is capable of accessing this power. However, since historians and history students are those who habitually engage in 'the study of history', they are obviously at the forefront of all those who acquire historical knowledge and, hence, possess this 'destructive' power in abundance. This vicious power manifests itself in several ways, but principally through the principle of selectiveness (selection) in historical reconstruction, the offering of different interpretations of the same events, distortion of historical facts (either in the form of exaggeration, twisting of facts, subjectiveness, or introducing personal biases and prejudice into one's study), and the ultimate result of the inability of history to offer a full and an adequate knowledge and

¹*Selectiveness* denotes a state of being selective, choosy, or discriminatory. *Selection* also denotes choice, a variety of items taken from a larger collection. The two are not the same, but they are closely related. In this study, therefore, both terms are used, in some cases, in their respective senses as shown here, and in others, and more preferably, interchangeably to refer to the state of taking an amount or some historical facts, in the sense of both events and evidence, and leaving others for reasons best known to those who make the choices.

understanding of the past. Since time immemorial, humans have always dreamed of acquiring a full and an indisputable knowledge of what happened in the past. This desire probably reached its peak in the 1950s with the development of Cliometrics, the science that proceeds on the assumption that through the application of mathematical statistics and computers, new and profitable truths can be learned about the past (Barzun and Graff, 1977: 182). Indeed, in some cases, this science has been judiciously applied and turned out results that overturned existing theories about some historical events.² However, the conclusions of some cliometric studies have been severely challenged and criticised for several inaccuracies. There is also no doubt that the use of computers and other modern electronic devices has contributed significantly to improvements in historical research. However, the use of the same devices sometimes imposes limitations on the studies.

All this shows that the desire to acquire a full and accurate knowledge and understanding of the past remains a mirage, in spite of the new impetus and fresh hope modern electronic equipment has injected into 'the search for the past.' It further informs us that consumers should often exercise caution in taking the sum of some historical studies as sufficient grounds for inferences. Meanwhile, in historical studies proper, some of the major causes of our inaccurate understanding of the past, as we have observed, are selection of historical facts for emphasis and the neglect of others (selectiveness), conflicting interpretations given to the same events by different writers, and distortions of historical facts. In a sense, the three causes flow like rivers into the sea of inadequate understanding of the past. Ironically, these four problems, the rivers and the sea, are among the major limitations often associated with historical studies. Like those of other disciplines, these limitations of history have been derived principally from the unique relationship that historians have with their subject matter, that is, the study of other humans in the past. Several questions have been raised in modern history about the extent to which we can truly have a scientific study of the past because of these principal shortcomings. The objective of this paper is to examine the three causes as a major cause of our inadequate understanding of the past, and the four problems as some of the major limitations of historical studies.

1.1. Selectiveness

History itself touches only a small part of a nation's life. Most of the activities and sufferings of the people ... have been and will remain without written record (E.L. Woodward, cited in Szasz, "Historical Quotations", retrieved June 7, 2013).

At the start of her 1974 study, *Times to Remember*, Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy, wife of former American President John F. Kennedy, makes it clear that age has several privileges. One, she indicates, is to reminisce, and another is to reminisce selectively. Between the two, Mrs. Kennedy prefers to remember the good times,³ and that is how, she states, her book begins (p. 1). The English historian of football David Winner (2005: 96) has also observed that we all have half a dozen possible ancestries to choose from, and this necessarily involves selectivity and silence, 'valorising a prestigious great uncle and forgetting the family black sheep.' Again, Randolph S. Bourne (cited in "Historical Quotes", retrieved June 7, 2012) observes that history remembers only the brilliant failures and the brilliant successes, and neglects the trivial. These observations reveal that history cannot study the whole of the past; it concerns itself with only the significant aspects of the past. Analysed critically, however, they point directly to the issue of selectiveness in historical studies and reconstruction, which many people consider as a significant limitation of the historical record. Genuinely, there are no guidelines on what topics to select for emphasis or on the facts to select in weaving one's interpretations. Of course, no general ruling can be given, and so what to select for study remains a matter to be settled by each individual historian in each individual case. A historian's interests or objectives normally influence the topics or problems he handles or investigates.

²Alfred H. Conrad and John R. Meyer are said to be the intellectual fathers of *Cliometrics*. In 1957, at the start of their academic careers, they published two seminal essays on cliometrics. Cliometrics have produced surprising results on some American historical events including the 1884 presidential elections, the unsettled economic conditions in the Age of Jackson, the American Civil War, slavery in the USA, etc. See Barzun and Graff, 1977: 182–183.

³This is what is called selective memory – remembering or mentioning only good things.

These problems have invariably created a situation in which historians tend to emphasise some aspects of society or of world history to the neglect of others altogether. This is the point Frederick Cooper (2000: 300) raises when he argues that some historians often tell the history of literate societies and leave the non-literate to other disciplines; they write about the formation of nation-states and neglect other forms of political affiliation. For example, in the introductory section of his *Africa in Modern History: The Search for a New Society*, Basil David (1978: 16) indicates that the study is selective with regard to both events and trends. In the last few decades, attempts have been made to build up a technique and a body of verifiable facts that have lifted history far beyond the boundaries of biography, and the history of political, religious, and other institutions that were previously primed high above others. Until these incursions into other avenues, which have enriched and deepened historical studies, however, most historians generally attached more respect to the pomp and drama of the lives of the great (compare Thomas Carlyle's Great-Man Theory below) than to the conditions of life for the ordinary people, the masses. In the nineteenth century, for instance, Marxist historians and the French Annales School of thought criticised the historical writings of the German historian Leopold von Ranke, often referred to as 'Rankean historiography', because Rankean historiography focused largely on diplomatic and political history, dwelling upon the deeds of kings and leaders, without paying attention to other historical divisions or themes (Gay and Webb, 1973: 641; Zewde, "African Historiography: Past, Present and Future", retrieved February 19, 2007). A.E. Bland, P.A. Brown and R.H. Tawney (1914: vii) have also criticised that the very nature of the agencies by which historical documents are compiled and preserved has led to a natural bias on the part of economic historians to often lay excessive stress on those aspects of economic development which come directly under the eyes of the State and are involved in its activity, and to neglect the humbler but often more significant movements which spring from below. In other words, economic historians have tended to over-emphasise organisation and to under-estimate the initiative of individuals in history.

When a critical analysis of world history is done, one observes a conspiracy of silence on African achievements in the past and the impact of those glories on world civilisation. In fact, it is clear that the contributions Africa has made to world civilisation in general and the culture and technology of our modern times are often passed over in silence in most universities and colleges around the world, including those in Africa itself. Much emphasis has been placed on the rise of Western civilisation, which has, rather wrongly, been assumed to be the ideal model for humanity. Even in most educational institutions in Africa, history of political thought focuses almost exclusively on Western political philosophy, without, in most cases, even a cursory glance at African political philosophy. Several excuses have been offered to explain this Western-centric approach to the study of world civilisation. In Western societies, one principle underlying this trend is that it is more important that young minds (young pupils and students) understand the roots of their own heritage than that of peoples elsewhere (Duiker and Spielvogel, 2001: xxiv). There is nothing inherently wrong with this notion, but it is wrong on the part of Africa to pay almost no attention to a study of her own civilisations, her proud gift to the world, and learn rather about the roots of foreign civilisations, all of which derived their roots from Africa itself, and, for that matter, owe considerable debt to Africa. In most cases, however, the most important justification for the phenomenon has been the belief that since the time of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, Western civilisation has been the sole driving force in the evolution of human society (Duiker and Spielvogel, 2001: xxiv). With this force behind it, world history has assumed the dimension of portraying itself as simply a chronicle of the rise of the West to global dominance and a celebration of the acclaimed superiority of the Anglo-Saxon civilisation. It appears to create the impression that until the rise of the West, nothing significant had occurred in the course of world history.

The same issue of selectiveness is observed in the history of Ghana. It is clear from the available historical records that much emphasis has been placed on the history of Asante and, to some extent, the history of the Fante than on other ethnic groups. In saying that "Much of the early histories of the Nzema remain as oral traditions and others are sketches of the records and writings of the early Europeans on Ghana, which do not capture in details the pre-19th century [history of] Nzemaland", John Nelson Buah (2013: vii), for example, is stressing that until Martha Alibah researched and published her *A History of the Nzema in Pre-Colonial Ghana* (2013), the history of the Nzema people of Ghana had not received the same attention historians had paid to Asante history. We find the same unfortunate element in, especially, biography. Selectiveness in this branch of the history tree has, in

some cases, like those of Ghana, produced monotonous biographical studies, as much emphasis has been laid on key political figures, such as the Casely Hayfords, the Danquahs, the Nkrumahs, and the Busias, to the neglect of others, who also contributed much to the development of their communities in particular and to the country in general. This tendency has the potency of creating a situation where some people would deliberately refuse to do anything that might benefit their communities and countries at large if their contributions would not be appreciated and given space in our history books. Many countries, particularly in Africa, are already guilty, to some extent, of having not kept accurate records of some important events in their history. This has led to numerous controversies over ownership of certain properties and over the legitimacy of some clans to certain stools and skins, and other high political offices, which, in turn, have led to numerous conflicts in certain parts of the continent. This trend, if remains unchanged, is likely to fashion out a condition where Africa would lose significant aspects of its history. The fact is that since more attention has been focused on key political or national figures, the histories of others, who also make some impact on the lives of the people in their neighbourhoods and on some aspects of their countries, would not be recorded for future generations to know what these people did towards the growth and development of their states. This inclination, thus, would eventually produce a one-sided and a monotonous form of biographies, and later generations would forever remain ignorant of the life stories of some people who, if not more important in terms of their contribution to their countries, were equally as important as those of key political stature.

Let us consider again how over-emphasis on the deeds of men in most societies has led to our shallow-mindedness in relation to the contributions of women to the development of our modern societies. In saying that "History, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in. ... The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars and pestilences in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all", Jane Austen (cited in "Historical Quotes", retrieved July 29, 2012) is criticising the dominance of men and their activities over women and their deeds in historical studies. Note also that different writers, individuals, intellectual associations or schools of thought, institutions, political groups, societies, and generations often tend to emphasise some historical events and issues more than others. In doing so, they are all being selective. Even in some cases, attempts are made by individuals and societies to obliterate from the historical records all unfortunate developments or calamities, such as outbreak of epidemics, defeat in wars, strange deaths, etc., in their lives. For instance, some scholars are of the view that the names of some rulers, during whose era some calamities befell the Asante kingdom, have been removed from the Asante king list (Ward, 1964: xlvi). Again, one could refer to the four-year Japanese occupation of Malaya as another example of an intentionally forgotten memory. In the second chapter of his M.A. Thesis, "An Analysis of Historical Discourses in Malaysian Lower Secondary History Textbooks" See C. Ng (1997: 14) states that since this chapter focuses on British colonial power, it would not discuss the four-year Japanese occupation of Malaya. This era is actually hardly mentioned in Malaysian history textbooks. Indeed, we necessarily do not have to overburden our present with memories of some unfortunate past developments; we do not have to put our present under the control of our damned past. However, the removal of all so-called unfortunate circumstances from historical reconstruction does not help us to gain a complete and better understanding of history, since the removal of these developments create big gaps, 'pot-holes' or blank spaces, in historical narratives.

Apart from being topically selective, history is also selective in terms of material use. As in the case of selection of topics, the issue of what material to select for emphasis is often determined by an author's objectives and value judgement of the relevance of the evidence or events and their suitability for serialisation, sometimes by the suggestions of colleagues, and by the availability of facts of previously published literature. Certainly, any investigator who sets out to digest a confused mass of evidence needs some means of distinguishing what is relevant to his purpose from what is not relevant. He must be able to sift his evidence so that, once he finds a sufficient proof, or the best available proof, for a conclusion, he can discard all the rest as unnecessary. He aims at extracting from each item that and only that which it and it alone can contribute to the knowledge of his subject. Actually, the researcher devises and arbitrarily imposes a method of selection of his own on the means of selection, and it is fundamentally the significance of a fact to a cause, that leads to its selection. Lawyers are guided by rules about what kinds of evidence are admissible; they call relevant anything that is helpful to their purpose, and natural scientists also plan their experiments so as to yield the answers to set questions. Essentially, all interpretation rests on the selection of evidence, and

whenever evidence has been selected, the selection governs any possible interpretation – what would come out of the study would be limited strictly to what went into it. However, this practice has created the view that historical synthesis is always subjective and never objective because what is selected is a part, an extract, and the whole of the matter is not given. As Adu Boahen (1975: 13) emphasises, there is absolutely no doubt that in the preparation of history works, one necessarily needs to make a selection of facts from the available data, and in this selection, one has to use one criterion or another, and to that extent, one is bound to be biased or prejudiced. Selection is, of course, an important part of historical study, but it is very risky, and its products can be queried or disputed. The reason is that the results of selection are partial and may have to be corrected. It is also an indication that history is never complete; neither is any history textbook.

At any rate, it is crucial to note that selection could render interpretations inadequate in accounting for historical phenomena. In fact, the problem of selection may account for the reason why no one has ever succeeded in constructing a general theory or philosophy of history to serve historical science in the way that the theories of natural scientists, like Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein, have served Physics. The evolution theory of Giambattista Vico, Auguste Comte and Charles Darwin, for example, has served biological studies and evolutionary science in a way no theory of history has done to the study of history. Moreover, selection, or, more appropriately, selectiveness in terms of the raw materials available on particular topics, could lead to different interpretations of historical developments, since all interpretations are influenced by the materials selected for the study.

1.2. Conflicting Interpretations of Past Events

I have a problem with history. It is because the facts keep changing from one person to another. There is a form of inconsistency in its presentation (Telephone interview: Anita Owusu Sarpong, May 23, 2015: 4:54–5:10).

Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy (1974: 3), once again, indicates that her memories of the past differ from the memories of her family and friends. Accordingly, what she considers important in the past and interprets as history is not the same as what her family and friends might take and interpret as of enduring significance. This is why Ludwig von Mises (1991: 104) posits that history could be written from different points of view, because of our different perceptions of things and, as a result, the importance we attach to them. It is the same point J.C. Aggarwal (2004: 21) highlights when he observes that the interpretation of the same event differs from historian to historian in accordance with their cultural, economic, philosophical, political and religious thinking. Jacob Burckhardt (cited in “Historical Quotes”, retrieved July 29, 2012) has also stressed that “To each eye the outlines of a great civilization present a different picture. In the wide ocean upon which we venture, the possible ways and directions are many ... and lead to essentially different conclusions. In view of all this, Thomas McCaskie (October 29, 2013) has observed that history is a mass of competing and conflicting stories without any specific destination. Admittedly, different historians may reconstruct the history of certain phenomena from different perspectives, based on their conceptions or perceptions and understanding of the events. Humans have always taken specific stances on issues for a complex of reasons, logical, psychological and traditional, some of which they understand and some they do not. In view of this, historians whose views or stances differ on a historical topic or question would surely differ in their interpretation of that particular event. Selection of evidence from the available facts to achieve desired purposes, and the documents available or selected for the study may also lead different groups of historians to produce historical studies that give conflicting or contradictory accounts, even when the original intention had not been to distort the facts to achieve some set objectives. In the first place, most of the primary and secondary documents from which the historian gathers his facts to weave his story and draw his conclusions are themselves limited because they are restricted and affected by the knowledge, attitude and culture of the originating individual, groups, committees, publication houses, etc. Hence, the same historical event reconstructed by people from different intellectual or ideological schools or cultures is likely to have multiple and equally plausible images. That is why politicians, religious leaders, trade unions, etc., can make conflicting claims over the same byte of information. Each party tries to create the image matching his beliefs. Genuinely, the facts do not change, but how they are combined and interpreted does.

In her *Erasmus and the Northern Renaissance*, Margaret Mann Phillips (1965: 12) shows that different historians have given different interpretations to the European Renaissance. To some historians, the

Renaissance was a new era and a clean break with the past. To contemporaries like Erasmus of Rotterdam and Ronsard, the Renaissance seemed more like a revolution as it diverged from the immediate past (Phillips, 1965: 13). Others see it as a means of enfranchisement of the human spirit, the overthrow of the age-long dictatorship of medieval theology, the liberation of energies that could now be concentrated on science and the investigation of the material world, rousing a new spirit of self-confidence and hope. To yet others, it was the beginning of the greatest mistake humans ever committed by daring to place humans at the centre of the universe which had until then seemed to revolve round the conception of God (Phillips, 1965: 13). There are yet other contexts in which the Renaissance has been explained. Some historians have considered it as basically an aesthetic and artistic revival, and to consist essentially in the acquisition of a sense of form. On the other hand, it has been conceived more intellectually as a fundamental change in outlook, the acquisition of a sense of history, or of increased self-realisation and historical perspective (Phillips, 1965: 13). These different interpretations of the Renaissance deprive students and readers of history a clear idea of the exact nature and form of the Renaissance and what it was all about. This problem, which historians and philosophers of history have never succeeded in resolving, acts as a limitation on the study of history.

Not only has the Renaissance been seen differently by different historians; different individuals and groups have held different notions about the significance of some of the key figures of the Renaissance in history. Erasmus of Rotterdam is one of the personalities of the Renaissance who have been interpreted variously, both during and after their life time. For example, while Phillips herself regards Erasmus as 'the greatest representative of the Renaissance in Northern Europe', Michel de Montaigne considered him as 'the man of proverbs' (p. 11–12). Erasmus appeared to his century, the sixteenth, as a living definition of humanism. He was seen by the eighteenth century as a rationalist and precursor of enlightened agnosticism, by the nineteenth century as an apostle of liberty and peace, and by the twentieth century as a symbol of international understanding. For this reason, Phillips has observed that the personality of Erasmus has been put to varied uses and figured as the supporter of many causes (p. 11). Similarly, David Kopf's (1975: 21–45) historiographical essay on the changing attitudes of successive generations of the Bengal Renaissance leaders to their great ancestor, Rammohun Roy, emphasises that the image of Rammohun Roy as co-founder of modern Unitarian religion, champion of reformed Hinduism, social reformer and father of modern India was refashioned over and over again throughout the nineteenth century to meet immediate ideological needs. Rajat K. Ray (1975: 2) has, therefore, warned people who read about Rammohun Roy to always bear in mind that many generalisations about Roy have no objective relevance to events during his age but were formulated after his death for various reasons.

Even the French Revolution, a historical event so popular in the history of not only France and Europe but also of the world as a whole, has been interpreted differently by different historians principally on grounds of their own political sympathies. Some have seen in the revolution either a great calamity, a necessary adjustment to changing circumstances, or a vision of social justice as yet unrealised. Different schools of American historians have also examined American history from different perspectives and have, as a result, provided different interpretations of American history. A group of American historians, commonly referred to as progressive historians, has considered American history as a record of conflicts which shaped the evolution of American society. They have regarded American history, particularly from the War of Independence and before to the era of the New Deal and after, as a process by which one bitter conflict after another nourished and enriched American democratic tradition (Schlesinger, Jr., 1971: vii). Even within the progressive camp, historians disagree on who exactly the antagonists in the conflicts were. A different school of thought, which emerged after the Second World War and claimed to have looked deeper into American history, however, reconstructed American history from the perspective of consensus. Consensus historians maintained that America emerged as a nation blessed by a lack of basic disagreements (Schlesinger, Jr., 1971: vii). They asserted that all Americans had much the same opinion about government and the economy, and about the methods and goals of the political process. They, therefore, rejected the conflict interpretation of American history offered by the progressive school.

Again, different groups of people involved in the same social situation may even have far different ideas about the same series of historical events. Thucydides (1966: 24) encountered this problem in his search for data to reconstruct the history of the Peloponnesian War. On his methods, he states that it was hard to find out what actually happened because those who were present at each event gave

different reports, depending on which side they favoured and how well they remembered (p. 24). The history of the contact between Africans and European colonial powers has, for instance, been very differently conceived by the two groups concerned. During the colonial period when numerous rebellions broke out in various parts of Africa against European colonial domination, Europeans described them as attempts to take Africa backward into her alleged former barbaric state in which she was engulfed. To the Africans, on the other hand, such rebellions were genuine manifestations of protest against the injustices of colonial rule. The Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya was not seen as a genuine nationalist movement, based on genuine grievances. The Historical Survey of the Origins of the Mau Mau or the Corfield Report” (1960), the official account of the revolt published by the colonial government, portrayed the insurrection as backward-looking and ‘tribal’ (Mazrui and Tidy, 1984: 60). Other European observers saw it as a reversionary and barbarous movement aimed at turning Kenya into a land of ‘darkness and death’ (Crowder, 1968: 11). In the same way, the military subjection of Bunyoro in the 1990s was, in the official European view, the necessary suppression of an intransigent native tyrant; but in the Nyoro view it was an unnecessary campaign against a king who, while defending his country against unprovoked foreign power, showed himself quite ready to come to terms with the British if they had permitted him to do so (Beattie, 1977: 24).

As is well-known, colonialist, nationalist and post-nationalist historians of Africa have also expressed different views on African history. The colonist historians, who wrote purposely to rationalise European imperialism and colonial policies in Africa, claimed that Africa had no history until the coming of outsiders who invaded the continent (Afigbo, 1993: 39–51; Adjepong, 2011: 25–28). They regarded Africa as a historically backward continent. Consequently, they conceptualised history in Africa as the history of its invaders: Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Persians, Indians, Indonesians, and lastly Europeans. The nationalists, who emerged with the view to finding evidence to rebuff and counter-balance the assertions of the colonial historians and to re-establish the historical authenticity of their societies on solid foundations, endowed Africa with a historiographical tradition dating back to the time of Herodotus on the basis that Herodotus made references to the past of those parts of Africa known to the peoples of his time (Adjaye, 2008: 9–11). Observing that most existing works that claimed to qualify as historical works on Africa did not come close to such claims, the post-colonialist historians, on the other hand, dismissed the view that there was already available any holistic work on Africa, and actually any scholar who could claim to be a historian of the African past. On the basis of this, they argued that African history and African historiography in reality were born only as from the 1940s at the earliest, or even the mid-twentieth century, especially in 1956 when K.O. Dike of Nigeria published his *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* (Afigbo, 1993: 40). Thomas Hodgkin, Basil Davidson, and A.D. Roberts, for example, all argued about the discovery or rediscovery or birth of African history as from the second half of the twentieth century. Their argument was that since the dominant colonial science was anthropology, those who claimed to have produced historical studies on Africa, and for that matter claimed to be historians, did not have any justification in their assertions in that they did not take into cognisance the “proper methods of enquiry” into African history, “its critical standards, and the authority that is the consequence of these” (Afigbo, 1993: 40). In essence, the post-colonialist historians rejected the arguments of the colonialists – Africa did not have history, and the nationalists – African history could be traced to the time of Herodotus, and called for the rewriting of African history.

The origins of the Akan are also a historical topic which poses a difficulty in the history of Ghana because of the multiple theories that have been formulated to account for the same issue. Different individual historians, schools of thought, etc., have offered different accounts on this topic. Thomas E. Bowdich, Vice Admiral John Hay, J.J. Williams, Sir Harry Johnston, J.C. de Graft-Johnson, J.D. Fage, Eva I.A. Meyerowitz and J.B. Danquah are some of the scholars who have traced the origins of the Akan to regions outside the West African zone. Even within the same camp, views on the specific place of origin differ from one scholar or group of scholars to another. For example, Thomas E. Bowdich, J.J. Williams and Eva I.A. Meyerowitz admit that the Akan first lived in Ethiopia, from where they later moved to Egypt (Boahen, 1966: 4–5). On the other hand, people like Vice Admiral Hay, and Dixon and Pittard content that the Akan originated from a region around the Chad, Niger and Nile rivers, while J.B. Danquah, on his part, traces the origins of the Akan from Mesopotamia, through ancient Egypt and ancient Ghana to modern Ghana (Boahen, 1966: 5–6). Those who agree on the temporary settlement in ancient Ghana argue that the Akan were among those who moved

southwards during the Almoravid invasion of C.E. 1075 and settled first in the northern part of modern Ghana before moving further southward to the Adanse region, from where they later emigrated to their present places of habitation. The views of these scholars have, however, been challenged in the light of new historical, archaeological, ethnographic and linguistic research by another school of thought, the group to which Adu Boahen belongs. This school claims that the Akan lived in Yorubaland in modern Nigeria, from where they crossed the Mono and Volta rivers and entered the Afram plains of modern Ghana. The Akan, according to this school of thought, later travelled northwards but turned again southwards to settle in the Pra-Offin basin. From this region, each Akan group migrated to settle in its present site. After conceding the Yoruba origins of the Akan, the same Adu Boahen (2000: 5) maintains, primarily on grounds of linguistics and culture, that since the Twi, Ga and Ewe languages spoken in Ghana are not spoken anywhere else in the world, they must have evolved in the country.

The present author has also made some observations and is convinced, to some extent, of the Middle Eastern origins of the Akan. As is well known, the Bible establishes the genealogy of certain families, clans and tribes in different chapters in several of the books in the Bible, including the five books of Moses, Chronicles, Judges and Kings. In this direction, the Bible mentions the names of the first ancestors of the families, clans and tribes concerned, and adds specifically in some verses (including Genesis 10: 2, 6, 15, 22; Numbers 3: 17–20) that the people whose names are mentioned “were the ancestors of the people who (or families or clans that) bear their names” at the time the authors were writing and, by extension, even today. Genesis 36: 20–30 talks about the “original inhabitants of the land of Edom” or “the descendants of Seir, a Horite”. As in other areas, here also, the names of some people are mentioned as “the ancestors of the clans of ...” Verse 27 reads “Ezer was the ancestor of the clans of Bilhan, Zaavan, and Akan.” Again, a critical observation of Akan culture reveals some similarities with the culture of not only the ancient Edomites, but also of the ancient Israelites who embarked on the Exodus from Egypt to Canaan. The earlier scholars who postulated the Middle Eastern origins of the Akan studied the cultures of the Akan and the ancient peoples of the Middle East and the traditions of origin of the Akan themselves and then, after careful observations and calculations, arrived at that conclusion. On the basis of all this, we are of the strong conviction that the first ancestor of the Akan of today is probably the man called Akan, especially as we observe today that some families, villages, towns, cities, institutions, etc. continue to bear the names of their original ancestors, settlers or founders.⁴ Evidently, several interpretations have been offered to account for the origins of the Akan. None of these theories has, however, been able to offer a sufficient explanation of the exact origins of the Akan, implying that the question of where the Akan of modern Ghana actually came from still remains unanswered.

In addition, W. Walton Claridge, in his *A History of the Gold Coast and Ashanti*, presents a genealogical table of the kings of Asante in his appendices under Appendix D at page 590 of the second volume of his work. On this genealogical table, he dates the accession of Asantehene Opoku Ware in 1731 and hence concludes that Opoku Ware’s predecessor, Osei Tutu I, reigned during the 1697–1731 period and was killed in a battle with the Akyem in the year 1731. In his introduction to the second edition of Claridge’s work, W.E.F. Ward (1964: viii), however, points out that Margaret Priestley and Ivor Wilks have shown that Opoku Ware succeeded in 1720 and not in 1731, that his accession was preceded by a short reign of civil war, and that the Asantehene who was killed by the Akyem was not Osei Tutu I but must have been an Asantehene who reigned from the death of Osei Tutu I in 1712 until his own disaster in 1717. Again, Claridge dates Asantehene Osei Yaw Akoto’s reign to the 1824–1838 period and that of Asantehene Kwaku Dua I to the 1838–1867 period. However, both Kofi Affrifah (2000: 35) and Adu Boahen (2000: 5) put the end of Osei Yaw Akoto’s reign and the beginning of Kwaku Dua I’s at 1834.

Take, again, the January 13, 1972 coup d’état in Ghana which ousted Prime Minister K.A. Busia and his Progress Party administration from power. Busia himself considered the coup as an ‘officers’ amenities coup’, carried out in self-interest by ‘the highest paid group in public service in Ghana’, but the coup plotters themselves regarded it as an act of national salvation (Goldsworthy, 1973: 8). We

⁴ The present author hopes to undertake some studies, “Is *Akan* the First Ancestor of the Akan?” and “African Images in the Bible”, which would throw more light on these issues. Meanwhile, readers should note that all the quotations referred to here were taken from *Good News Bible with Deuterocanonical Books*, Today’s English Version, 2002.

may also consider the varied accounts which different authors have offered in relation to the context in which Ghana's 1969 Aliens Compliance Order was implemented. Some literature on the subject presents conflicting views, influenced in their viewpoints often by their political proclivities and sometimes due to the apparent lack of detailed research into the topic. For instance, while it is held in some circles that the Busia government issued the Aliens Compliance Order mainly with xenophobic tendencies or on the instigation of some international financial bodies (Awoonor, 1990: 221), it is believed elsewhere that most policies of the Busia administration were a continuation of the policies of the National Liberation Council (NLC) and so the government's action was a continuation of a process started by the NLC or even the Nkrumah regime (Austin, 1976: 152). With regard to the manner in which the Order was implemented, some works maintain that it was harsh, while others argue otherwise. Observers are divided over the ramifications of the expulsion drive. There are those who believe that the effects could be measured more in adverse terms. Kofi Nyidevu Awoonor (1990: 221), for example, contends that the expulsion led to the virtual collapse of the economy. Ebow Mensah (1971: 25) maintains that Ghana lost more than it gained from the expulsion drive. Others argue that it rather enabled Ghanaians to recover the economy from the hands of immigrants. Mike Oquaye (1980: 6), for example, insists that in so far as the Order got rid of various categories of persons associated with smuggling and allied economic offences, Ghana should always be grateful for the bold move initiated by the Busia government. There is, thus, a conflict of opinions on matters relating to the objectives for which the Order was issued, how the implementation was done, and the effects on Ghana itself and on its foreign relations. The different views expressed by the different writers leave a significant gap in our knowledge and understanding of the specific context in which the Aliens Compliance Order was implemented.⁵

The conflicting and contradictory interpretations different historians and philosophers of history have given about the nature and general pattern of the course of history have also blurred our historical vision and flawed our understanding. The earlier philosophers of history generally postulated a cyclical view of history. They all agreed that history begins from a point and goes round and comes back to its starting point and repeats itself. The different scholars who espoused the cyclical view of history partitioned each full cycle into stages, but they never agreed on the number of stages and on the nature of the specific events that would take place in each age. They also never agreed on the number of years it would take for the cycle to come to an end and what exactly happens at the end of each cycle. They were also never able to provide convincing answers to questions such as whether the peoples in the first cycle would be the same people in all other cycles, and whether the people would suffer the same fate in each cycle, undertake the same activities, and think the same way in each cycle. Again, among the cyclical historians, one could distinguish those who believed in a periodic destruction followed by rebuilding; those who posited an organic law of rise and fall; and those who inferred the idea of eternal recurrence from laws of material necessity (Barzun and Graff, 1977: 162).

During the age of Herodotus and Thucydides also, there were two dominant conceptions of history, moral and political, respectively represented by the two early Greek historians. Herodotus had political and cultural interests when he was reconstructing the history of the Persian Wars. However, he wanted history to give great people "their due meed of glory"; for he believed that the lives of notable people and great actions have permanent value as moral teachings (Barzun and Graff, 1977: 45). Conversely, Thucydides wrote from a political point of view and so regarded the moralising intents of Herodotus irrelevant to his purpose. He was a warrior and a statesman and so he wrote from the point of view of the practice of politics. In Christendom, from Saint Augustine in the fifth century C.E. to Bossuet in the seventeenth, the providential theory of history, which interpreted historical events as the working out of a divine plan, was more popular. In the eighteenth century, Vico also maintained that the universal law of history is the cyclical development of the human mind through the divine, heroic and purely human stages. In the nineteenth century, Hegel came out with the dialectical development of freedom in history; Auguste Comte posited that three stages of intellectual

⁵ In fact, the expulsion drive was neither a total failure nor a complete success. For, there were some gains and some losses. It was the problems created by the conflicting accounts which compelled Adjei Adjepong, the present author, to carry out a thorough inquiry into the Aliens Compliance Order and the expulsion of the illegal immigrants with the view to comprehending and accounting for the origins, implementation and effects of the 1969 Ghanaian expulsion order in order to help fill the vacuum. For the details, see Adjepong, "Aliens Compliance Order".

development usher in positivist thought, with the triumph of science and a rationalist religion of humanity; and Karl Marx's view was that the dialectical movement is rooted in matter taking the form of economic production, and that successive class struggles usher in freedom and justice under anarchy. In the same century, Thomas Carlyle, ceasing on the space Hegel's theory had provided for great men, defended the Great-Man interpretation of history by glorifying great men like Oliver Cromwell of England, Frederick the Great of Prussia (Germany), and Napoleon and other key individuals in the French Revolution.

These varied interpretations have historically been very useful by way of bringing about a thorough review of some large periods and a breaking up and recasting of old interpretations. They have drawn attention to the importance of neglected classes of facts. However, no interpretation has adequately demonstrated the laws of history, and all of them have violated the basic canon of historiography by neglecting contrary evidence. This problem apart, the multiplicity of the interpretations alone poses some difficulties, including why are there numerous, and conflicting and contradictory interpretations about the same phenomenon; which of these explains the course and purpose of history better; and how could the various views be reconciled to build a grand theory? Clearly, the different angles from which historical events and concepts are perceived would eventually produce 'opposed histories', which may end up denying the reader the original representation of historical events. By the nature of science and the scientific method, this issue may be understood to some extent, but what appears quite unfathomable is the inability of historians themselves since time immemorial to agree on the nature, form and purpose of their study. On methods, for example, while colonialist historians rejected the oral traditions of African societies, nationalist and post-colonialist historians accepted these traditions as concrete evidence of past events. Even at present, some scholars trained in the Western tradition still do not consider oral accounts as genuine sources for the study of history.

What is more worrying is the different interpretations they have assigned history, what may be described as the politics of defining history. One would have expected people outside the history profession to have defined history differently, due ostensibly to their different perceptions and inadequate knowledge about what history is. However, almost every history book and every historian has a different definition for history, implying that historians are not agreed on the actual meaning of the concept and purpose of history. In other words, history has been defined differently, depending upon the contexts in which it is placed and described as well as on the use to which people put it. To different historians, history is 'what happened in the past' or the 'past' itself; as research; as a record of 'what happened' through research; as a written account of the past; as a body of knowledge for the scientific reconstruction of the past; and as a means of understanding the past, present and future (see Adjepong, 2013(a): 1–16). In fact, some historians have conceded that history is not easy to define. Peter Gay and Gerald J. Cavanaugh (1972: ix), for example, have stressed that history is easier to write than to define. Admittedly, history is one of the hardest fields of serious study and literary effort to be assigned a precise definition. Meanwhile, this could not be an excuse for their inability to fashion a definition that is broad enough to capture the nature, processes and purpose of history to help students and general readers know what actually history is and what historians do. If historians themselves are not agreed on the definition of their own discipline, then it implies that they disagree also on what they do, how they do it, and the value of their products. It is then not surprising that they offer conflicting and differing interpretations of historical events. Some of the wrong interpretations, as illustrated by colonial historiography, are sometimes the result of distortion of facts. In the reverse, wrong interpretations distort the facts of history.

1.3. Distortion of Historical Facts

Millions and millions of words have been written about my family, collectively and individually, and if I were to make a guess about the contents of this mountain of print, I would think that most of it has, at best, been flawed by inaccuracies, misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and the worst has been mendacious and deceitful or even totally untrue stories that sound like pulp fiction and are often confused with history (Kennedy, 1974: 1).

As pointed out already, closely connected to the issue of conflicting interpretations of historical events is the deliberate parody of the facts of the past due to prejudice, misunderstanding and other associated factors. In a telephone interview with the author on May 21, 2015, Boadan Farouk, a graduate in history, stated categorically that "One problem associated with history is the distortion of

facts by some historians. Some people fail to give accurate accounts in history, and I think that is a big problem.” Fernand Braudel (cited in “Historical Quotes”, retrieved July 29, 2012) maintains that people falsify history, even when it is their personal history, unconsciously or deliberately to realise some set objectives. Thomas G. Paterson (1984: 1) also has stressed that no historical writing is free from the personal bias of the author. Lamenting on the inadequate recognition given to all the *Big Six*, the ringleaders of Ghana’s independence struggle, Akua Adutwumwaa Mrosa (*Daily Graphic*, 2007, February 6: 9) has also pointed out that the history of Ghana, as a matter of fact, has been greatly distorted. On their part, Marvin Perry, Joseph R. Peden and Theodore H. Von Laue (2003: xvii) have questioned whether it is possible to write history without being influenced by one’s own particular viewpoint and personal biases. This is the reason why Mark Twain (cited in “Historical Quotes”, retrieved July 29, 2012) has observed that “The very ink with which all history is written is merely fluid prejudice.”

Of course, distortion of history, when taken in a historical context, is certainly not a new or recent phenomenon; it is as old as history itself. As Spengler and Yockey, and many others maintain, there is no definite border and never has been between history-as-fact and history-as-myth (Carto, “On the Uses of History”, retrieved May 16, 2012). Distortion of facts is sometimes the result of problems associated with the historical documents consulted for data. In his *The Akyem Factor in Ghana’s History 1700 – 1875*, Kofi Affrifah (2000: 3) has intimated that his sparing use of oral tradition in this study was not due so much to his “distrust of oral tradition as lacking worthy evidence” as to the fact that “truth is sometimes deliberately and easily distorted to suit the interest of the narrator, or inadvertently glossed over.” In view of this, “I have relied more on documentary than [oral] traditional evidence” (p. 4), he states. As is clear in Affrifah’s words, many people tend to believe that everything written is authentic. This view is wrong; written documents are the products of humans who, by nature, are not totally immune from personal prejudices and biases as a result of some complexes. Political control to twist facts, the risk of wrong assumptions and the application of wrong theories in the interpretation of historical phenomena, and many other factors could also lead to distortion of historical facts. Historical documents are, therefore, not free from both deliberate and accidental limitations. Mark Osgatharp (“Limitations of Historical Study”, retrieved July 29, 2012) has stressed that

It is virtually impossible for a human being to rise above his biases when expounding or writing about any given subject. Even if one historian might, he has no guarantee that his sources wrote with an unbiased pen. Therefore the whole historical record is suspect.

In saying this, Osgatharp is highlighting the problem of documentary infallibility.⁶ In fact, all historical documents provide a wide range of valuable information to the historian in diverse forms and degrees. However, each has some limitations. In other words, no historical document for the study of the past is infallible. Consequently, no single source can adequately supply information about the past. All documents, irrespective of their form, are the work of humans, and naturally, no human can ever be free from bias, exaggeration, distortion and errors. When counselling a friend, E.T. Lawrence of Arabia, a soldier-scholar, insisted that historical documents are liars because no one has ever tried to write down the entire truth of any action in which he has been engaged (Barzun and Graff, 1977: 41).

⁶In contemporary historical practice, the term document is used extensively and in several senses. Historians use the term *document* to refer, first, to a written testimony of historical information. Secondly, *document* is sometimes used to refer to only official or state records like treaties signed between nations, the laws of a country, grants and charters given to companies, minutes of cabinet meetings, and suchlike. In the third place, *document* can be used to mean artifacts, archaeological remains, such as pottery, coins, buildings and even paintings. In the fourth, and the most important fashion, many historians use the term *documents* in a comprehensive way to signify any process of proof based upon any kind of testimony, whether written or oral, archaeological or pictorial, if that testimony is regarded as a source of information. *Document*, therefore, can be used to refer to any written material, whether official or unofficial, and objects such as arms, coins, buildings, stamps, pottery, sculpture and paintings, all of which serve as proofs of historical events. See Daniel F. McCall, *Africa in Time-Perspective: A Discussion of Historical Reconstruction from Unwritten Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 5.

Practically, there could hardly be any outright objection to these criticisms. For one thing, the differences among historians in terms of professionalism and experience seem to stress the need on the part of consumers of historical works to beware of likely biases and prejudices, distortions of facts, the presentation of uncritical evidence, and so forth in historical works. For, these are evidence that there can be bad historians and poor historical studies, just as there are good historians and useful historical studies. Bad history obviously appears when historians allow their prejudice and personal feelings to get the better part of them. Some historical works are highly biased in favour of certain groups and against others. This usually happens when history is reconstructed from the point of view of only one or some of the participants or competitors, usually the 'victors', in a hostile encounter, and not from the accounts of all the parties involved in the event, thereby presenting a one-sided or a partial version of the facts. In this case, some of the historical facts are, either intentionally or unknowingly, ignored. A model example is the biased historical information that has come down to us about the African past from Western scholars. As Ivor Wilks (1996: 7) shows, the Whiggish approach colonial historiography adopted towards African history was only sustained by a quite extraordinary determination to ignore some facts. In fact, following its failure to conquer Africa at the very beginning of the contact in the fifteenth century, Europe resorted, in the subsequent centuries, to the gross misrepresentation of Africa out of an economic need to rationalise and even justify slavery and colonialism (Howe, 1958: 16). Colonial historians, anthropologists and their collaborators worked assiduously, pouring gallons of ink on piles of papers, in an attempt to propagate falsehood about Africa and its people. They used ethnocentric theories of cultural evolution to justify the expansion of their empires into Africa. Again, they hierarchically arranged the human races, with Europeans at the pinnacle and Black Africans at the bottom. They described Africans as primitive, barbaric, savages, and carnivorous. Africa was even denied of having any history and civilisation of its own. Lord Lugard (1965: 1–2), for example, informed the world that "... in Western Africa ... or any other part of tropical Africa, from the frontiers of Egypt to the Zambezi, there are no traces of antecedent civilisations – no monuments or buried cities – like those of the prehistoric civilisations of Asia and South America." Lugard further maintained that "Unlike the ancient civilizations of Asia and South America, the former inhabitants of Africa have left no monuments and no records other than rude drawings on rocks like those of Neolithic man" (p. 66). These arguments were so clearly based on wild generalisations from data taken out of context that they could readily be dismissed as propaganda. In essence, all these were fabrications, a deliberate attempt to distort the historical record in the interest of sustaining colonial rule (Wilks, 1996: 4). Many imperialist historians of Africa, therefore, wrote bad history because of their prejudice and personal feelings towards Africa and Africans, and the desire to rationalise European imperialism.

Another classic instance of biased history is A.L. Rowse's (1946: 7–11) eulogy of the British Empire and his awful descriptions of Germans and their history from the era of Frederick the Great to the Second World War. In his *The Use of History*, Rowse saw the British empire, which was established through the loss of the lives of many subject peoples, egregious exploitation of the natural and human resources of colonial territories, and the degradation of the social and political systems of colonial peoples, as a necessity for British survival when he describes it as "the Empire without which we cannot exist" (p. 11). He, however, considered the Germans' attempts at establishing a similar empire as evil-driven. He said of the Germans,

The worst thing that their history reveals, worse than their criminal brutality, their stupidity and insensibility, their sycophancy and self-pity, is their utter lack of any sense of responsibility for what they do – for that is what leads to all the rest. When I lived in Germany after the last war [World War II], ... at a time when we [the British] in this country were already beginning to sit superfluously in a white sheet for a responsibility that was not ours – I never heard one word of regret for the war they had precipitated upon the world, with untold losses in men's lives. All that they regretted was that they had lost it: they were incapable of seeing anything beyond that. And I gather from all that I hear and read, and from what I know of them, that even after this second war, they have still not learnt the simple lesson – that war is not a good thing (p. 7).

Rowse angrily maintained that the absence of a sense of responsibility, which he considered to be the necessary foundation of any civic sense, run right through German life from top to bottom and reflected their history. He described the Germans as a people "of brutal strength, but with no moral

courage” (p. 8). He stressed that these traits always made the Germans susceptible to any masters who were prepared to drive them forward along the road of aggression to power, because, he alleged, power was what Germans worshipped and aggression was the method. He insisted that aggression was what always paid in German history, and that the careers of Frederick the Great and Otto von Bismarck, the two great heroes of German politics, were nothing but long records of successful aggression (p. 8). After carefully examining these statements, one could state without doubt that Rowse was absolutely prejudiced against Germany and, for that reason, twisted the facts of German history. That Germany was highly blamable for the outbreak of the Second World War is not really doubted, but to make such bold generalisations and draw these hasty conclusions about the attitude of all Germans and describe their history as nothing but a ‘recordful’ of aggression and brutality is, indeed, a gross exaggeration. The question that we need to ask is whether Rowse would have described the Germans as such if he were a German himself, and whether a German historian would have written these same words about Germany. Again, would Rowse have said the same things had the Germans and their allies, the Axis Powers, won the Second World War? Clearly, whoever reads these statements and takes them to be a true description of Germany, without any critical assessment, would only be consuming a highly prejudiced and grossly distorted history.

Again, in some past societies, to speak or write critically of rulers could amount to conviction of treason and death. No one could criticise the government even when evidence of gross abuse of human rights abounded. During the era of the Reign of Terror in the course of the French Revolution, for example, people who opposed compulsory military service and the religious settlement, or the treatment of the Catholic Church and the clergy, were regarded as opponents of the revolution and were arrested in accordance with the Law of Suspects, tried by the Revolutionary Tribunal and subsequently executed on the guillotine. As such, in many ways, what was left as the ‘official record’ of events was often influenced by one’s desire to avoid exile or execution. Reports by government officials concerning abuse of power would no doubt be a denial of such allegations even when there was evidence pointing to the fact. Historical accounts from regimes that did not tolerate freedom of speech could hardly be accepted as ‘truth’ in view of the fact that there was no voice to alternatives.⁷ In dictatorships, for instance, ruthless censorship allowed only the state-approved version of events to be made public, and much of what actually happened remained secret if it proved hurtful to the ruling elite. Consider, for instance, what happened to Russia under Nicholas I (1825–1855). There was strict censorship of the press and foreign books and other reading materials were not allowed to enter Russia. Textbooks were strictly censored to remove words which carried ideas of liberalism, democracy, union, etc. Russians were also not allowed to travel abroad under the pretext that they would be influenced by foreign ideas. Included in this category are the developments that took place in communist Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin, in Mexico under Porfirio Diaz (17–1810), and in Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler’s leadership. In Diaz’s case, editors who criticised the government were either imprisoned or killed secretly by the secret police. In apartheid South Africa, the white minority government also tried severally to actively corrupt historical facts. Mary Benson (1966: 11–12) has lamented over this situation in her *South Africa: The Struggle for a Birthright*. She decries that

In Court records, in Press reporting of political trials, on which future historians must rely to give a representative picture of this confuse and wretched period, there are recorded allegations blatantly nonsensical to anyone knowing the facts. For instance, A.N.C. may be treated as interchangeable; Sobukwe is alleged to ‘be’ Poqo or to have initiated the Paarl riots which happened long after he had been imprisoned; A.N.C. stay-at-homes under Lutuli are said to have been violent, while the M Plan, conceived by Mandela in 1952 for street to street organizing of non-violent resistance, is declared a ‘sabotage’ plan. Many such ‘facts’ go unchallenged.

Obviously the powers that be have several advantages in promoting their versions of events, even if they do not erase their enemies completely from existence. They often have control over the churches, the courts and schools. This often gives them nearly total control over the moulding of consciousness

⁷In all cases of intolerant and autocratic regimes, historical records were twisted to favour the regimes in power. As a result, unless these records are critically examined against the circumstances of the times and verified from other sources, they can never be accepted as genuine historical documents.

and discourse over the ruled. They use their political dominance to suppress a defeated adversary's version of historical events in favour of their own propaganda, which might go so far as historical revisionism, rewriting the historical record. Dictators like Stalin, Hitler and Mao, for example, rewrote history without considering the authenticity of what was written, but solely considering the significance of what was written in strengthening support for their regimes (Wilks, 1996: 4). Nations adopting such an approach would likely fashion a "universal" theory of history to support their aims, with a teleological and deterministic philosophy of history used to justify the inevitableness and rightness of their victories. This is the reason why Voltaire (cited in "Historical Quotes", retrieved July 29, 2012) has argued that history can be well written only in a free country. But even under liberal democracies, such as those practised by the West, there are indications of propaganda history. The concentration of media into ever fewer hands has given the captains of major media and the public relations industry increased control over the parameters of public discourse which form the boundaries of issues usually discussed in classrooms, and even with friends and co-workers on matters such as war and politics. Essentially, therefore, history can have propaganda tendencies. Such histories would definitely not be a true reflection of reality. It only affirms the aphorism that 'he who controls the present controls the past', as in all these and other similar cases, the historical scribes were those in control of the present. In short, some historical accounts may merely serve propaganda purposes. This is why the Indian statesman, Jawaharlal Nehru (cited in Jay, 2007: 285), has pointed out that history is almost always written by the victors and conquerors and, thus, gives only their viewpoint.

In addition, uncompromising commitment to certain instrumental values, such as specific organisations, leaders, social systems, religions, or techniques, create powerful pressures for hiding or distorting historical facts in order to help achieve a targeted objective. The case of British historian David Irving, author of numerous books on World War II, is a typical example in this direction. Irving's undisguised admiration for Hitler and antipathy for Jews led him to minimise and disguise atrocities of the Third Reich (Perry, Peden and Laue, 2003: xvii). Irving maintained, when addressing neo-Nazi audiences in several lands, that there were no gas chambers and so the Holocaust was a major fraud. In his 2001 work, *Lying about Hitler: History, Holocaust and the David Irving Trial*, Richard J. Evans, a specialist in modern German history with a broad background in archival research, exposed how Irving, in his attempt to whitewash Hitler, misquoted sources, misrepresented data, skewed documents, and ignored or deliberately suppressed material when it run counter to his arguments (Perry, Peden and Laue, 2003: xvii). In the same way, Thies Christophersen, a former SS guard at the notorious Nazi death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, hid the truth about Nazi atrocities in the Second World War. In *The Auschwitz Lie* (1973), Christophersen denied the existence of gas chambers and mass killing in the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp and insisted that the camp was rather a sort of resort where prisoners, after work, could swim, listen to music in their rooms, or visit a brothel (Perry, Peden and Laue, 2003: xvii). Years later, however, Christophersen was captured on a videotape confessing that he lied deliberately about the gas chambers because of loyalty to the SS and the desire to protect the honour of Germany (Perry, Peden and Laue, 2003: xvii). This is what Bob Corbett ("More on History and Silencing the Past: The Limitations of the Particular Historian" (1999), retrieved January 23, 2013) has described as silencing the past, that is, the situation where a historian approaches his study with a conscious ideological view which influences him to choose certain sources and silence others, and, thus, creates a picture of the past which flows from limited data, when he is very much aware of the limits of that data.

Biography is one theme in history which often suffers from such distortions. Sigmund Freud (cited in Flexner, 1965: 3) has described how recurring "infantile phantasies" concerning their own fathers affect biographies thus:

They obliterate the individual features of their subject's physiognomy; they smooth over the traces of his life's struggles with internal and external resistances, and they tolerate in him no vestige of human weakness and imperfection. Thus, they present us with what is in fact a cold, strange, ideal figure, instead of a human being to whom we might feel ourselves distantly related.

Freud's description perfectly fits the somewhat repellent "marble image" of George Washington, invented by Parson Weems, which, according to James Thomas Flexner (1965: 3), has displaced Washington's true identity in American history. As Flexner emphasises, Washington, who actually

lived, has been transmuted in the group memory of his people into an impersonal “Father of Our Country” (p. 3). When the painter Grant Wood illustrated the ridiculous story Parson Weems invented of Washington, his little hatchet, and the cherry tree, Wood put on the neck of the boyish figure who “cannot tell a lie” a jowled, toothless head copied from a Gilbert Stuart portrait of Washington as an exhausted old man. Shortly after Washington’s death, Wood filled with invented goody-goody anecdotes the vacuum created by the unwillingness of Americans to accept the idea that Washington was ever really young. Flexner reveals that although modern sophisticates smile at Weems, they have too often revived the father image of Washington in a purer form, instead of turning to the factual record (p. 4). In essence, Gilbert Stuart’s portraits of the tired, aged Washington remain the favourite effigies of Washington despite the existence of even better works of art that show the leader as a virile man, imbued with both sweetness and animal power. Flexner has considered the distortions of the image of Washington as “a tragedy for Washington’s reputation”, because though conscientious and able scholars have made almost all the facts available, few Americans have any clear idea of how Washington developed and of what kind of man he actually turned out to be (p. 4).

Further, an unyielding dedication to his own country may cause the historian to glide over the elements of brutality in their history. The past offers many examples of this situation. During the First and Second World Wars, historians were among those whose services were sought to help in the spread of propaganda against enemy countries, although their countries were also engaged in similar atrocities. Rigid devotion to Stalin, for example, led to the fabrication of history in the Soviet Union about the purges and other issues, and a shift in instrumental gods led to counter-fabrication after 1956 (Zinn, 1970: 22). During the Cold War, historians and other social scientists who were employed and sponsored by the USA government to carry out research also distorted facts by assuming that American foreign policy at the time was identical with peace and freedom. They accepted without question the United States government’s claim that the Soviet Union intended to invade Western Europe, which turned out to be incorrect (Zinn, 1970: 22).

A critical examination of many history books on Ghana written by indigenous authors would also reveal many instances of biases and distortions of historical facts as a result of ethnicity, political affiliations, economic interests, cultural perspectives, religious orientation, etc. A possible consequence of this trend is the mindless acceptance of the partial views and conclusions of works readers access. Moreover, as people’s ideas about the past constitute an intrinsic part of the present situation, many contemporary researchers are likely to be engaged in debates that may lead to conflicts as they come to possess different documents advancing conflicting claims about the past. Even where outright conflicts are avoided, the encouragement of ultranationalism and the generation of xenophobia cannot be completely ruled out as some people often twist facts about the past in order to incite some individuals, groups of people and whole nations against others.

Aside wittingly twisting facts to achieve some set objectives, the historian also suffers from the problem of ‘language barrier’ in his efforts to reconstruct and give an approximate image of the past. One of the greatest problems of historical exegesis is the faulty assumption that words have inherent meanings. No word means anything other than what somebody used it to mean, and there is no guarantee that any historical record uses words in their common usage, if it can even be said that there is any such thing as “common” usage of words. As language constantly changes, a word that “means” one thing today may “mean” a totally different thing tomorrow. Likewise, a word that “means” one thing in one person’s mouth may mean something else in another person’s mouth, even today. Thus an English historian accused the English queen, Catherine of Aragon, of being still loyal to her nephew Charles V because she ended a letter to him in Spanish with the words, before her signature, ‘who kisses your hand’. He did not know that this is still, as it was then, an ordinary formula for ending a letter (Clark, 1967: xxviii). As a result, the words and statements in the historical documents, on which historians depend for the reconstruction of the past, may not mean what researchers take them to mean. A wrong use or meaning of words can easily distort historical statements and the events they describe or explain. Even the borrowing of technical terms from special branches of knowledge without observing their definitions or redefining them can lead to distortion of facts.

Another factor that can easily distort history is the tendency to explain historical events in terms of the theories current at the time of writing. This is what is referred to as presentism. It is the habit of reading into the past our own modern ideas and intentions. In this process, the historian, or the

scholar, plants his own values, or those which he thinks belong to his own time, in the minds of the people of the past, and approves of their achievements or judges their shortcomings according to these present-day standards. Actually, it is not wholly wrong to explain historical events in the context of present theories. Marxist historians, for example, can explain in the context of economic materialism peasant revolts that occurred many years before the invention of the Marxist conception of history. W. Arthur Lewis (1965: 15) shows that in reality some economic historians explain past economic events in terms of the economic theories current at the time of writing. It should be noted, however, that this practice has the tendency to distort historical reality because in most cases phenomena of different periods are not really identical, and so would past systems of thought not be identical with those current at the present time. For example, we observe clearly that the writing theory of history which was current and applicable to Western historiography led to a great distortion of the history of Africa when Eurocentric scholars applied it in their historical writing about Africa. Here, Western scholars were using ideas and notions in their present culture to judge the African past, and since the variable, writing, of the theory conflicted with the facts of the phenomenon it attempted to explain, both in time and in space, the European writing theory of history could neither give a good account of African unhistoricity nor historicity. Admittedly, explaining historical events in terms of current theories certainly can lead to the most insidious form of the falsification of history, because it can lead the historian to overlook or minimise ideas engrossing and potent in the thought of earlier generations. In view of this, it is not advisable to extrapolate the findings of current studies back into the past and to assume that the same patterns must necessarily have prevailed then (Thernstrom, 1972: 125). This is probably the reason why Leopold von Ranke advocated an assembling and a presentation of facts without interpretation, and the avoidance of the use of theory in the reconstruction of the past (see Adjepong, 2013(b): 1–18).

Aside from the factors raised so far, possession of pre-conceived ideas, training and professionalism, misquoting of original sources, attempts to satisfy the taste of readership, and misunderstanding of facts can all lead to distortion of historical facts, and thereby deny readers of a good understanding of the past. Indeed, there are people who argue that because all history rests on ‘subjective impressions’, all historical accounts are equally biased and worthless (Barzun and Graff, 1977: 139). To such people, therefore, history is like a distorting mirror, a real reflection but all twisted.

1.4. Inadequate Understanding of the Past

Unfortunately ... we do not know exactly how the conversion of the small Soninke chiefdom into the empire of Ghana was accomplished (Boahen, with Ade Ajayi and Tidy, 2004: 20).

For several reasons, it has been maintained that while history itself is hundred percent complete and hundred percent accurate, the historical record⁸ is unable to convey an accurate knowledge and understanding of the past (Osgatharp, “Limitations of Historical Study”, retrieved June 29, 2012). In other words, historical studies cannot help us to gain a full knowledge and understanding of the past because the past is something outside our personal experience, and the possibility of first-hand observation of past events is forever excluded. Thus, only a minute fraction of the whole of the past can ever be known. There are, therefore, several historical questions which have never been adequately answered. For instance, historians have not been able to confirm the exact origins of some peoples, including the Akan peoples of Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire, and the Ewe of Ghana, Togo and Benin. The conflicting and contradictory interpretations that have been offered on these issues usually confuse many people. Again, some historical studies are unable to supply the names of heroes or heroines or those of other significant historical figures. It is difficult, for example, for any historian of Ghana to give the list of names of kings who ruled in any particular Ghanaian society in a chronological or sequential order. Sometimes, historians produce limited accounts of the makers of tools and objects. In other cases, they cannot supply adequate information about the languages spoken by the members of some past societies, their socio-political organisation, and their complexion. In effect, the same reservations S. Ademola Ajayi (2005: 28) has expressed about archaeologists in connection with the Ife Art apply also to historians. Ajayi maintains that there are certain vital

⁸ Some people often confuse the historical record with history itself, but the two are not the same. History itself is the sum total of all events that actually occurred in the past. The historical record is the sum total of humans’ attempts to preserve history, both in oral and written forms.

information which archaeologists have not been able to supply. His concerns are: who were the artists; were they the ancestors of the present inhabitants of Ife or did they belong to quite another people; when and precisely where did the art flourish; and if at Ife itself, did it precede or follow the establishment of the dynasty of Oduduwa? Essentially, some historical researches are not able to give concrete proofs of the specific nature of some past phenomena due to the inability of the existing documents to make the necessary facts available.

This draws our attention to the limitations of the documents consulted. Certainly, the historian's knowledge of the past is limited to the amount of information that could be derived from the documents at his disposal.⁹ As a result, the historian only sees certain aspects of the past. Based on what he observes from the documents, he can make extrapolations. He, however, can never know more than what the documents available have preserved for him. Even in many cases, primary documents are not available altogether, making it difficult to have concrete evidence on which to base bold and definite historical statements and arguments. This is what Adu Boahen (1964: vii) means when he states that

Until the masses of Arabic material being collected in Nigeria have been organized and made available to scholars, any attempt at a detailed study of [the] social, economic and political conditions in the Sahara and western Sudan in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries will be premature.

For example, due mainly to the non-availability of adequate information, historians do not know much about the various peoples who up to the first half of the fifteenth century inhabited the territory now called modern Ghana. Other significant problems associated with the documents also can lead the historian to commit some fundamental mistakes which may, in turn, lead to the presentation of a distorted image of the past and, thus, offer an inadequate understanding of the past. Those who lived in the past were humans like ourselves, and this is what makes it possible for the historian to describe historical events in their respective contexts. However, since they were different from us, we can never completely enter into their mentality to grasp their motivations. The historian cannot rethink or re-enact exactly or in full the thoughts of historical agents. He cannot, for instance, rethink precisely the thoughts of a ruler when such a person was formulating a policy or making up a law. He cannot rethink the exact thoughts of the leaders of the Progress Party administration of Ghana when they were issuing the Aliens Compliance Order on November 18, 1969. The historian cannot also put himself completely in the mind of a general who viewed a certain military situation and then reconstruct that situation in exactly the same way as thought by the general, especially if the historian has no knowledge about military strategy. A historian of Ghana cannot rethink exactly what Kwame Nkrumah and his ministers thought when they were drawing up the terms of the Preventive Detention Act or the terms of the Avoidance of Discrimination Act, both in 1958. The historian can only assume or deduce the thoughts of historical personalities from the evidence presented to him, but he can never have access to the minds of historical figures to know what exactly motivated their thoughts and actions.

The historian can come close to the reality, but he can never provide a full and an exact image of the past. To be able to accurately interpret events of the past, causal relationships must first be sought for and established, but, this is often a difficult task to fully accomplish. While history may record what happened, it is not often able to record exactly why it happened. The available records may show what some of the people who lived at the time of the event considered to be the cause. In many cases, however, few contemporaries would even be aware that such events were taking place, and most of the recorded views as to why they were occurring have to be treated with reserve. It would, therefore, be left to the historian to evaluate and interpret the facts he is able to gather, and whatever fact he is able to establish would be his opinion of what happened, and of why it happened. This opinion of why the event occurred is usually not more than a reflection of that particular historian's personal theories of social causation, which determines the facts he selects as important. It is obvious then that in

⁹In this direction, Jan Vansina has compared the historian to someone whose only way of viewing a landscape is by looking at photographs, which are only able to reveal only what the camera is able to capture. See his *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, translated by H.M. Wright (Penguin University Books, 1973), p. 141.

appealing to facts in history, the historian appeals to facts in quite a different sense from that in which the natural scientist appeals to facts. This is one important reason why many people argue that history is not a science, and historians, for that matter, are not scientists.

At this point, it is clear that history, by its nature, cannot offer a total knowledge and understanding of the past, irrespective of the amount of effort and energy devoted towards the study of history. It is equally obvious that selection of historical facts and emphasis of some historical themes and the total neglect of others, presentation of conflicting interpretations of historical events, and distortion of historical facts, whether inadvertently or intentionally, have contributed, individually and collectively, to the inability of history to offer the kind of knowledge and understanding that we so much expect from the study of the past. Mention has been made of the lack of historical records on some historical problems and the limitations associated with the available ones. Here, we only want to remind readers that no historical study can ever provide total knowledge and understanding of the issues it handles. The fact that there is a historical work on the origins, implementation and effects of Ghana's 1969 Aliens Compliance Order does not imply that the work has answered all the questions we ask, or would want to ask, about the Aliens Compliance Order and the expulsion exercise that resulted from the measure. Similarly, the present study can never claim to have provided a complete knowledge and understanding of the limitations of history. The study has not even the right to claim that it has been able to give a comprehensive idea of all the problems associated with selectiveness, conflicting interpretations, distortion of facts, and incomplete knowledge and understanding of the past, the very factors to which it has directed its focus, and could, therefore, claim to have done an in-depth study of. The key point to note here is that the knowledge provided on any historical problem relates only to the area on which material was selected. Not all the raw materials, the facts or data, collected end up getting selection. In football, almost every football club in the world has more than eleven players. During competitive matches, however, each team presents only eleven players on the pitch at a time. Reserved players are kept on the bench, but some of them never get the chance to play. Even the coming-on of a reserved player implies the automatic going-out of one of the eleven players already on the field. It is the same situation in historical studies, although not as strictly as in football, where the accepted rules require only eleven players at each particular time. In short, historical works provide historical knowledge and understanding solely on aspects of events on which material is included in the selection and interpretation. Aspects on which facts are not selected remain gaps, blank spaces, in our knowledge and understanding of the past. Considering all this, some people have described history as a vast network of incomplete stories upon which perspectives, slightly clearer than the confusions of life, are imposed for convenience only (Barzun and Graff, 1977: 158).

2. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The paper sought to examine the inability of historical studies to provide a full knowledge, and offer an adequate understanding, of the past primarily as a result of their discriminatory nature in terms of selecting and laying emphasis on some historical developments and figures, and also in terms of selecting some historical raw materials on particular topics and neglecting others; offering of conflicting interpretations of historical phenomena; and the distortion of historical facts due to both intentional and accidental factors. These shortcomings detract so much from the claims of historians of the significance of history to the development of the contemporary world. These limitations, if not appropriately controlled, could be very detrimental to the study and practice of history and to the development of our societies. There is, thus, the need to condemn these in favour of more scientific analysis of the past because history helps us to understand the present, and can become, in dedicated hands, an instrument of action. It must be noted, however, that selection as a practice, is common to all sciences. As Fletcher G. Watson (1962: 198) states, "In every field of study, and especially in science, the material that might be considered is vast. Selection is [therefore] always necessary" Raymond Aron (1959: 157) reinforces this view by pointing out that no science is concerned with total reality; each has its own principle of selection, seeking to isolate that which is worth examining or that which serves to explain what is worth examining. Aron even emphasises variations in the natural scientist's principle of selection from the era of Aristotle to Einstein's generation (p. 157). W. Warwick Sawyer (1962: 223) also stresses that the mathematics teacher selects material that creates in students the desire to learn; the engineer selects material that can be used; and the pure mathematician selects material that can be systematically developed (p. 223). Ritchie P. Lowly and Robert P. Rankin (1972: xi) also admit that in their *Sociology: Social Science and Social Concern*, they selected and chose material based on their special interests and experience. Whatever the size of the sample

selected for any study, it is still a selection from the available facts, meaning that the characteristics or behaviour of some members of the population from which the sample is drawn are never considered. Fletcher G. Watson (1962: 201) maintains that scientists gather, judge and organise data; they create and select large ideas, or concepts, as adequate and consistent explanations for the available facts. Evidently, explanations and generalisations in the natural sciences are often based on facts selected from all the available data. Meanwhile, the interpretations and theories formulated from the selected facts are accepted and applied much without many questions.

In view of this, selection in historical reconstruction can also never be avoided. The fact is that no historian can study the whole of history, in the senses of all the significant events of the past and all the divisions or themes in history as a body of knowledge. The past as a whole is too broad to be covered by one person and history as a subject is too broad for one person to specialise in all sub-areas. Life is also too short for any one particular person to master so many extensive disciplines. It is, thus, necessary that labour is divided so that humans choose interested fields for themselves, and, without allowing themselves to be imprisoned in them forever, dwell there for preference. In their activities in their chosen areas also, every historian necessarily selects topics that interest him for emphasis. Actually, all human knowledge combined, past, present, and future, is nothing compared to what we will never know (Tsiolkovsky, cited in Szasz, "Historical Quotations", retrieved June 7, 2013). By virtue of this, history is, in reality, a subset of the past. It is a representation of the past in concepts (Mises, 1991: 105); for the past actually happened but history is only what has been recorded about the past. Even the collaborative efforts of all historians can never lead to a study of the whole of the past, or the total significant past. Again, it is plainly impossible to cover in detail all aspects of an event or include all the data or raw materials, the evidence, the historian gathers in his interpretation. Indeed, to attempt to cover every aspect of an event would require the inclusion of a great deal of information that would often be impossible for readers who have not been trained in some disciplines or topics to understand. For this reason, a line always has to be drawn on what to include and what to leave out. Therefore, the historian has to select what to examine from a data set that is usually too big to read item by item, and too badly organised to sample systematically by some transparent criteria. The process of selecting and abstracting from the available evidence is a necessary one not only in historical studies but in all human studies.

Again, the need to choose from among the available facts in order to explain events points to the truth that history must present a pattern and an interpretation to the mind, without which the accumulation of names and events is unintelligible and useless. And in this, there are many ways to interpret events, and there are several factors which cause people to interpret events in one way or the other. One's past experiences, type of assumptions, expectations, knowledge, personal mood, and even physiological factors such as taste, odour, temperature, sex,¹⁰ vision, hearing, health, fatigue, age, hunger, height, weight and personal daily cycles caused by hormonal cycles or physiological changes in the body, all influence, in one way or another, the interpretations we give to events (Abnory, 2003: 42–47). And so as there are many historians of different ideological orientations, so shall there be many volumes of interpretations of many historical events, some of which may end up misrepresenting the past and confusing readers. As Jan Vansina (1973: 141) captures it, "every photograph of the past has been made with a special kind of camera, fitted with a lens that is suitable for a given situation."

Further, total objectivity is sometimes very difficult to achieve; the historian is an ordinary human being and his own point of view is bound to show in anything he writes. However, he can try to be objective. Of course, many historians try to maintain as objective a view as possible not only in listing and describing important historical events, but also in offering comments and explanations which help their readers towards a fuller understanding of these events. They are aware that a presentation of an exaggerated view of the past would definitely present a diminished view of the present, and totally obscure the future. According to Leo XIII (cited in "Historical Quotes", retrieved July 29, 2012), 'the first law of history is to dread uttering a falsehood; the next is not to fear stating the truth; lastly, the historian's writings should be open to no suspicion of partiality or animosity.' Thus, most historical researchers are very much aware of their social responsibilities and, hence, remain faithful to their sources, and make no attempt to contradict or distort them by willful omission, factual falsification, or

¹⁰ Studies have shown that even simple sentences written in the same language are interpreted differently by men and women. See John Boakye, "Use Fight as Language of Love", in *The Mirror* (June 1, 2013), p. 22.

contextual misrepresentation. Professor Albert Kwadwo Adu Boahen, for example, was one particular historian, and politician, who meticulously insulated his work against partisan bias. It is recorded that “His objective analysis of history sometimes upset his political allies. He gave credit where credit was due, even when the lauded came from opposing political camp” (‘Biography of the Late Professor Albert Kwadwo Adu Boahen’, 2006: 9). Lord Acton is also reported to have been one of the key political opponents of Thomas Babington Macaulay, and yet Acton, although repelled by the faults of Macaulay, described Macaulay as one of the greatest writers and masters (Barzun and Graff, 1977: 153). Here are historians considering themselves as searchers after truth, approaching their studies with objective minds, and making fair assessment of their opponents, without distorting the facts. It is, therefore, not true that ‘the very ink with which all history is written is merely fluid prejudice’, as Mark Twain has asserted (“Historical Quotes”, retrieved July 29, 2012). For though errors may always creep into historical works, we cannot say that historians are never right. History is wrong on a number of points; yet, it is right on several other issues. As John Sparrow maintains, every lawyer knows that honest and truthful witnesses may contradict themselves, particularly on questions concerning their own and others’ motives and states of mind, without thereby forfeiting credibility (Barzun and Graff, 1977: 130). In the same way, historical works may produce conflicting accounts of events, without necessarily losing credibility. Naturally, every person is necessarily subjective, and that is why we have varieties of human judgements on so many issues.

Moreover, Fritz Machlup, while accepting similarities in all scientific undertakings, has drawn our attention to the intentionalist quality of social phenomena in which the actor’s subjective meanings are crucial elements to successful social analysis (Ebeling, 1991: 50). Historical interpretations are often subjective because historians, like all other people, have their viewpoints that are shaped by parents, by personal experiences, by ideological preferences, and by many philosophers, scholars, politicians, and others. In fact, it is rare historical writing that is free from the personal bias of the author (Paterson, 1984: 1). This does not, however, make the writing less significant as a work of scholarship or as a viable interpretation. Paterson (1984: 1) maintains that on the contrary, readers of history are enriched by knowing about and learning from an author’s subjectivity, and that to overlook the historian’s role in creating our image of the past is to miss an exciting part of the quest for knowledge and understanding.

Meanwhile, it is important to state that selectiveness, conflicting interpretations and distortion of facts in the reconstruction of the past place a very big limitation on our knowledge and understanding of the past. Indeed, the sum total of the historical record, even if it were totally accurate, represents only a very small portion of what actually occurred in history. Though we could do an exhaustive study of the historical record, our knowledge and understanding of history would still be extremely limited. It must be stated, however, that these defects are not so dangerous enough to deter any scientific analysis of the past and to deny history its proper place in our academic and general life. After all, no particular science has ever succeeded in producing full knowledge and understanding in its area; all human knowledge is imperfect. To the justly critical and comparing mind, history, at its best, is no more uncertain than the descriptive earth sciences whose assertions most people appear willing to take on faith. Again, selectiveness, conflicting interpretations and distortion of historical facts are not the only causes of our inadequate understanding of the past; they are not the only rivers that flow into the sea. The scientific nature of history itself acts as a further limitation on the discipline and is, therefore, partly to blame for the situation as it does not entertain the claim to arrival at the final truth or absolute knowledge. As in all sciences, there is no such thing as absolute historical truth. The truth always remains beyond our reach; we can only arrive at some approximation to it. George Sorel (cited in Carr, 1987: 55) has even advised scientists to proceed their works with probable and partial hypotheses, and be satisfied only with provisional approximations in order to leave the door open to progressive correction. Accordingly, it must be admitted that historical science is a science of probabilities, in the same way as a large number of present-day sciences make use of the concept of chance and probability.

In this circumstance, the simplest advice we would wish to give to consumers of historical works and researchers in history is that history is genuine knowledge, but they should not take statements and conclusions of historical works as concrete truths without analysing them. Every historical work provides invaluable information, but it must equally be appreciated that no historical study is without limitations; no historical work has claims to total infallibility. All statements in historical works must be subjected to scrupulous critique and cross-checking to verify their authenticity. On any historical

work, a question mark must always be left hanging in the reader's mind. To do this successfully and achieve the desired result, the researcher particularly should always turn the documents over and over again, "... in what appears an almost eternal process of assessment, re-assessment, review of re-assessment, etc" (Kwanashie, 1987: 59) in order to reduce errors in historical studies.

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