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*ON THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF  
SENTIMENTAL HISTORY FOR LIFE*

This paper is intended to provide context for the current interest in historical re-enactment. Drawing upon my recent interest in theorizing the concept of historical distance, I argue that much recent historical writing has been characterized by a deep interest in affective relations to the past. Whereas traditionally historians were expected to focus on issues of narrative and explanation, much of our best work since the mid- 1960s has responded to a rather different question: not so much "what happened and why?" but "what was it like to be there?" I argue that this attitude towards the past can be best described using the 18th-century notion of a sentimental culture, but to do so we will have to work to achieve a non-pejorative understanding of that loaded word. In keeping with my title, I then explore some of the ethical strengths and temptations of the sentimental strain in contemporary historical thought.

Biographical information

Mark Salber Phillips is an intellectual historian with a particular interest in questions of narrative and historical representation in 18th and 19th century Britain. His current work concerns the idea of "historical distance" and its place in variety of forms of historical description, ranging from national histories to literary history and history painting. He is the author of *Society and Sentiment; Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (2000) and co-editor of *Questions of Tradition* (2005). Earlier studies include *The Memoir of Marco Parenti; a life in Medici Florence* (1987) and *Francesco Guicciardini; the historian's craft* (1977). He is Professor of History at Carleton University, Ottawa.

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