**NOTE:** This paper has been published in *Accounting History*, Vol. 16, No. 4, November 2011, pp. 389-402. DOI: 10.1177/1032373211417993. This version of the paper may differ slightly from the published version, which should be regarded as definitive.

**Does accounting history matter?[[1]](#endnote-1)**

Delfina Gomes

University of Minho

[dgomes@eeg.uminho.pt](mailto:dgomes@eeg.uminho.pt)

Garry D. Carnegie

RMIT University

[garry.carnegie@rmit.edu.au](mailto:garry.carnegie@rmit.edu.au)

Christopher J. Napier

Royal Holloway, University of London

[christopher.napier@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:christopher.napier@rhul.ac.uk)

Lee D. Parker

University of South Australia

[Lee.Parker@unisa.edu.au](mailto:Lee.Parker@unisa.edu.au)

Brian West

University of Ballarat

[b.west@ballarat.edu.au](mailto:b.west@ballarat.edu.au)

**Corresponding author:**

Delfina Gomes, Assistant Professor, School of Economics and Management, University of Minho, Gualtar, 4709 Braga Codex, Portugal.

Email: [dgomes@eeg.uminho.pt](mailto:dgomes@eeg.uminho.pt)

**Does accounting history matter?**

**Abstract**

Building from a Panel Discussion held at the sixth *Accounting History* International Conference, a resounding “yes” is offered in response to the question of whether accounting history matters. However, reflecting the viewpoint that accounting history can and should matter *more*, various suggestions are presented for advancing the quality, relevance and significance of historical research in accounting, commencing with the need to redress persistent misconceptions about the discipline. Practical strategies for enhancing the impact of accounting history scholarship are then developed around the themes of promoting its contemporary relevance and implications, fostering engagement with diverse groups of scholars, writing accounting history in informative and engaging ways, and articulating and developing appropriate methodologies. Finally, the role of accounting historians as “change agents” is explored and advocated.

**Keywords**

Accounting; history; accounting history; accounting research

**1. Introduction**

Does anyone ask: “Does accounting matter?”. This is not a common question, even in the academic community. The question is often posed rhetorically by the authors of accounting textbooks, for whom accounting clearly *does* matter, or there would be no point to their books. On the other hand, Plott and Sunder (1981, p. 227) claimed: “Much accounting research for the past 15 to 20 years [i.e., 1960-1980] has been concerned with the question: Does accounting matter?”. The research to which they referred was often intended to show that accounting, or at least corporate financial reporting, did *not* matter: that accountingwas irrelevant to investors, considered to be the main users of financial statements. But it is generally taken for granted that accounting matters to individuals, organisations and society.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Does anyone ask: “Does history matter?” Not everyone in modern society values or appreciates history, whether we understand this as referring to the past itself or to the study of the past, although at least scholars around the globe generally have an appreciation of the role and importance of history. However, many modern historians appear to be on the defensive about the value of history, with authors of recent books such as *In Defence of History* (Evans, 1997) and *Why History Matters* (Tosh, 2008) feeling that it is necessary to make a case for history. Interestingly, even in the space of a single decade, the perceived “enemies” of history have expanded: Evans mainly castigates fellow historians who, in his view, undermine the mission of history through relativism, while Tosh defends history against what he sees as an increasingly uninterested society, which tends to focus on the “now” without appreciating that the present is the outcome of the past.

Putting these two questions together, we ask: “Does accounting history matter?”. This question arises from time to time, if not regularly, in the academic accounting community, where there is perhaps a lingering view that historical accounting research is merely “antiquarian” (Napier, 1989, p. 243; Napier, 2006, p. 453). Some of our colleagues within the broad academic accounting community are not necessarily appreciative of historical accounting research and publication and its contribution to our understanding of accounting’s past and of contemporary practice and thought.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Many accounting academics, as teachers, see their responsibility to their students as ensuring a sound understanding of current accounting practice, in particular the laws, standards, rules and regulations that govern the production, form and content of financial statements (West, 2003, ch. 7). As researchers, they may be fully committed to statistically-based quantitative accounting research, and hence find any other forms of research, including historical studies that do not involve statistical analysis of historical quantitative data, to be of marginal or even of no value in contributing to their understanding of accounting. Such colleagues may be only or primarily concerned with the technical aspects of the discipline, where accounting is merely about quantification, aggregation and the assembling of financial reports, while accounting research “crunches numbers” to produce results from investigations that are increasingly dominated by statistics. These colleagues may not appreciate the notion of accounting as a social and institutional practice (Hopwood and Miller, 1994; Miller, 1994) in which accounting is both pervasive and enabling, with impacts, whether intended or not, on organisational and social functioning. The conception of accounting as a social and institutional practice, which gave rise to the application of new theories and methods in accounting research, arose around the same time as the advent of “new accounting history” (Miller, Hopper and Laughlin, 1991), as addressed by Gomes (2008). Accounting historians who view accounting as a social and institutional practice extend accounting research beyond aggregated financial results and a narrow focus on the structure and contents of the annual report.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The present study’s answer to the question “Does accounting history matter?” is a resounding “Yes”. In reaching this answer, some common misconceptions of accounting history research and publication are identified and briefly discussed in the next section. The following section, entitled “making accounting history matter”, outlines four key issues to be addressed by accounting historians in persuading others, especially those outside the field of enquiry, of the appropriateness of the affirmative answer to this question. Thereafter, accounting historians are cast in the role as agents of change concerned with “making accounting better”, thereby possibly diminishing the propensity for the question to be posed in the future. The final section presents summarising and concluding comments.

**2. Misconceptions of accounting history**

The questioning of the merits of historical accounting research and publication may relate to perceptions which emerge from time to time of accounting history being a narrow, highly specialized field that is not part of the “main game” or the “big picture”. Paradoxically, accounting history studies typically set accounting in its social and economic context, often apply theoretical perspectives drawn from outside accounting (such as economics, sociology, and philosophy) and preferably attempt to identify the impacts of accounting and accounting change within organisations and within society as a whole. Critics who denounce historical accounting research as “narrow” often fail to appreciate that research positioning accounting as a local, time-specific practice in the life and times of the period of study may, at the same time, provide more general and time-independent insights, for example into how accounting emerges from, and impacts upon, its setting within society. Accounting is not studied for its own sake or merely on its own terms. Rather, accounting is studied in the contexts in which it operates. The historian’s focus is broadly on the nature, roles, uses and impacts of accounting and accounting change in historical context. This wide agenda would appear to be the antithesis of a “narrow” focus. Indeed, accounting historians contend with accounting in all its forms, whether this is what is now known as financial accounting, management accounting, social and environmental accounting, assurance and auditing, or taxation. They generally embrace not only a wide gamut of accounting practice and thought but also both depth and breadth of enquiry. Accounting historians have also long been conscious of accounting’s international scope (see, for example, Brown, 1905; Parker, 1971, 1993; Carnegie and Napier, 1996, 2002).

Some may view accounting historians as a small, introverted group of potentially quaint individuals who attend only accounting history conferences, lacking sufficient interest in accounting more generally even to consider attending major generalist accounting conferences. Clearly, this characterisation would be an exaggeration at best and a misrepresentation at worst. Nevertheless, some valid concerns about a lack of interdisciplinary focus in historical accounting research have recently been articulated (Guthrie and Parker, 2006; Walker, 2008). Historical accounting research, however, is published widely in the accounting literature and may be found outside accounting in business, management and social history journals. It is regularly found in the leading international journals in the sociological, critical and interpretative tradition (*Accounting, Organizations and Society*, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, and *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*), generalist accounting journals (*Accounting and Business Research*, *Abacus*, *British Accounting Review*)[[5]](#endnote-5) and, of course, in the specialist accounting history journals (*Accounting Historians Journal, Accounting History Review* from 2011, formerly *Accounting, Business and Financial History*,[[6]](#endnote-6) and *Accounting History*).

Some people do not perceive a clear connection between past and present phenomena and, therefore, see no real relevance in studying accounting’s past or even the past of anything, including that of families and local communities. Accountants who have been trained to think that “the past is a sunk cost” and that accounting is fundamentally future-oriented will see no value to accounting history. For example, the “rational institutional myths” of founders of professional accounting bodies, even the development of the notion of professionalism itself – what has been referred to as “accounting’s professional project” (see Carnegie and Napier, 2010) – may be dismissed by those accountants who believe the accounting profession, or rather the accounting “industry”, has entered a “new paradigm”. The notion of the past as a database of potential solutions to current problems is also dismissed, with the past being regarded as irrelevant as a guide to action in the present. We would claim the contrary: enhancing an understanding of accounting’s past may also augment our understanding of contemporary accounting thought and practice and hence strengthen our appreciation of the social dimensions and impacts of accounting on individuals, organisations and society, allowing us to evaluate accounting in its current modes of operation more effectively.

**3. Making accounting history matter**

In making accounting history matter, accounting historians must address the challenge of demonstrating the applicability of historical accounting research to their target audiences and to the accounting research and practice community generally. Accounting historians may well fail to make accounting history matter if they do not strive to do the following: (1) demonstrate the contemporary relevance/implications of accounting history scholarship; (2) proactively engage with other accounting researchers and scholars from other disciplines; (3) write their research in an informative and even engaging way, and (4) better develop and articulate their historical methodologies. Each of these pre-conditions will now be discussed in turn.

*Contemporary relevance and implications*

History is contemporary and unavoidable. It impacts on us all, personally. It is the currency of everyday life, even in this global, technological post-modern era. Our history is reflected in our fashions, customs, traditions, medical diagnoses, legal precedents, family histories, culinary preferences and more. Historiographers such as Hamerow (1987) and Stanford (1986, 1994, and 1998) argue that history is indigenous and instinctive to all of us – a spontaneous and deep-seated interest in the past. Publicly and privately, we both consciously and unconsciously draw on and interpret our beliefs about and experiences of the past when making decisions (Parker, 1999).

In order to persuade others of the importance of accounting history, accounting historians need to draw out the contemporary relevance and implications of their research findings. This is not just a matter of providing “relevance” oriented postscripts to research papers. It is a task of embedding traces that contribute to this agenda throughout the contents of our research papers and other scholarly writing. One key pathway is through the contextualisation of our historical accounts, not only retaining what happened, but to convey what it was like to be involved, to explain how and why things happened as they did, and to attempt to relate any connection between what was to what is now (Lerner, 1997). Where does the relevance agenda cut in? In our interpretations, explanations and theorisations, we have the opportunity, where the evidence allows, to reflect upon our professional world in its complex and messy reality (rather than through abstract modelling) and to see what clues it offers for assessing future possibilities and for informing judgements about accounting today (Previts, Parker and Coffman, 1990a; Previts and Bricker, 1994; Carnegie and Napier, 1996; Oldroyd, 1999). Accounting history can and should offer precedents, probabilities and choices: reflections upon what has worked in the past, and what has not, and why (Parker, 1999). Ultimately history’s importance arguably lies in its perceived relevance and utility for contemporary audiences. So the better accounting historians can articulate the interrelationships between historical actions, technologies and context, the better informed may be accountants’ and accounting researchers’ diagnoses of contemporary accounting issues (Hamerow, 1987; Stanford, 1986, 1994, 1998; Parker, 1999). Indeed as Heller (1982) has argued, history influences our perceptions of the future, so that even instinctively it can feed into future behaviours and events (Parker, 2004).

Accounting historians, therefore, should strive to identify the “lessons to be learned” from their investigations. As Robert Penn Warren stated; “History cannot give us a program for the future, but it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves, and of our common humanity, so that we can better face the future” (Warren, 1961, p. 100). The importance of path dependency – knowing how we got to where we are – should not be underestimated. Some sense of this notion is evident in the way in which accounting standard setters often provide a narrative of how standards develop, although these are likely to emphasise how the current standard is superior and the previous versions were inferior. Notwithstanding such an orientation, studies of this genre may augment an understanding of the complex evolution of accounting standards and, in the process, help to enhance an appreciation of the standards themselves (see, for example, Napier, 2009).

Arguably the relevance injunction applies irrespective of the accounting history study focus, theoretical disposition or methodological approach. From the historicist to the critical theorist, we are challenged to transmit our findings and conclusions, be they explanations, social histories, school of thought analyses, or counter-narratives. The task is one of translating understandings and critiques into a language and set of inferences with which our contemporary accounting audiences can identify and to facilitate a resonance with their contemporary concerns, at both national and international levels. On this point, there remain particularly abundant opportunities to uncover and learn from the history of diverse non-English language locations.

*Proactively engage with other accounting scholars and scholars outside accounting*

In order to assist in broadening perspectives on accounting’s past, accounting historians must resist the temptation to retreat within the comfort zone of the historians’ ghetto in which they can promulgate and digest historical research amongst the welcoming cohort of their own research peers. While this position has attracted reservations from some accounting historians, it has been strongly advocated as a required “coming out” of accounting specialisms by Guthrie and Parker (2006) as editors of *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*. Accounting historians are encouraged to engage the non-historical, general accounting research community by promoting historical research in the pages of the interdisciplinary contemporary accounting research journals. The call is for accounting historians to improve their performance in engaging general contemporary accounting research audiences as well as to engage with scholars in other disciplines, but still including historians. Accounting historians are less likely to be marginalised in accounting academe if they communicate effectively with accounting scholars in general. This is a multifaceted task which includes attending and presenting their research at general accounting research conferences and in seeking to publish in a wide array of accounting journals, including the specialist accounting history journals. Indeed, the present authors, along with other leaders in the historical accounting research field today, such as Professors Marcia Annisette, Warwick Funnell, Barbara Merino, Gary Previts and Stephen Walker and many more have presented their historical accounting research across general interdisciplinary as well as specialist accounting history research conferences and published in a wide range of journals internationally.

Accounting historians generally, however, appear to have been less prone to engage with scholars outside the accounting discipline, including historians in other fields. Such restricted engagement with non-accounting scholars tends to diminish the potential for accounting historians in general to bring a full range of perspectives from other fields to the study of accounting’s past, curtailing the prospect of excelling in interdisciplinary research.[[7]](#endnote-7) Regularly co-authoring with scholars in other disciplines – particularly, although not limited to, those studying the histories of finance, management, business and economics – can assist in permeating the accounting literature with different perspectives on accounting for enhanced historical understanding and provide potentially richer insights into accounting’s present. In so doing, we must be mindful of Mills’ (1993) and Fleischman, Mills and Tyson’s (1996) warning that accounting historians should not confuse their endeavours with social scientists’ use of historical data for testing contemporary hypotheses. Social scientists may use past data to explore the present. They look for historical data examples to support their *a priori* generalisations about the present, but in so doing risk de-contextualising historical data. As historians we must remain more sensitive to the complexities of historical context, the uniqueness of preceding events and the importance of time and place. Nevertheless, becoming familiar with the scholarly literature outside accounting is a responsibility not to be delegated or ignored by accounting historians of the future.

*Write research in an informative and engaging way*

Accounting historians are exhorted to continue to endeavour to write their research in an informative, engaging, and even entertaining way. The interest in accounting history from outside accounting history is more likely to grow when the manuscripts of accounting historians both attract interest and engage the readership. One way of attracting a broader audience is to produce thoroughly contextualized and well-written manuscripts on accounting in non-typical settings, such as in the circus (Cummings and St Leon, 2009), in the tea club (Jeacle, 2008), and in the cinema (Jeacle, 2009). Such studies bring accounting into the realm of everyday life and into the personal experiences of people, combining our individual experiences as adults, teenagers or children. More generally, however, accounting historians have an obligation to develop and stimulate a readership based on providing insights on accounting in any organisational setting in any location, which preferably inspire further questions and subsequent enquiries on accounting development.

Stimulating interest in historical accounting research is indeed the responsibility of the accounting historian. As stated in a remark generally attributed to Voltaire,[[8]](#endnote-8) “a historian has many duties. Allow me to remind you of two which are important. The first is not to slander. The second is not to bore”. One of the panellists at the sixth *Accounting History* International Conference in Wellington (2010) queried: “How many people walking around the streets of Wellington today would attend this conference if given free tickets to attend?”. Would anyone receiving the mythical free tickets to attend do so if they expected to be bored by the proceedings? Accounting historians can well learn the craft of reader engagement from the writings of George Macaulay Trevelyan, Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University (1926) and Master of Trinity College Cambridge 1940-51. He championed historical writing in the grand literary style, writing for the general as well as specialist history reader. His was a narrative, literary style which evoked a strong sense of literary craft, evoking the mood of the period and carrying the reader along at pace. His long popular work *English Social History: A Survey of Six Centuries*, published in 1944, has sold more than 400,000 copies and still sells today (Plumb, 1988; Parker, 1999). Trevelyan’s style is the antithesis of the trap that some accounting historians fall into, namely writing in a fashion seemingly designed to impress rather than express! A more recent exemplar of engaging historical writing can be found in the historical books ofNorth American historian and biographer Carolly Erickson.[[9]](#endnote-9) Her evocative and gripping style of writing demonstrates how intensively researched and referenced historical works can even be presented in the style of a novel. Of course many accounting research journal reviewers would probably resist such a writing style, considering it unsuited to the style of writing for a scholarly journal. Nonetheless, Erickson still offers accounting historians valuable lessons in better adapting our writing styles to attract and retain our target audiences.

*Articulate and develop historical methodologies*

Accounting historians have a responsibility to continuously develop and articulate their historical methodologies (Previts *et al.*, 1990a, b). Preparing detailed and robust research proposals in advance of undertaking historical projects is an essential discipline for all accounting historians as part of the process of effectively constructing investigations for critical evaluation and defence. In particular, emerging scholars or intending scholars starting their career can benefit by seeking comments from research-active senior colleagues at the beginning of their research projects on accounting historiography, both from within the accounting history community and additionally from other relevant accounting researchers beyond historians. Engaging with scholars outside accounting, including historians in other disciplines, will assist in exposing accounting historians to a wide range of diverse methodologies, including theoretical perspectives that can productively inform their investigations and analyses. Such engagement will refresh and broaden the dimensions of accounting historians and, more importantly, assist in building a pathway to interdisciplinary credibility.

The historiography underpinning accounting history research as presented in many published accounting history papers tends to be under-articulated (Gaffikin, 2011). As a result, readers of publications in the field are not fully apprised of the craft, and the credibility of the research and its findings suffer. If historians are to connect with their contemporary accounting research peers and to attract their attention and engagement, then their greater attention to, and articulation of, their methodologies and methods employed is a *sine qua non*. This calls for methodological engagement with traditional historiographic literature on the theory and methodological principles of historical research and revelation of the particular concepts and principles being employed in each individual accounting history study. This requires recourse not only to accounting historiographic literature, but general historiographic literature as well (Tholfsen, 1967; Heller, 1982: Howard, 1991; Evans, 1997). There has also been a general tendency for accounting history research to be associated with qualitative research techniques. While such techniques are often applicable, quantitative methods can and should be used in those settings in which they are appropriate. In all cases, both methodological design and specific method steps need to be articulated with respect to time period selected, data sources employed, data collection and evaluation methods, contextualisation approaches, thematic development and interpretation, causal attributions and critical approach (Parker, 1997, 2004; Tosh, 2010). Thus, the development and articulation of our methodologies stands to improve not only the rigour of our research, but the credibility of its findings and messages, and simultaneously offers a pathway to connecting with the wider accounting discipline.

**4.** **Accounting historians as change agents**

Moving from the notion that change is something to be investigated, accounting historians can consider the more exciting notion of themselves being agents of change. The possibility of changing accounting – “making accounting better” – was a key factor in stimulating the social and institutional turn in accounting research, and hence the “new accounting history” (Napier, 2006; also see Gomes, 2008). Accounting historians are typically concerned with examining the nature, roles, uses and impacts of accounting, and this encompasses a strong focus on accounting change which can provide “lessons” for the present. Carnegie and West (2005), for example, made a case for “making accounting accountable in the public sector” in their critical examination of the mandated monetary valuation of the collections of not-for-profit public arts institutions – including museums, galleries and libraries – for financial reporting purposes. While the accounting domain seems constantly to expand in this era of calculative order, accounting does not necessarily become better, nor are the organisational and social impacts of accounting change, whether intended or not, always made clear or effectively evaluated (also see West and Carnegie, 2010). Therefore, accounting historians are encouraged to move outside the archive from time to time and become commentators on contemporary developments in accounting, thereby applying their knowledge of the past, and particularly their understandings of accounting change in historical contexts, to better appreciate and critique present-day accounting and proposed reforms for the future.

Over 40 years ago, the American Accounting Association’s (AAA) Committee on Accounting History suggested that “students are not given sufficient exposure to the historical contexts and antecedent environments in which present-day accounting practices and institutions emerged and gained acceptance” (AAA, 1970, p. 55), and stressed the intellectual value of studying accounting history in developing a greater awareness of “how. . . change actually occurs” (AAA, 1970, p. 53). How to study and theorise change in accounting has been a contested issue, with many of the more interpretive researchers endorsing Anthony Hopwood’s criticism of “traditional” approaches to accounting history:

Rather than being perceived as an outcome of processes that could make accounting what it was not, accounting has more frequently been seen as becoming what it should be. A teleological trajectory of development has provided a basis for understanding changes in the accounting craft. (Hopwood, 1988, p. 208)

Yet, if we think of accountants (let alone accounting historians) as “change agents”, we are implicitly ascribing agency to individuals and/or collectives. We are assuming that people can work towards particular goals and ends, attempting to solve problems, achieve desired outcomes and also avoid the undesirable, such as a repeat of governance failures arising from a spate of corporate collapses in which accounting and auditing were implicated (Clarke, Dean and Oliver, 1997; O’Connell, 2005). Those researchers who ascribe to what Burrell and Morgan (1979, p. 17) have referred to as the “sociology of regulation”, and view society as possessing “underlying unity and cohesiveness”, would assume the existence of a consensus as to what “making accounting better” would actually involve. However, those who ascribe to the “sociology of radical change”, which would include many accounting historians working within critical and interpretive theoretical frameworks, seek “alternatives rather than . . . acceptance of the *status quo*” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, p. 17). The danger is that, if there is fundamental disagreement as to what is “wrong” with accounting, indeed whether anything significant is wrong at all, then academic accounting historians may seek to avoid engagement in controversy.  Historians of accounting trained in the traditions of positive social science, where complying with core values of researcher neutrality and remaining within the scope of the empirical evidence tend to inhibit “speculation”, are likely to believe their role is merely to understand and explain, and possibly even to predict, particular changes.  However, they will be generally reluctant to act as advocates or opponents of specific accounting changes in historical context.

More traditional views of accounting history often characterise human actors as “rational economic men”, and hence explain their choices as the outcome of systematic thought based on seeking to achieve given ends – actors are seen as behaving purposefully but freely. Ironically, however, many (though not all) of the theoretical influences on the “new accounting history” (Miller *et al.*, 1991) are less comfortable with ascribing agency to human actors, perhaps regarding them as subject to social structures or discourses that represent relationships of power and knowledge which, as Michel Foucault put it, “quietly order us about” (quoted in Simon, 1971, p. 200). In such a theoretical setting, we can certainly study the preconditions for particular accounting changes, the mechanisms by which change manifests itself, and the consequences, both intended and unintended, of change. However, every change must be understood within its own context. Not only are we unable to extrapolate from specific histories to make recommendations about how to achieve changes in other contexts, or to make predictions about the outcomes of such changes, but the whole notion of a change *agent* is brought into question.

But our engagement as historians with accounting’s past, and its relationships with accounting’s present and possible futures, is a testimony that we believe we can make a difference. This introduces an important moral dimension that is implicit in the very notion of the change agent. An interesting insight on this is provided by Raymond Caldwell, a scholar of organisational change:

Almost all forms of agency, whether centred or decentred, are modes of enactment in practice that mix intentionality and moral action, power and knowledge. This is why all apparently expert or rational interventions in human affairs are subject to ethical scrutiny and self-questioning, in their formulation, planned outcomes and unintended consequences. This also explains why the ideal of the ‘change agent’ as an ‘unbiased facilitator’ of planned change has always been an intellectual and moral illusion. (Caldwell, 2005, p. 111)

Caldwell (2005, p. 111) notes the fragility of our “ideals of rational dialogue, practice and moral action”, and how this fragility threatens the central hope of many scholars, including accounting historians: the hope that we can make a difference. Yet without such a hope, does accounting history matter?

We would suggest two important ways in which accounting history can assist in effecting change. First, one way is with “histories that encourage self-consciousness about both the existence and the foundations of our customs and conventions” (Southgate, 2005, p. 176). If we are not aware of the ways in which accounting today is different from accounting in the past, and how accounting has come about (whether we regard the most cogent way of understanding this process of coming into being as involving notions of evolution, conditions of possibility, path dependency or some other explanatory scheme[[10]](#endnote-10)), then we are more likely to mistake contingent accounting ideas, practices and institutions, local in space and time, as “self-evident, universal and necessary” (Foucault, 1991, p. 76) and, therefore, as objects that cannot and should not be changed.

In the previous paragraph, “we” referred mainly to accounting academics and, to a lesser extent, practitioners. But these are not the only audiences for historians of accounting. The second way in which accounting history can assist in effecting change is by becoming more public. In recent years, the notion of “public history” has been employed by historiographers as a focus for studying how “those who are not professional historians acquire their sense of the past” (Tosh, 2008, p. 99, referring to Jordanova, 2006). Public history is a broad field, which embraces historical work carried out in the community and in organisations (this would include the compilation of oral histories – see Hammond and Sikka, 1996 – whereby members of communities narrate their own stories about how they use and are affected by accounting), the work of museums and heritage bodies to “promote the public consumption of the visible and tangible relics of the past” (Tosh, 2008, p. 100), and historians’ direct engagement through broadcast media, popular writing and interaction with policy-makers. Some forms of engagement may be ephemeral: for example, in March 2010, BBC Radio 4 broadcast a series of ten 15-minute programmes under the title *A Brief History of Double-Entry Bookkeeping*,[[11]](#endnote-11) in which several leading historians of accounting participated. Others may be more long lasting: for example, the Theatre and Performance Collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, exhibits the account book for the original production of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, with a commentary that draws visitors’ attention to the way in which the accounting record shows how takings fell significantly after Wilde’s arrest for gross indecency in late April 1895 (Nikkhah, 2009).

The contribution of accounting historians to public history can include, at one end of the range, quite local advice and support to curators of museums, galleries and heritage locations in how to display accounting records most effectively to enhance general understanding of what the records reveal, and the significance of the records and the accounting processes that they document. At the other end, it can embrace the writing of scholarly but, at the same time, general-interest studies such as Edgar Jones’s history of Price Waterhouse (Jones, 1995), Rob Linn’s *Power, Progress and Profit: A History of the Australian Accounting Profession* (Linn, 1996) or Tom King’s *More Than a Numbers Game: A Brief History of Accounting* (King, 2006). Such measures can potentially sensitise a broader range of human subjects to the power of accounting, making it more likely that they will be able to use accounting positively while seeking emancipation from accounting’s more negative aspects – not only changing accounting but using accounting itself as an instrument of change within organisations, in particular, and within society, in general.

On this point, there is also ground for accounting historians to engage in more “direct action” in shaping the policy debates and political decision making processes from which much accounting practice is derived. This can include, for example, making use of historical perspectives in submissions to accounting standard-setting bodies and other regulatory agencies, in articles and letters prepared for professional journals and more mainstream media, and in the educational programs – at both university and professional levels – which shape the viewpoints and outlooks of future accounting practitioners. Accounting historians have the opportunity, and perhaps the responsibility, to help ensure that policy makers are historically informed. Of course, that cannot ensure historically informed policy, but it may at least ameliorate the risks associated with proceeding without knowledge of the relevant past. Recurring cycles of corporate failures in which accounting and auditing are fundamentally implicated stand as an obvious example of an area in which the lessons of the past are likely to be relevant to policy formulation. Accounting historians can also assist policy makers in appreciating the potential consequences, whether intended or not, of proposed accounting change.

**5. Conclusion**

The question posed in the title of this article – “Does accounting history matter?” – has been answered in the affirmative. However, in responding to this question various strategies have been advanced for making accounting history matter *more*. These strategies commence with the familiar, but still ongoing, need to ensure that misconceptions about the relevance and contribution of accounting history research are addressed. Accounting historians have also been encouraged to emphasise the contemporary relevance and implications of their work, to engage with accounting scholars whose research is not primarily historical as well as scholars whose research field is not accounting, to write in an informative and engaging way, and to articulate their historical methodologies with clarity and seek their continued development. The idealised outcome of these strategies would be accounting historians who function as effective “change agents” and are, for example, involved in shaping public opinion, the agendas of professional associations and public policy decisions.

The basic premise underlying our conclusion that accounting history matters is that as time unceasingly transforms the present into the past it does so without erasing its relevance. What has gone before remains important to understanding and acting in the present and anticipating and preparing for the future. As Mark Twain is said to have commented, “History never repeats itself but it rhymes”.[[12]](#endnote-12) That said, it is one thing to *assert* that accounting history matters, but quite another to *demonstrate* that it does. The fact that much of our attention in this article has been directed to strategies for advancing the impact of historical research in accounting carries with it some implicit equivocation regarding the present status of the discipline. Indeed, the mere fact that we are asking the question posed in the title might be interpreted as a defensive manoeuvre, or at least an admission of some doubt. We suspect that there are many academic and professional disciplines that feel no need to ask if their research matters. Yet, the practical relevance of the whole field of accounting research has often been questioned (West, 2003, ch. 6). In contemplating such issues it must also be remembered that mere enthusiasm for historical research is not evidence that it matters.

What, then, is the way forward? Those who rely upon extravagant claims about inferior products are condemned, at best, to short-term success. Similarly, in a competitive world, success is likely to elude those who have a sound product but are reticent in their advocacy for it. The path to ensuring that accounting history matters – and continues to matter more over time – is for accounting history scholars to achieve the highest standards in their work *and* to act as effective advocates for it. Success in the latter, of course, is dependent on success in the former.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors are grateful to the two referees for their helpful comments on an earlier version of the paper as well as to those participants at the sixth *Accounting History* International Conference who posed questions and made comments during the Panel presentation in Wellington in August 2010.

**Notes**

**References**

American Accounting Association (1970), “Committee on Accounting History”, *The Accounting Review*, Vol. 45 (supp.), pp.52-64.

Barth, M.E., Beaver, W.H. and Landsman, W.R. (2001), “The Relevance of the Value Relevance Literature for Financial Accounting Standard Setting: Another View”, *Journal of Accounting & Economics*, Vol.31, Nos.1-3, pp.77-104.

Brown, R. (ed.) (1905), *A History of Accounting and Accountants*, Edinburgh: T. C. and E. C. Jack.

Burrell, G. and Morgan, G. (1979), *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis*, Aldershot: Gower.

Caldwell, R. (2005), “Things Fall Apart? Discourses on Agency and Change in Organizations”, *Human Relations*, Vol.58, No.1, pp.83-114.

Carnegie, G.D. and Napier, C.J. (1996), “Critical and Interpretive Histories: Insights into Accounting’s Present and Future Through its Past”, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol.9, No.3, pp.7-39.

Carnegie, G.D. and Napier, C.J. (2002), “Exploring Comparative International Accounting History”, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 5, pp. 689-718.

Carnegie, G.D. and Napier, C.J. (2010), “Traditional Accountants and Business Professionals: Portraying the Accounting Profession after Enron”, *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol.35, No.3, pp.360-376.

Carnegie, G.D. and West, B.P. (2005), “Making Accounting Accountable in the Public Sector”, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, Vol.16, No.7, pp.905–28.

Clarke, F.L., Dean, G.W. and Oliver, K.G. (1997), *Corporate Collapse: Regulatory, Accounting and Ethical Failure*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cummings, L. and St Leon, M.V. (2009), “Juggling the Books: The Use of Accounting Information in Circus in Australia”, *Accounting History*, Vol.14, Nos.1/2, pp.11-33.

Evans, R. J. (1997), *In Defence of History*, London: Granta Books.

Fleischman, R.K., Mills, P.A. and Tyson, T.N.(1996), “A Theoretical Primer for Evaluating and Conducting Historical Research in Accounting”, *Accounting History,* Vol.1, No.1, pp.55-75.

Foucault, M. (1991), “Questions of Method”, in Burchell, G., Gordon, C. and Miller, P. (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, pp.73-86.

Gaffikin, M. (2011), “What is (Accounting) History?”, *Accounting History*, Vol.16, No.3, forthcoming.

Gallagher, S. (2011), “Rankings Can’t Measure Up”, *The Australian* (Higher Education Supplement), 29 June, p. 36.

Gomes, D. (2008), “The Interplay of Conceptions of Accounting and Schools of Thought in Accounting History”, *Accounting History*, Vol.13, No.4, pp. 479-509.

Guthrie, J. and Parker, L.D. (2006), “The Coming Out of Accounting Research Specialisms”, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal,* Vol.19, No.1, pp.5-16.

Hamerow, T.S. (1987), *Reflections on History and Historians,* Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Hammond, T. and Sikka, P. (1996), “Radicalizing Accounting History: The Potential of Oral History”, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol.9, No.3, pp.79-97.

Heller, A. (1982), *A Theory of History*, London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Holthausen, R.W. and Watts, R.L. (2001), “The Relevance of the Value-Relevance Literature for Financial Accounting Standard Setting”, *Journal of Accounting & Economics*, Vol.31, Nos.1-3, pp.3-75.

Hopwood, A.G. (1988), “The Archaeology of Accounting Systems”, *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol.12, No.3, pp.207-234.

Hopwood, A.G. (2000), “Understanding Financial Accounting Practice”, *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol.25, No.8, pp.763-766.

Hopwood, A.G. (2007), “Whither Accounting Research?”, *The Accounting Review*, Vol.82, No.5, pp.1365-1374.

Hopwood, A.G. and Miller, P. (eds.) (1994), *Accounting as Social and Institutional Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Howard, M. (1991), *The Lessons of History*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Jeacle, I. (2008), “Accounting and the Annual General Meeting: The Case of the Edinburgh University Tea Club, 1920-45”, *Accounting History*, Vol.13, No.4, pp.451-478.

Jeacle, I. (2009) “Going to the Movies: Accounting and Twentieth Century Cinema”, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol.22, No.5, pp.677-708.

Jones, E. (1995), *True and Fair: A History of Price Waterhouse*, London: Hamish Hamilton.

Jordanova, L. (2006), *History in Practice*, 2nd edition, London: Hodder Arnold.

King, T.A. (2006), *More Than a Numbers Game: A Brief History of Accounting*, Hoboken: John Wiley.

Lerner, G. (1997), *Why History Matters: Life and Thought*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Linn, R. (1996), *Power, Progress and Profit: A History of the Australian Accounting Profession*, Melbourne: Australian Society of Certified Practising Accountants.

Miller, P. (1994), “Accounting as Social and Institutional Practice: An Introduction”, in Hopwood, A.G. and Miller, P. (eds.), *Accounting as Social and Institutional Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.1-39.

Miller, P., Hopper, T. and Laughlin, R. (1991), “The New Accounting History: An Introduction”, *Accounting, Organizations and Society,* Vol.16, Nos.5/6, pp.395-403.

Mills, P.A. (1993), “Accounting History as Social Science: A Cautionary Note”, *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol.18, Nos.7/8, pp.801-803.

Napier, C.J. (1989), “Research Directions in Accounting History”, *British Accounting Review*, Vol.21, No.3, pp.237-254.

Napier, C.J. (2006), “Accounts of Change: 30 Years of Historical Accounting Research”, *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol.31, Nos.4/5, pp. 445-507.

Napier, C.J. (2009), “The Logic of Pension Accounting”, *Accounting and Business Research*, Vol.39, No.3, pp.231-249.

Nikkhah, R. (2009), “That’s Entertainment: New Costumes at the Victoria and Albert Museum”, *The Telegraph Online*, 14 March. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/4991186/Thats-entertainment-new-costumes-at-the-Victoria-and-Albert-Museum.html> (accessed on 8 June 2011).

O’Connell, B. (2005), “Editorial: Accounting and Audit Failure within Corporate Collapse”, *Accounting History*, Vol.10, No.3, pp.5-10.

Oldroyd, D. (1999), “Historiography, Causality, and Positioning: An Unsystematic View of Accounting History”, *Accounting Historians Journal*, Vol.26, No.1, pp.83-102.

Parker, L.D. (1997), “Informing Historical Research in Accounting and Management: Traditions, Philosophies and Opportunities”, *Accounting Historians Journal*, Vol.24, No.2, pp.111-149.

Parker, L.D. **(**1999), “Historiography for the New Millennium: Adventures in Accounting and Management”, *Accounting History*, Vol.4, No.2, pp.11-42.

Parker, L.D. (2004), “‘Presenting the Past’: Perspectives on Time for Accounting History”, *Accounting, Business and Financial History*, Vol.14, No.1, pp.1-27.

Parker, R.H. (1971), “Some International Aspects of Accounting”, *Journal of Business Finance*, Vol.3, No.4, pp.29-36.

Parker, R.H. (1993), “The Scope of Accounting History; A Note”, *Abacus*, Vol.29, No.1, pp.106-110.

Plott, C.R. and Sunder, S. (1981), “A Synthesis”, *Journal of Accounting Research*, Vol.19 (supp.), pp.227-239.

Plumb, J.H. (1988), *The Making of An Historian: The Collected Essays of J.H. Plumb,* New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Posner, E. (2010), “Sequence as Explanation: The International Politics of Accounting Standards”, *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol.17, No.4, pp.639-664.

Power, M. (2010), “Fair Value Accounting, Financial Economics and the Transformation of Reliability”, *Accounting and Business Research*, Vol.40, No.3, pp.197-210.

Previts, G.J. and Bricker, R. (1994), “Fact and Theory in Accounting Research: Presentmindedness and Capital Market Research”, *Contemporary Accounting Research*, Vol.10, No.2, pp.625-641.

Previts, G.J., Parker, L.D. and Coffman, E.N.(1990a), **“**Accounting History: Definition and Relevance”, *Abacus*, Vol.26, No.1, pp.1-15.

Previts, G.J., Parker, L.D. and Coffman, E.N. (1990b), “An Accounting Historiography: Subject Matter and Methodology”, *Abacus*, Vol.26, No.2, pp.136-158.

Sánchez-Matamoros, J.B. and Gutiérrez Hidalgo, F. (2011), “Publishing Patterns of Accounting History Research in Generalist Journals: Lessons from the Past”, *Accounting History*, Vol. 16, No. 3, forthcoming.

Schwartz, B., Williams, S. and Williams, P.F. (2005), “US Doctoral Students’ Familiarity with Accounting Journals: Insights into the Structure of the US Academy”, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, Vol.16, No.3, pp.327-348.

Simon, J.K. (1971), “A Conversation with Michel Foucault”, *Partisan Review*, Vol.38, No.2, pp.192-201.

Southgate, B. (2005), *What is History For?* Abingdon: Routledge.

Stanford, M.(1986), *The Nature of Historical Knowledge,* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Stanford, M.(1994), *A Companion to the Study of History,* Oxford: Blackwell.

Stanford, M.(1998), *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, Massachusetts: Blackwell.

Tholfsen, T.R. (1967), *Historical Thinking: An Introduction*, New York: Harper & Row.

Tosh, J. (2008), *Why History Matters*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Tosh, J. (2010), *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, revised 5th edition, London: Longman.

Walker, S.P. (2008), “Innovation, Convergence and Argument without End in Accounting History”, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol.21, No.2, pp.296–322.

Walker, S.P. (2011), “Editorial”, *Accounting History Review*, Vol.21, No.1, pp.1-5.

Warren, R.P. (1961), *The Legacy of the Civil War*, New York: Random House.

Waymire, G.B. and Basu, S. (2007), “Accounting is an Evolved Economic Institution”, *Foundations and Trends in Accounting*, Vol.2, Nos.1/2, pp.1-174.

West, B.P. (2003), *Professionalism and Accounting Rules*, London and New York: Routledge.

West, B.P. and Carnegie, G.D. (2010), “Accounting’s Chaotic Margins: Financial Reporting of the Library Collections of Australia’s Public Universities, 2002-2006”, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol.23, No.2, pp.201-228.

Williams, P.F., Jenkins, J.G. and Ingraham, L. (2006), “The Winnowing Away of Behavioral Accounting Research in the US: The Process for Anointing Academic Elites”, *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol.31, No.8, pp.783-818.

1. This paper draws upon the deliberations of a Panel Discussion which addressed this question at the sixth *Accounting History* International Conference held in Wellington, New Zealand in August 2010. The panellists were the last four named authors. The first named author took responsibility for initiating this overview paper based on the speakers’ notes, including bullet point summaries, and an audio tape of the session’s proceedings. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Though *how* accounting matters may be a matter of dispute. In the financial reporting area alone, there is fierce debate between those who consider that the existence of a statistical association between accounting numbers and security prices is evidence of “value-relevance” (for example, Barth, Beaver and Landsman, 2001) and those who view such an association merely as evidence that financial reports and share prices reflect broadly the same underlying information, with financial reporting seen mainly in the context of contracts between corporate stakeholders (Holthausen and Watts, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. It is not just historical accounting research that suffers from the increasing narrowness of focus exhibited by accounting academics and doctoral students: it has been suggested (see, for example, Schwartz, Williams and Williams, 2005; Williams, Jenkins and Ingraham, 2006; Hopwood, 2007) that even relatively “mainstream” accounting research traditions such as behavioural accounting research currently have to struggle against the hegemony of what has been labelled by its proponents as “archival-empirical” research (Napier, 2006, p. 450). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A possible cost of this has been that critical and interpretive historical studies of traditional financial accounting have been comparatively rare: as Hopwood (2000, p. 763) has noted, “The institutional and social aspects of financial accounting are still relatively unexplored”. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In spite of accounting history research appearing regularly within the non-specialist journals mentioned, Sánchez-Matamoros and Gutiérrez Hidalgo (2011) find that the discipline still has a relatively limited presence across the broad range of journals that comprise the accounting literature. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For a discussion of the rationales underlying the transformation of *Accounting, Business and Financial History* into *Accounting History Review* see Walker (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Gallagher (2011) for a general discussion of the growing importance and impact of interdisciplinary research. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Though without the original source – this remark, with the attribution to Voltaire, can be found widely on the internet (e.g. at <http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/history/quotations/historiography.html> – accessed 18 April 2011; or <http://www.williamcronon.net/handouts/szasz_history_quotations.pdf> – accessed 8 June 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Refer to her many books (published by St Martins Press/Macmillan), including *Great Catherine* (1995), *Great Harry* (1997) and *Bloody Mary* (1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Recent examples of studies using these approaches would include the evolutionary accounting history of Waymire and Basu (2007), the investigation into the conditions of possibility for the emergence of fair value accounting carried out by Power (2010), and the study of the path-dependency underlying the global dominance of International Financial Reporting Standards over US Generally Accepted Accounting Principles undertaken by Posner (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Produced and presented by Jolyon Jenkins: see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00r401p> (accessed 8 June 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Though without the original source – the remark, with the attribution to Mark Twain, can be found widely on the internet (e.g. at http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/rhymes.html – accessed 20 June 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)