

School of History

Summer 2018 Reading Recommendations

The following recommendations for your summer reading do not in any way constitute a compulsory bibliography for your first-year modules. We simply asked members of the School to recommend any book—scholarly or popular, historical or literary, essay, short story, or monograph—that has inspired their study of the past; transformed or challenged their own ideas on a particular period; or captured their historical imaginations at an early and impressionable age (i.e. your own). Below are their selections and explanations. You can read some, all, or none of their choices: it is your intellectual journey, after all, so you can make your own bibliographical selections and engage in your own campaigns of summer reading. But reading is all. It is not only essential to getting the most out of your forthcoming history degree; it will empower and enthrall you for the rest of your life. As Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), the escaped slave, abolitionist, and zealous critic of the Confederate states put it with his characteristic bluntness, ‘once you learn to read, you will be forever free’.

Stephen Church, Professor of Medieval History, recommends George Orwell, *Why I Write* (London, Penguin Great Ideas ser., 2004).

At just four pages, Orwell’s ‘Why I write’ must be the shortest literary autobiography of all time, but because it was written by one of the greatest writers in the English language of the mid twentieth century, it is a profoundly influential work. ‘Why I write’ explains how Orwell came to the business of writing and how he developed as a writer and improved his writing style. I found that the honesty with which this literary genius showed his readers how he developed as a writer inspired in me the courage to work harder on my own written work, to realise that writing has to be practised in order to be improved. Orwell taught me, moreover, that far from becoming a historian, I was, in fact, becoming a writer whose subject is the past. I had, until that point, concentrated on the *content* of my prose; from the moment I read Orwell’s thoughts on his own writing, I have concentrated much more on the *way* I write the content of my prose. And perhaps more importantly still, I now see the works of other historians as literary works that exist within the confines of one particular genre. I still vividly remember this as a liberating moment even though it occurred more than a quarter of a century ago.

Hugh Doherty, Lecturer in Medieval History, recommends Gustave Flaubert, *Salammbô* (London: Penguin Classics, 1977).

Gustave Flaubert’s *Salammbô* is one of the most original and most daring studies of an ancient society at war. As with his *Madame Bovary*, the lead character is a woman of independent and defiant spirit, the daughter of Hamilcar, leading generalissimo of the city of Carthage, and the sister of Hannibal, the future nemesis of Rome, but in place of the suffocating bourgeoisie values and petty unkindnesses of provincial Normandy in the 1850s the context is a brutal civil war between the Carthaginian city states and a group of disaffected and unpaid mercenaries in the third century BCE. *Salammbô* is of course a work of its time. It draws upon that rich store of prejudice, partial familiarity, fantasy, and yearning that so informed and shaped western visions of the Maghreb and the Levant in the nineteenth

century; its publication in 1862 coincided with the efforts of Napoleon III to refashion parts of both into new imperial provinces. But the novel was also a work of scholarship: Flaubert visited Carthage and its hinterland, worked closely with the primary ancient narrative supplied by Polybius, and drew upon the extensive French-led excavations of the city of Carthage. The novel remains a tale of passionate desire set against a backdrop of the most savage violence and civil collapse. There have been many attempts to recreate the world of antiquity, in print, on canvas, and on screen, but few have been as gripping, as graphic, and perhaps as sensual and as moving as this one.

Jayne Gifford, Lecturer in the Humanities, recommends John Darwin, *After Tamerlane. The Rise & Fall of Global Empires 1400–2000* (London: Penguin, 2008).

The study of empires allows us to take a much broader view of history, a tradition that goes back to Herodotus. It seeks to place Europe and the West within the much wider historical landscape of ‘empire-, state- and culture-building projects of other parts of Eurasia’ and demonstrates that Europe’s expansion was not a foregone conclusion. The book helps to make sense of the muddled origins of our contemporary world. Importantly, it answers the question of why study history – because history is in a constant dialogue with the present.

Emma Griffin, Professor of Modern History, suggests Catherine Cookson, *Our Kate: An Autobiographical Memoir* (London, 1993)

Yes—Catherine Cookson is the author of the best-selling romantic fiction that your gran reads and no—we would not normally expect you to read her books as part of our degree programme. However, *Our Kate* is not a novel, it’s Cookson’s autobiography. It retells an impoverished childhood in the early twentieth century with an unmarried, alcoholic mother (and her violent family) in the slums of South Shields. It’s often been noted that history is written by the winners, and Catherine Cookson did ultimately achieve enormous success. But this isn’t the story of that success. It is the story about her life before. It is the story of a child, living on the social margins in desperate poverty, over a hundred years ago—and we don’t have many historical sources like this. *Our Kate* is extremely cheap (my copy cost 1p plus postage). It’s easy to get hold of and it’s an easy read—Cookson was after all a best-selling author. But it also sheds light on a corner of social history that has been woefully neglected by a profession that has traditionally been overwhelmingly male, and raises important questions about who we should study as historians, and why.

Malcolm Gaskill, Professor of Early Modern History, recommends Patrick Süskind, *Perfume: the Story of a Murderer*, trans. J. E. Woods (London, 2010).

This is an amazing and horrible evocation of the sights and smells, dangers and degradations, of eighteenth-century French society. It tells the gripping story of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, who despite being born in the most inauspicious circumstances, through a preternaturally acute sense of smell manages to make something of himself as a perfumier. His chosen trade, catering to the rich and the vain, is a cut-throat world—literally in Grenouille’s case. *Perfume* is a work of fiction, but all early modern historians can learn from its vivid descriptions and sheer imaginative power. It reminds us that the people and events we find in history books and in the archival record actually inhabited a world like this, and that it made

them what they were. It's also a reminder that great novels, like history, are committed to telling the truth about human experience in and across time, and that the past can be both familiar territory and a foreign country.

Geoffrey Hicks, Senior Lecturer in Modern British History, recommends Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (originally published 1933; London, Penguin Classics, 2005).

Vera Brittain was 20 years old when war broke out in 1914—from a happy family, off to university and looking forward to life. The First World War changed everything. The shattering impact of that conflict had a profound effect on her, as it did on the shape of the twentieth century. This memoir, however, is not the usual story of trenches and barbed wire. Brittain became a nurse, and saw the war's effect on those who had fought. Then, one by one, it took her friends and family. But this is not a 'misery memoir'; it's a story of friendship and survival—and how the author responded to the trauma she and her generation had undergone. If we are to understand Britain's twentieth century, we have to understand the impact of the First World War, and this book is a very good place to start.

Chris Jones, Lecturer in History and Widening Participation Academic Officer, recommends Rod Kedward, *La Vie en Bleu: France and the French since 1900* (London: Penguin, 2006).

In this highly readable overview of France's troubled and tumultuous twentieth century, Rod Kedward offers a sweeping narrative of the complex and contested past of *l'Hexagone*. Kedward moves from high politics and great events to personal and localised stories. Ultimately, he demonstrates that throughout the twentieth century France was engaged in an internal battle (*une guerre franco-française*) between the forces of change and continuity.

Francis King, Lecturer in Modern European History, recommends John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007).

John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World*, written in 1919, brilliantly captures the atmosphere of revolutionary Petrograd in autumn 1917. Reed—an American writer and poet—had found fame as a war reporter during the Mexican insurgency before travelling to report on events in Russia. Well-connected and with an ear for a good story, Reed talked to ministers and street demonstrators, businessmen and revolutionary soldiers, and was at the momentous Second Congress of Soviets, at which Lenin's Bolsheviks formalised their seizure of power. Reed's book not only tells the story of those days, but contains countless vignettes of episodes – many inconsequential in themselves – which together convey the mentalities, hopes and fears, and assumptions of many of the actors in that drama. *Ten Days that Shook the World* is not an 'objective' account of the revolution. Reed was unashamedly partisan in his support for Lenin's Bolsheviks. But for its immediacy, its vividness, and its ability to convey the confusion and excitement of those days, Reed's book remains a classic account. Anyone who wants to understand not only what those revolutionaries a century ago did, but also what they thought they were doing, will gain much from reading John Reed.

David Milne, Senior Lecturer in Modern History, recommends Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (London: Harper Perennial, 2009).

This history of classical music through the twentieth century is dramatic, beautifully written, and best read with frequent pauses to listen to the music—by Richard Strauss, Gustav Mahler, Arthur Schoenberg, Benjamin Britten, Oliver Messiaen, and others—that Ross explores with such élan. It's the most entertaining single-volume history of the twentieth century I've read. It just happens to focus on its music.

Thomas Otte, Professor of Modern History, recommends Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

The Transformation of the World offers a panorama of a world in transition. Jürgen Osterhammel, an eminent scholar who has been called the Braudel of the nineteenth century, moves beyond conventional Eurocentric and chronological accounts of the era, and instead presents a truly global history of amazing scope. He examines the powerful and complex forces that drove global change during the 'long nineteenth century' from Berlin or London to New York and New Delhi, from the Latin American revolutions to the Taiping Rebellion in China, from the perils and promise of Europe's transatlantic labour markets to the hardships endured by nomadic, tribal peoples across the planet. *The Transformation of the World* describes a world increasingly connected through global networks of telegraph communications, oceanic steamship navigation, and the railways. It also explores the changing relationship between human beings and nature and the importance of rapid urbanisation; it explains the role which slavery and its abolition played in the emergence of new nations; it mounts a challenge to the widely held belief that the nineteenth century witnessed the triumph of the nation-state. It is a book that will make you think.

Geoffrey Plank, Professor of Early Modern History, suggests Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

Equiano's Narrative is a great adventure story covering much of the eighteenth-century Atlantic World. He describes his birth in Africa, his capture and forced transportation across the Atlantic as a slave, his experience of slavery in colonial North America and the Caribbean, his service in the Royal Navy, his manumission, his life as a free man in England, his period of service in the slave trade, and his travels to far-flung places including Central America, Turkey and the Arctic. Amazingly, every important part of his narrative, with the exception of his birth and early childhood in Africa, has been corroborated. It's all true. Equiano provides an account of slavery from an enslaved man's perspective. His work was very influential, helping to shape the abolitionists' arguments in the late eighteenth century, and pioneering a new genre of literature – the slave narrative – that would expand gloriously in the antebellum United States.

Carole Rawcliffe, Emerita Professor, recommends Thomas Penn, *Winter King* (London: Penguin, 2012).

Winter King presents a compelling account of the reign of Henry VII, who is often overshadowed by his larger-than-life son. Yet the Tudor dynasty had an uncertain start, which Penn describes in a vivid narrative that brings alive a whole gallery of careerists, courtiers and conspirators. As Henry became increasingly suspicious, keen to hoard money and neurotic about the future, his court began to resemble a sinister web, recreated here in what has been described as ‘a brilliant mash-up off gothic horror and political biography’. It’s a riveting read, which raises many questions about the society in which we live today.

Lyndsey Stonebridge, Professor of Modern Literature and History, recommends Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, ed. P. Baehr, *The Portable Hannah Arendt* (London, Penguin Classics, 2003).

How did the world get to the total horrors of Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism in the twentieth century? What forces of history conspired to create such a novel and terrifying political system? Hannah Arendt’s brilliant book is a must read for all students of twentieth-century history. Arendt was a victim of the system she taught the world to recognise. The young philosopher and political theorist, born to a non-practising Jewish family, fled Germany in 1933. She was interned in France during the war, and fled to the US in 1942. This was the period she began work on *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, thinking between continents, languages and disciplines. She finished the book in the US, and it quickly became a classic of modern history. Covering the history of Imperialism, Anti-Semitism and offering a striking description of the features of totalitarianism, this is a book born of scholarship, thought and lived experience. Usually, Arendt said, historians write about something because they want to preserve it; but she wrote her book in order to destroy the myths, errors and ideologies that supported the twentieth-century’s most pernicious of inventions. Written with verve, passion and imagination, this is one of the best books on modern political history that you will ever read.

Becky Taylor, Reader in Modern History, recommends Nan Joyce, *Traveller: an autobiography*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1985 (Anna Farmar, ed.).

Nan Joyce is an Irish Traveller, mother of eleven, who has spent her life in on both sides of the Irish border, and this is her story. Gypsies and Travellers, despite romantic stereotypes of them as living a free and easy life untouched by the modern world, remain Europe’s most stigmatised and marginalised peoples. This is only one person’s story, though grippingly and distinctively told, but it forces us, as historians, to ask ourselves a number of questions: what does history look like when it’s written, not only from outside of the university, but also outside the society from which that person comes? can we still write about ‘progress’ in the twentieth century, if we take into account the experiences of those living on Europe’s margins? how do we, as historians, include the voices of the excluded? and what can looking at the history of Europe’s stigmatised groups tell us about the practices, preoccupations and assumptions of its mainstream societies?

Nicholas Vincent, Professor of Medieval History, recommends Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, ed. & trans. R. Graves & J. Rives (London, Penguin Classics, 2007).

We sometimes suppose that celebrity culture is an invention of Hollywood and the twentieth century. In reality, the misbehaviour of the powerful has been chronicled for several thousand years. Contrasting the good with the bad, the magnificent with the monstrous, Suetonius (c.120 AD) recounts the achievements and foibles of the great ‘makers’ of the Roman empire. Not only has his account here been recycled time after time, copied by those writing the lives of medieval or modern kings and queens, but for anybody interested in the origins of modern European politics or society there are lessons here in abundance. To view Silvio Berlusconi in the light of the Emperor Tiberias, for example, is to grasp the continuity and underlying changelessness both of politics and humanity. It is also worth noting that Suetonius is one of the principal sources for the gripping historical novels by Robert Graves (*I Claudius*, and *Claudius the God*), themselves made into a best-selling BBC drama series.

Peter Waldron, Professor of Modern History, recommends Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power* (New York: Random House, 2012).

This is one of the best political biographies ever written. Lyndon Johnson was JFK’s Vice-President and acceded to the presidency of the United States on the November day in 1963 when Kennedy was assassinated by a gunman in Dallas. This account shows the roller-coaster of Johnson’s career in the years before he became President: he went from exercising immense power as leader of the US Senate in the late 1950s to the outward importance—but in reality near-powerlessness—of the Vice-Presidency, before he was catapulted to the Presidency itself by Lee Harvey Oswald’s bullets. This book has everything: political intrigue at its most extreme, bitter personal rivalry and loathing between Johnson and JFK’s brother, Robert, the intense tragedy of JFK’s murder and a cast of characters that suggest that Trump’s White House is perhaps not so extraordinary as we think. It concludes with Johnson’s legislative triumph in 1964 when he succeeded, against all the odds, in getting the Civil Rights Act through Congress and laying the foundations for racial equality in the USA. The book gives a masterly insight into the realities of both political power and human emotion.

Nadine Willems, Lecturer in Japanese History, recommends Ryū Murakami, *Coin Locker Babies* (London: Pushkin Press, 2013).

Imagine being left by your mother at birth in a train station’s coin locker, desperately clinging to life. Next you find yourself in an orphanage, where you meet the fellow survivor of the same plight. You now have a brother, and you both face feelings of loss and abandonment, also a tremendous sense of freedom at being left to your own devices in the world. This is the premise of Ryū Murakami’s 1980 novel. Kiku and Hashi, the two teen-aged orphans, plunge into the mayhem of post-modern Tokyo. Not for gentle souls, the novel presents a gory, spiraling tale of amorality and dissolution, but also love. Ultimately, *Coin-Locker Babies* is an unsettling reflection on postwar Japan, the trappings of its consumer society, its extraordinary rebirth after the self-inflicted trauma of a devastating war, and its cultural contradictions.