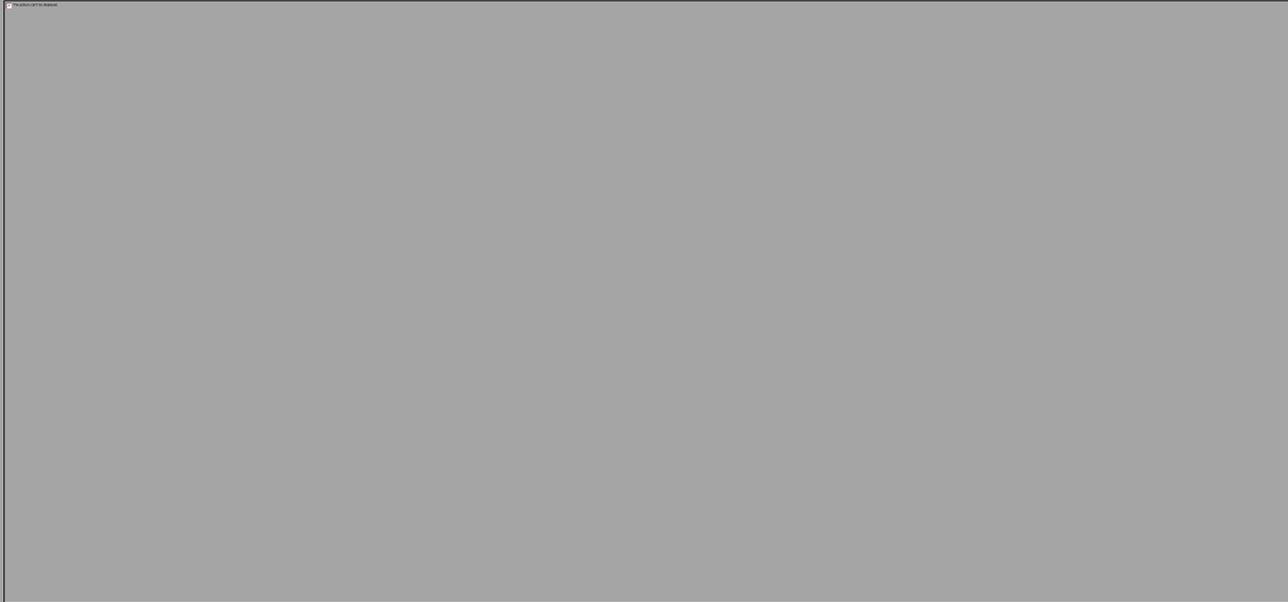


*Erik 7. Larson's Dead Wake  
and the Field of Popular History*

A talk by Paul Kopperman  
Benton County Public Library  
September 14, 2016

# **I. Why write history?**

## **A. Need**



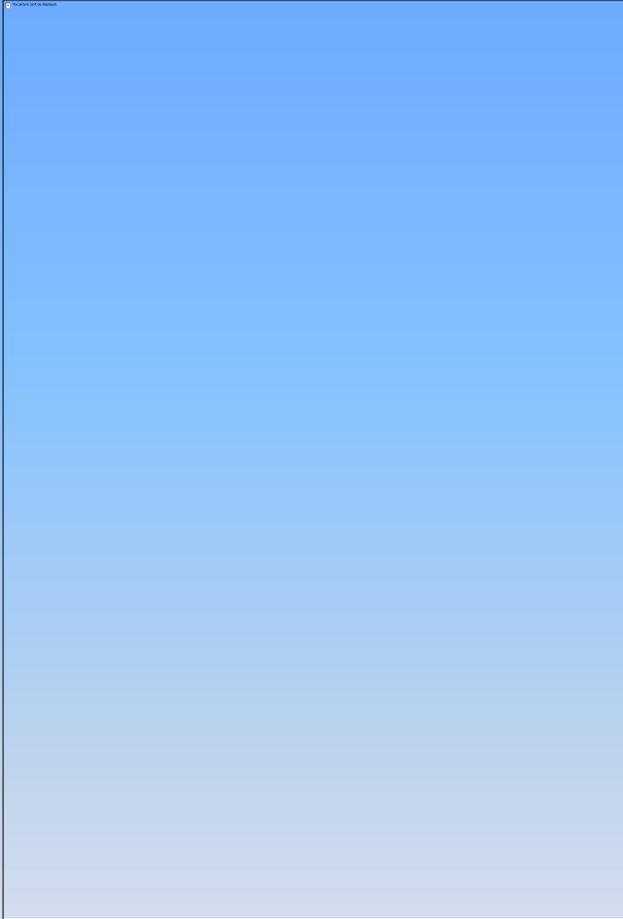
**B. Approval from peers, critics, and readers**

**C. For enjoyment**

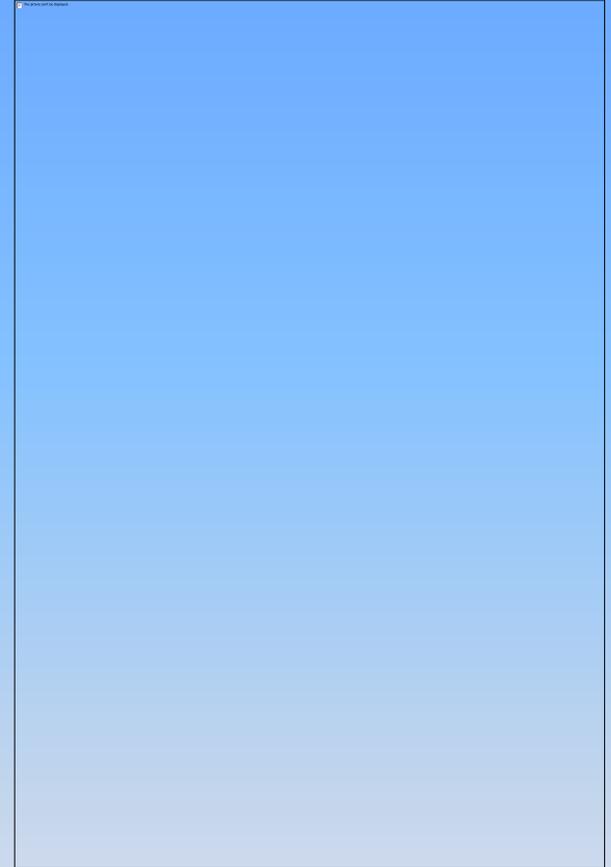
**D. To teach**

# **II. What popular history is not; monograph**

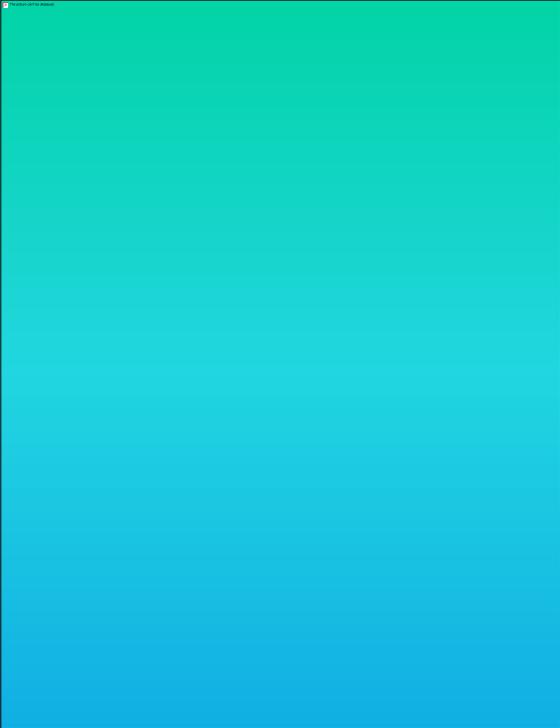
# III. Lineage



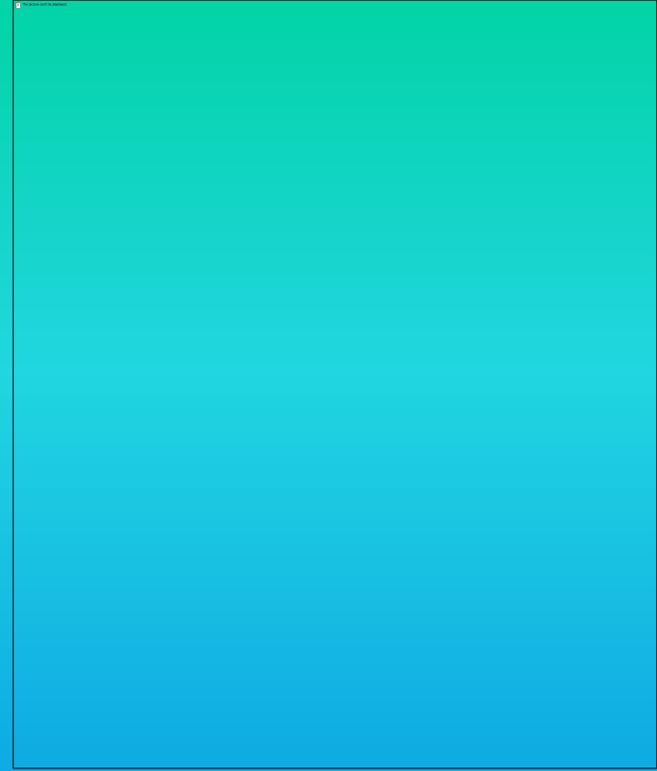
**Herodotus**  
**c.484-c.425 b.c.e.**  
**Roman copy of bust**



**Thucydides**  
**c.460-c.400 b.c.e.**  
**Cast from Roman copy**  
**Pushkin Museum**



**Sir Walter Scott**  
**1771-1832**



**James Fenimore Cooper**  
**1789-1851**

**Macaulay diary entry,  
Jan. 1839: “I really think  
posterity will not  
willingly let my book  
die.”**

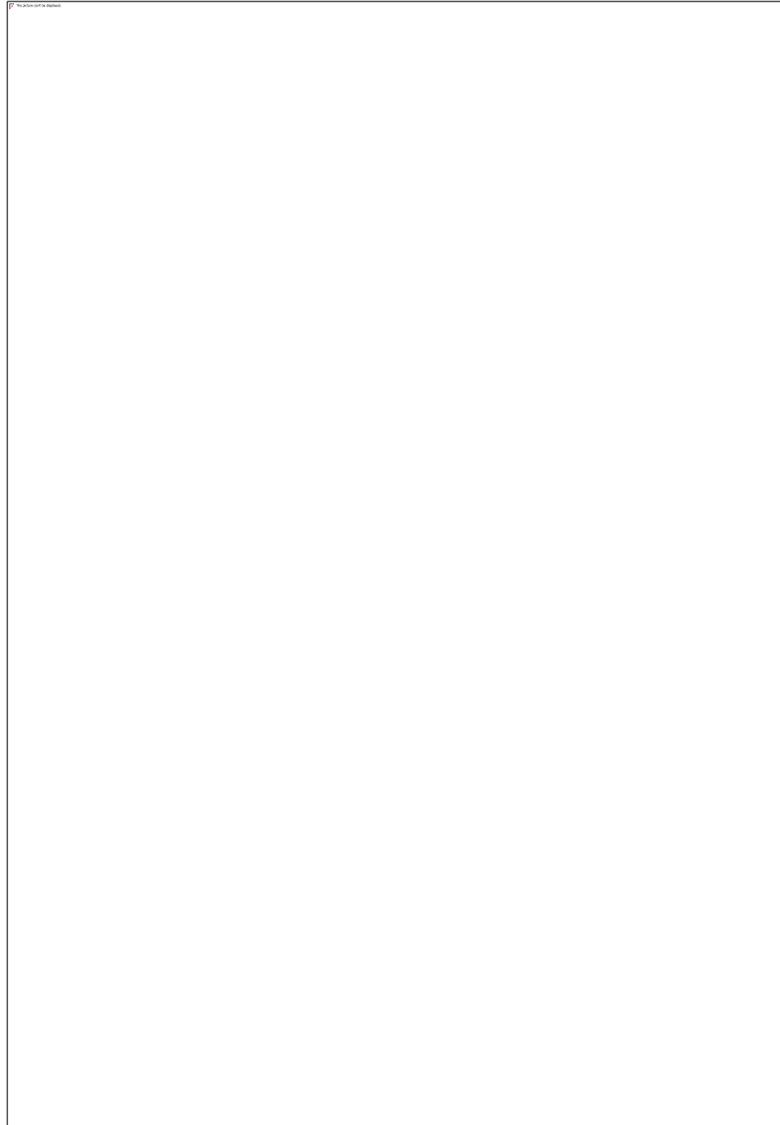
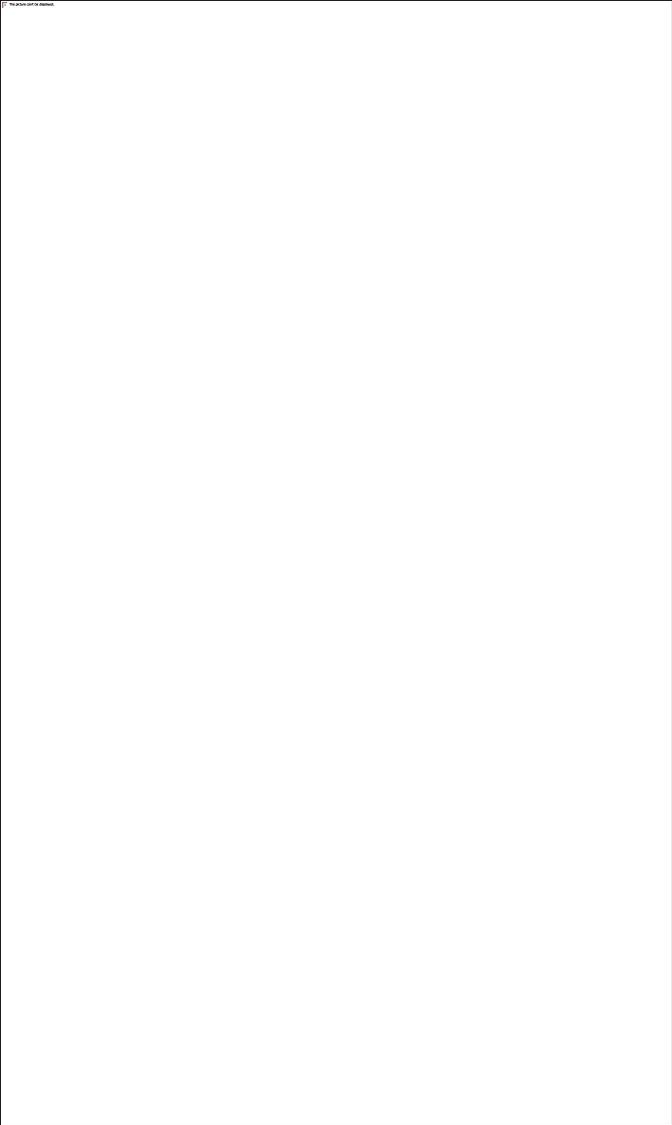
**Thomas Babington Macaulay  
1800-1859  
Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge**

# **IV. Common themes of popular history**

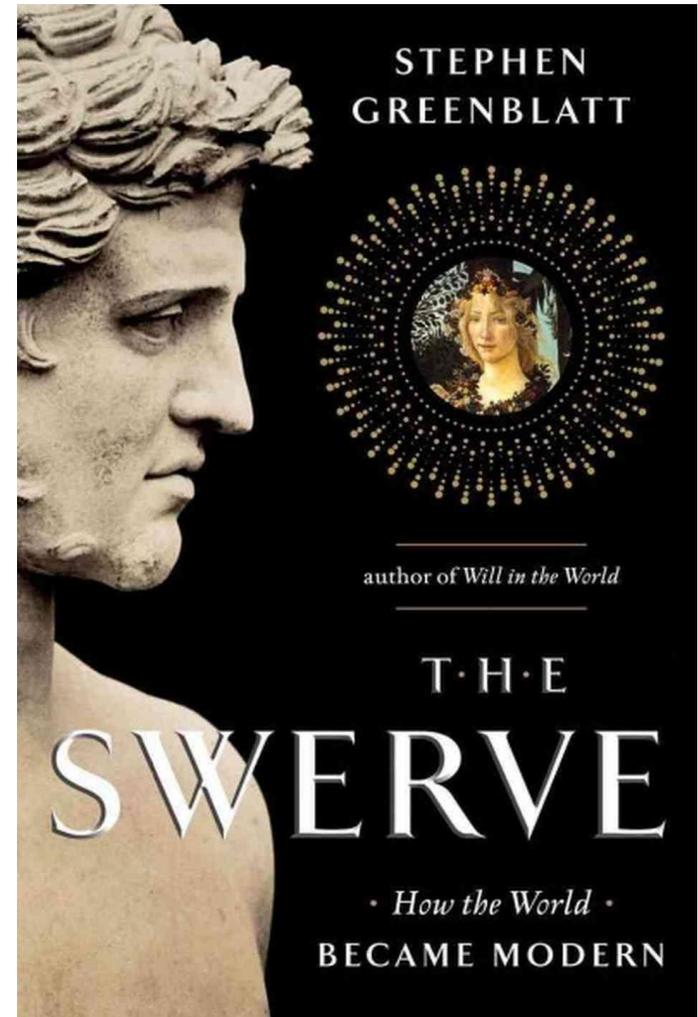
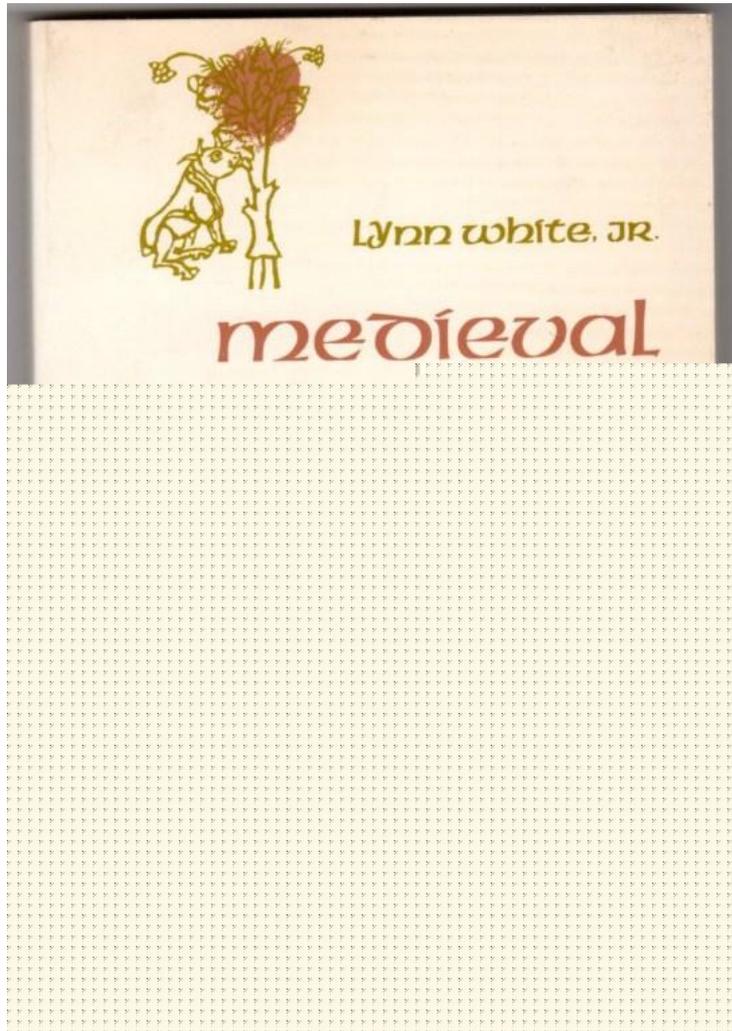
## **A. Epic**



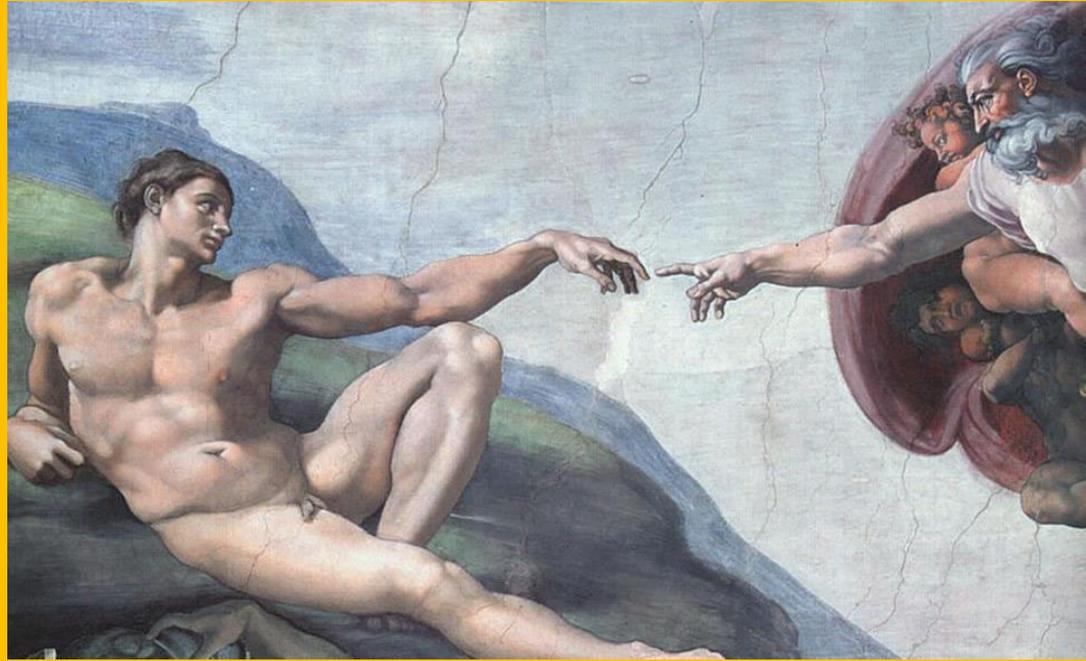
**Will (1885-1981) and Ariel (1898-1981) Durant**



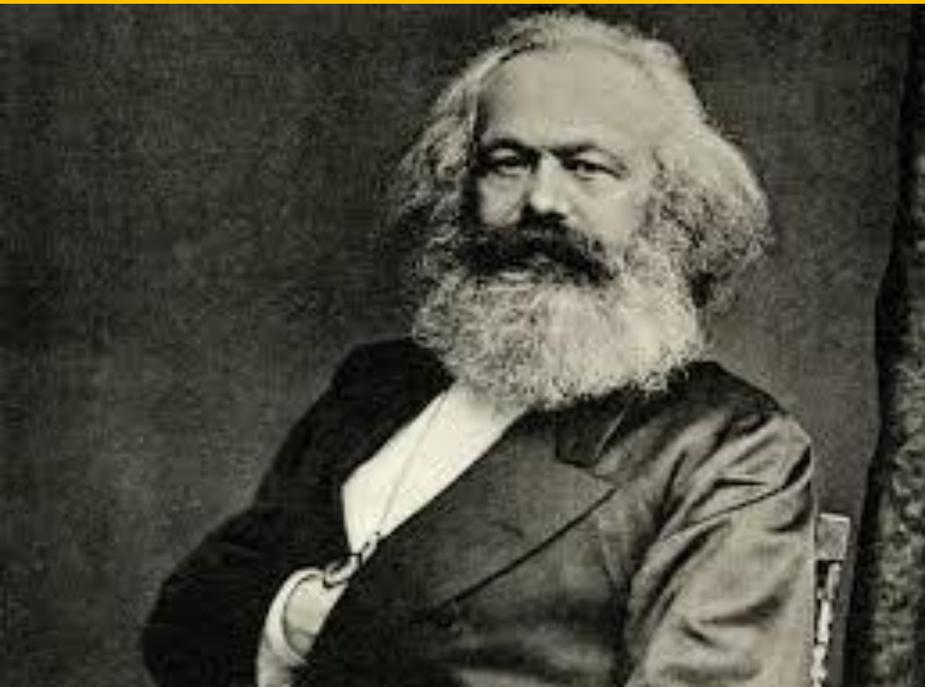
# B. Connections



**C. History –  
shape &  
shapers;  
determinism,**



**Above, the creation of man,  
Sistine Chapel  
By Michelangelo**



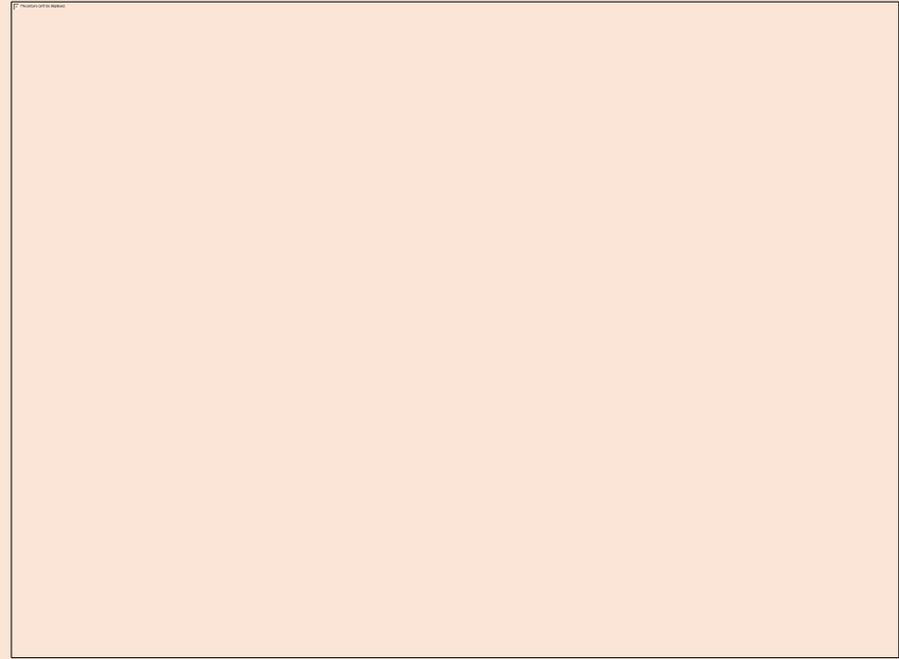
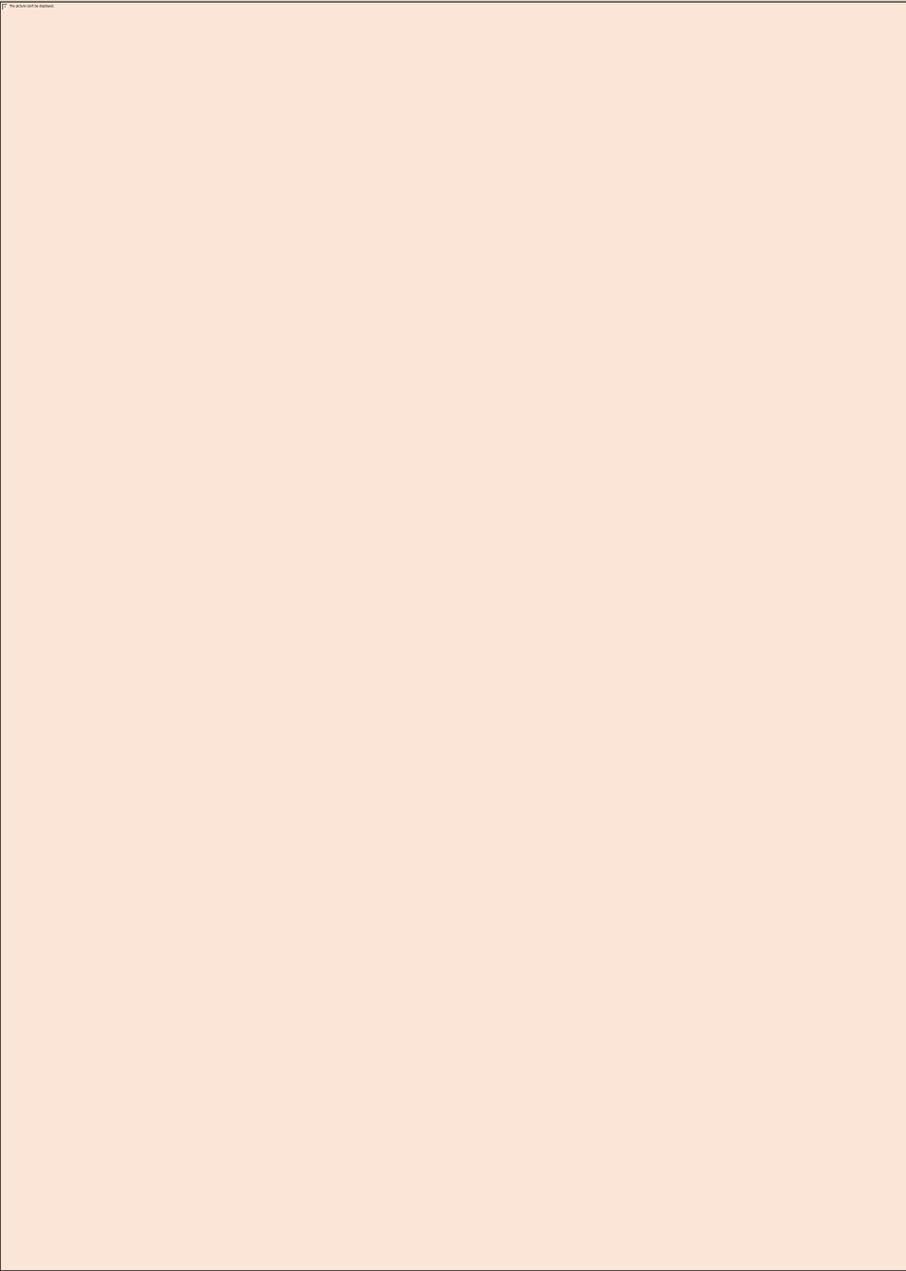
**Left, Karl Marx, 1818-1883**

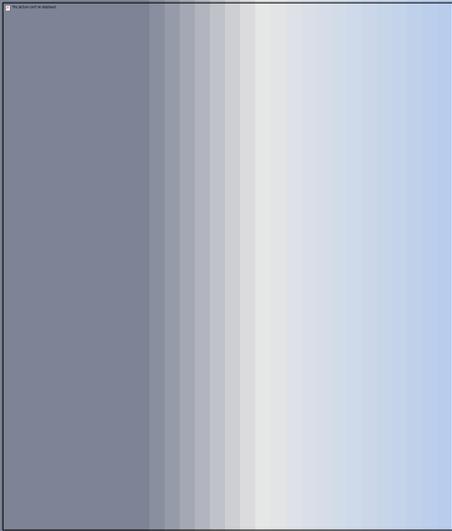
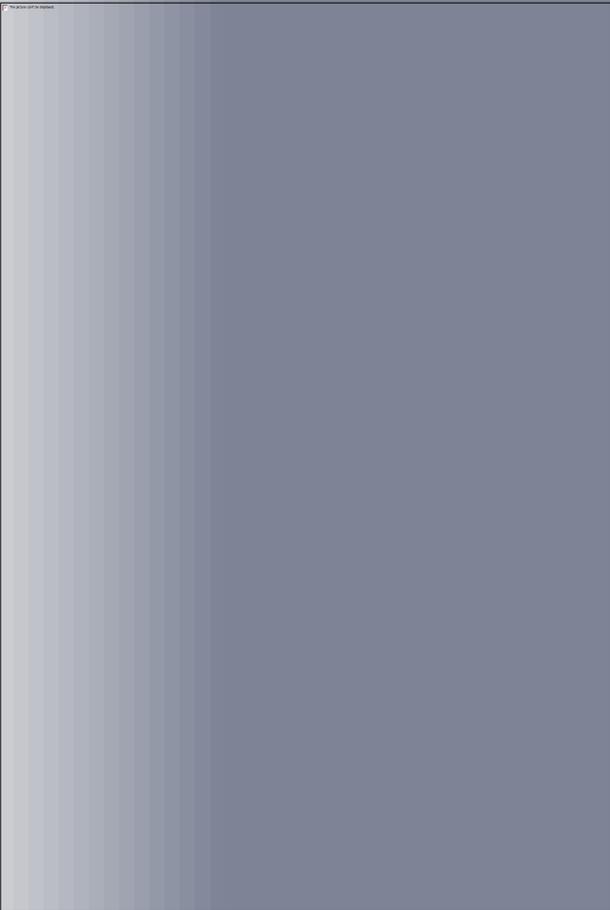
# contingency (Pascal), counter-factual history, “great man”

**Cleopatra  
69-30 b.c.e.**

**Five minutes from death, Franz Ferdinand and wife enter car at Sarajevo, June 28, 1914**

# D. Biography



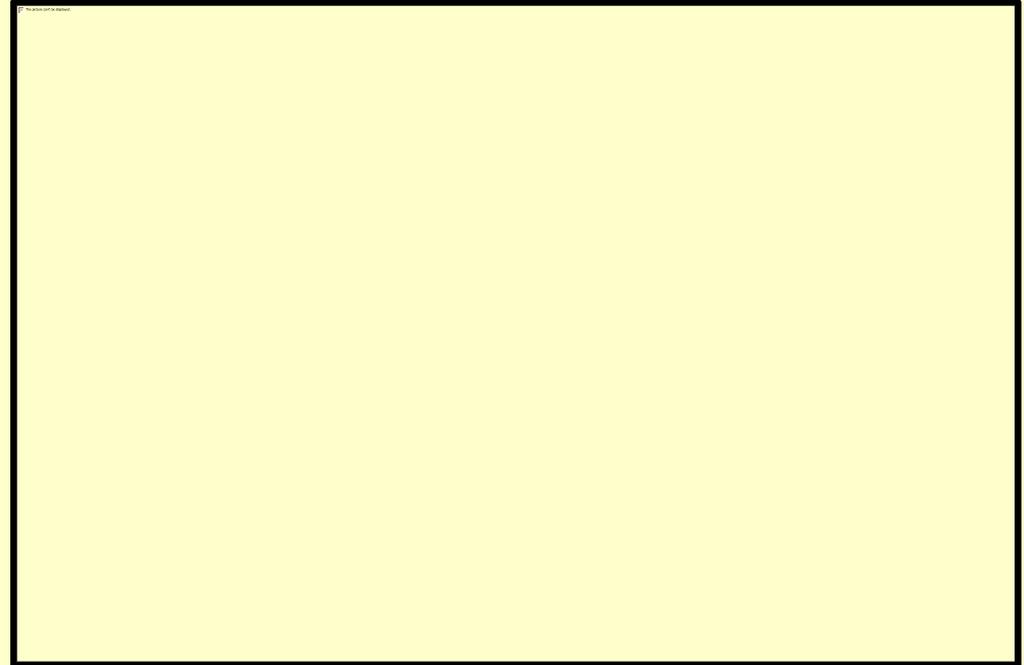


**Bell Irvin Wiley**  
**1906-1980**

# E. War

# **V. Expectations of the popular historian --**

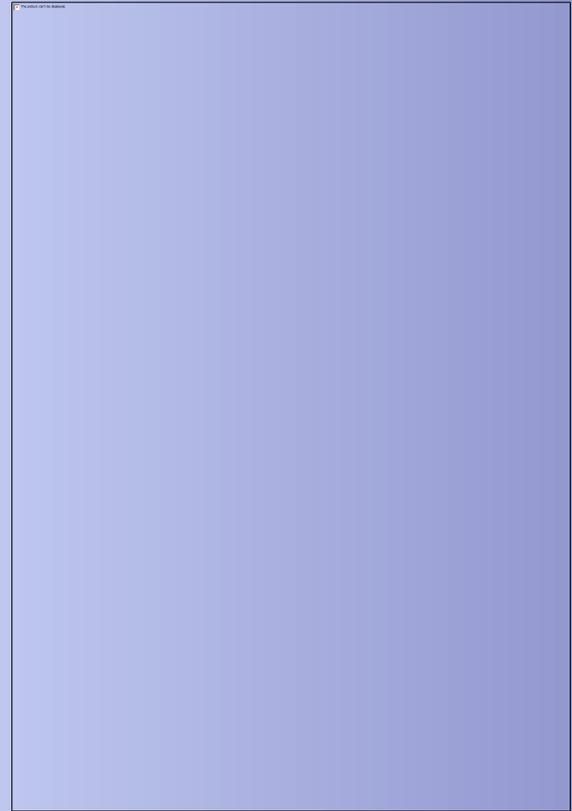
**Barbara Tuchman  
1913-1989**



**“The author’s object should be to hold the reader’s attention. I want the reader to turn the page and keep on turning until the end. This is accomplished only when the narrative moves steadily ahead, not when it comes to a weary standstill, overloaded with every item uncovered in the research.”**

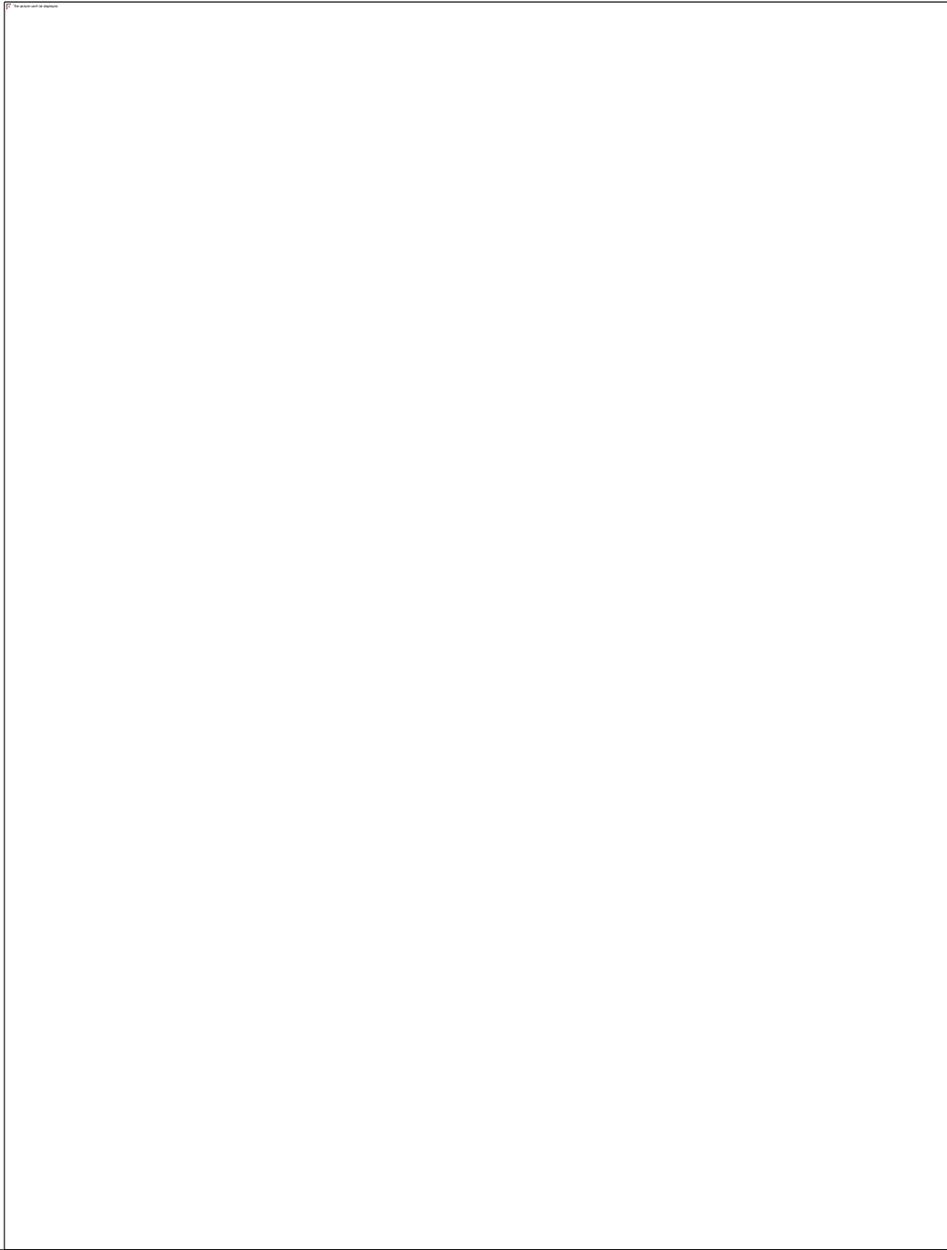
**-- Talk given at National Portrait Gallery, 1978**

# and the price to be paid; Mattingly



# **VI. Who writes popular history?**

# VII. A book and an author





**Erik Larson, b. 1954  
NY Daily News**

***The Naked Consumer: How Our Private Lives Become Public Commodities (1992)***

***Lethal Passage: How the Travels of a Single Handgun Expose the Roots of America's Gun Crisis (1994)***

***Isaac's Storm: A Man, a Time, and the Deadliest Hurricane in History (1999)***

***The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic and Madness at the Fair That Changed America (2002)***

***Thunderstruck (2006)***

***In The Garden of Beasts: Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin (2011)***

***Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania (2015)***

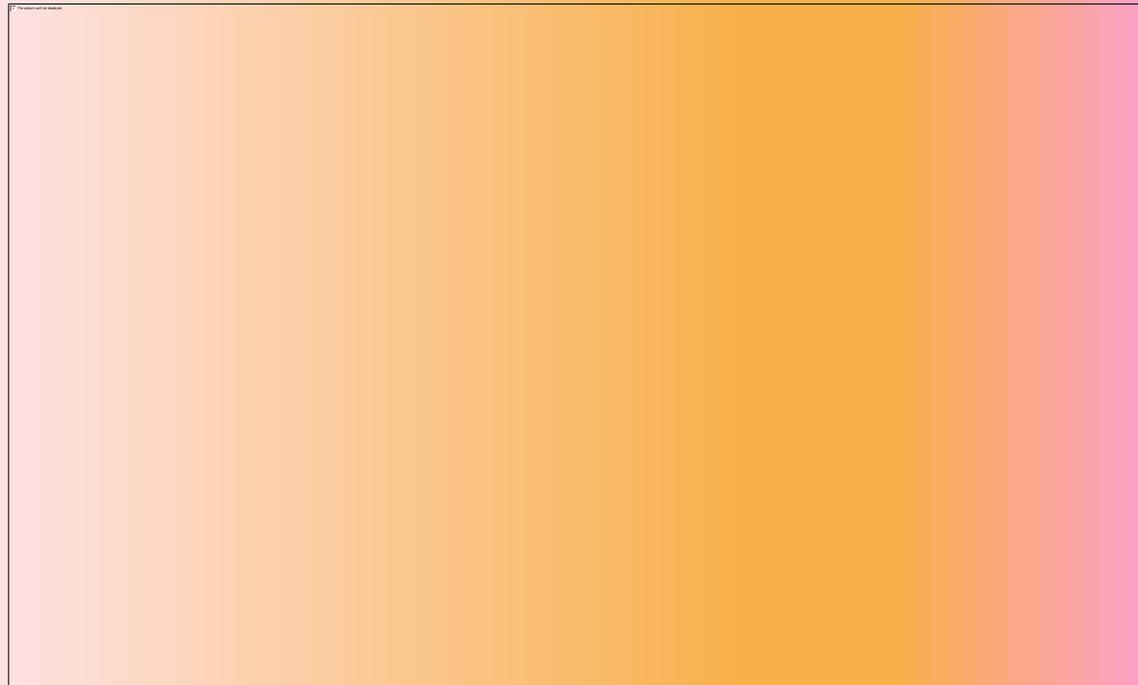




# A. Cast of characters



**William Thomas Turner**  
**1856-1933**  
**1914 photo**

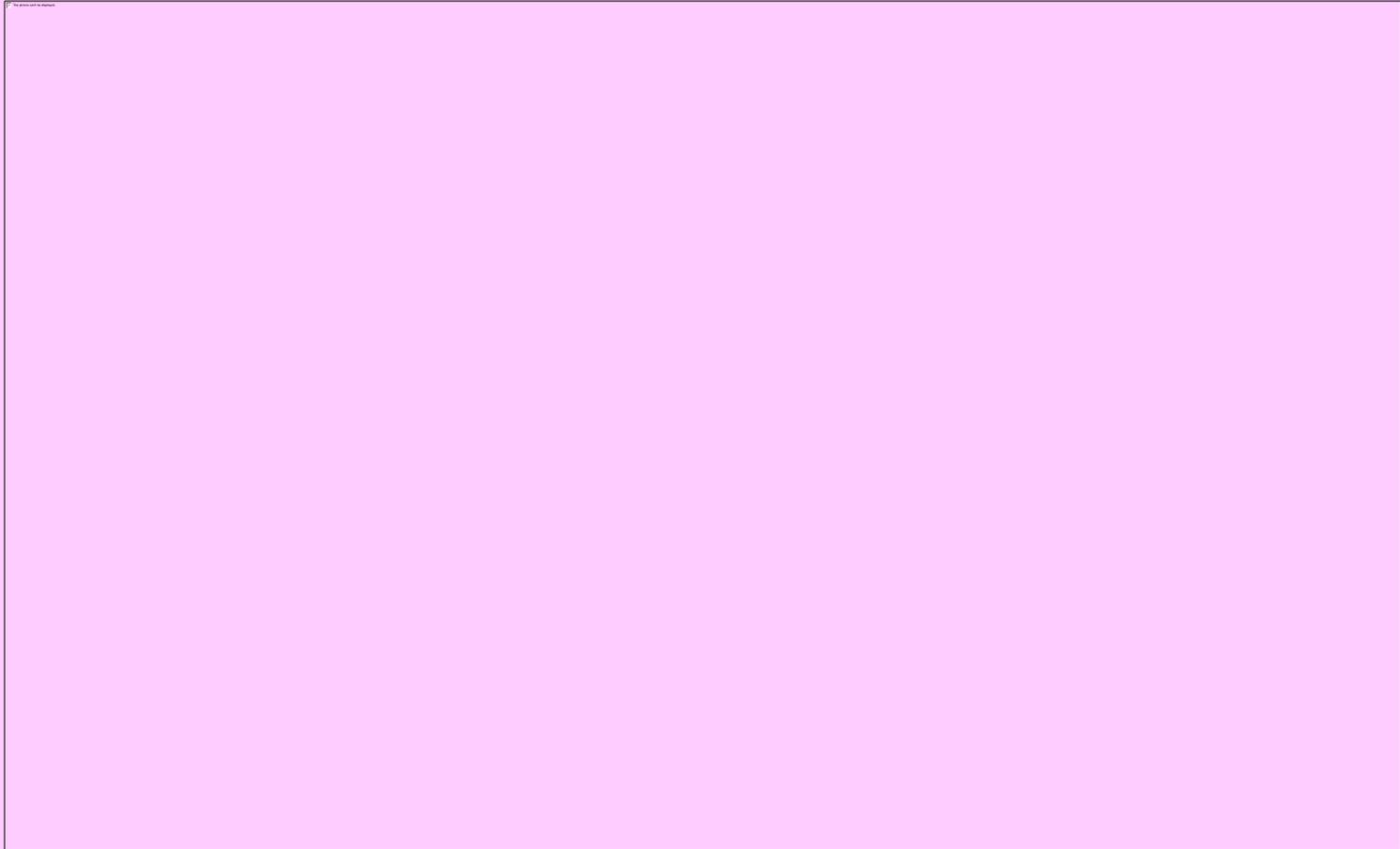


**Walther Schwieger**  
**1885-1917**  
**(right) damaged**  
**U-20 aground on**  
**Danish coast**

**Charles Lauriat**  
**1884-1969**

**Alfred Vanderbilt**  
**1877-1915**

**Theodate Pope**  
**1867-1946**



**Edith Galt (1872-1961) and Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924)**

## **B. Questionable decisions, bad luck**

**“Vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or of any of her allies, are liable to destruction” and those who travel on them “do so at their own risk.”**

**-- Ad that German Embassy in Washington placed in New York newspapers just before *Lusitania* sailed**

**“Passengers had been thinking, dreaming, sleeping, and eating submarines.”**

**-- Statement of passenger, Oliver Bernard**

**Larson: “I frankly cannot imagine boarding the Lusitania, knowing that the German Embassy had just posted a stern warning against travel in the ‘war zone.’ ... Honestly, what were those poor people thinking?”**

**“[*Lusitania*] was coming directly at us. She could not have steered a more perfect course if she had deliberately tried to give us a dead shot.”**

**-- Schwieger's recollection**

**“[That the ship] was not sent through the North Channel is inexplicable.”**

**-- Entry in Schwieger's log**

## **C. Assessing Larson**

### **1. Choices in style and substance**

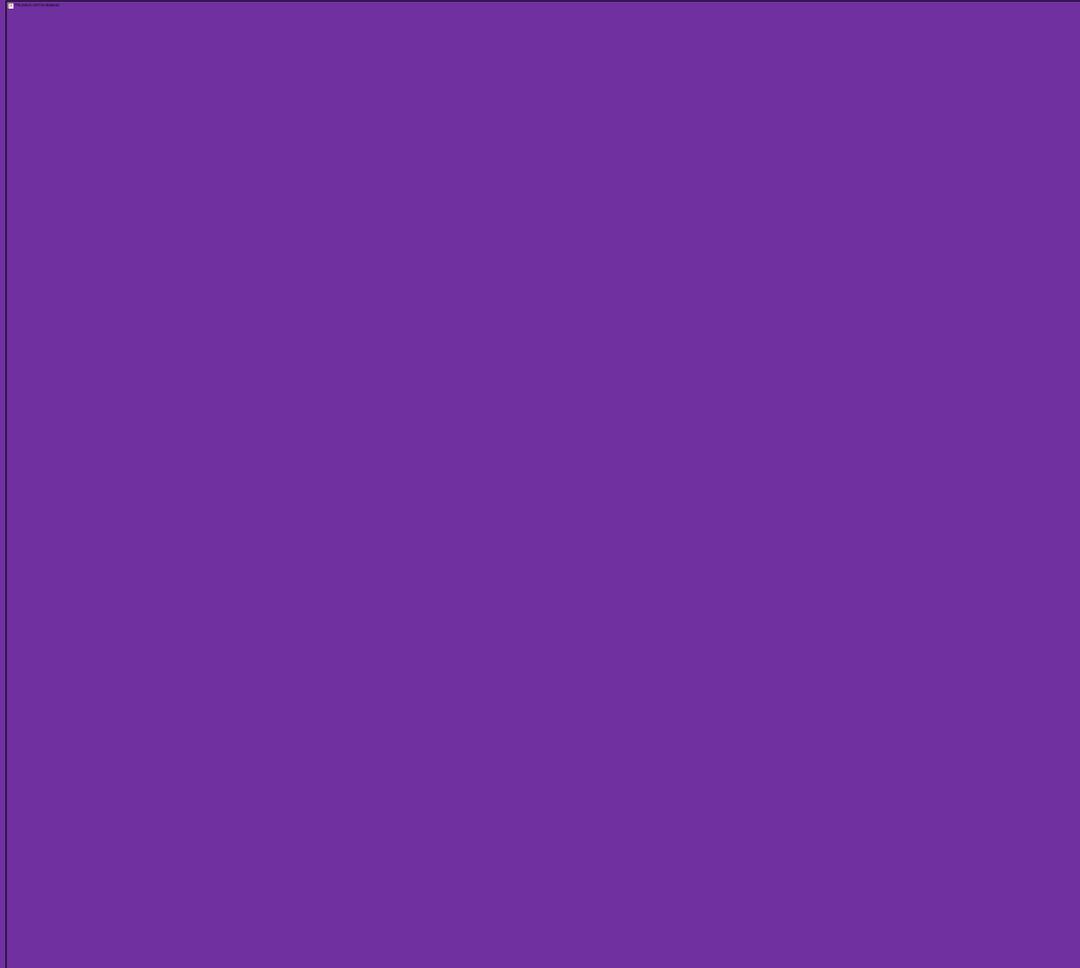
**“The ship was sinking with unbelievable rapidity. There was a terrific panic on her deck. Overcrowded lifeboats, fairly torn from their positions, dropped into the water. Desperate people ran helplessly up and down the decks. Men and women jumped into the water and tried to swim to empty, overturned lifeboats. It was the most terrible sight I have ever seen. It was impossible for me to give any help. I could have saved only a handful.”**

**-- Schwieger's reminiscence**

**“I know you must be tempted to have most terrible imaginings; may I tell you that although it was very awful, it was not so ghastly as you are sure to imagine it.... [The passengers] were calm, many of them quite cheerful, and everyone was trying to do the sensible thing, the men were forgetting themselves, and seeing after the women and children. They could not too much, because the list prevented the launching of most of the boats, but they were doing their best and playing the man.”**

**-- Ruth M. Wordsworth, a British passenger,  
addressing mother of Preston Prichard**

## 2. Scholarship



**Jack Webb as  
detective sgt. Joe Friday**  
*Dragnet*

### **3. Achieving objective**

**In planning new project, Larson read “voraciously and promiscuously” and found “a very good story.” “My goal was to try to marshal the many nodes of real-life suspense, and, yes, romance, that mark the *Lusitania* episode, in a manner that would allow readers to experience it as did people who lived through it.”**

## 4. History and the “So What?” issue

**“History is the study of causes.”**

**-- E. H. Carr, *What is History?***

**Edward Hallett Carr  
1892-1982**

**a. The significance that isn't there**

*"He Kept Us Out of War"*

**Wilson campaign buttons  
1916**

**William J. Bryan  
1860-1925**



# PROMISE AND PERIL

*America at the Dawn of a Global Age*

CHRISTOPHER MCKNIGHT NICHOLS

**William E. Borah  
1865-1940  
Senator, 1907-40**

All the News That's Fit to Print

THE WEATHER  
New York, Tuesday, Feb. 21, 1917. High, 40. Low, 28. Wind, S. by E. 10 to 15.

## GERMANY BEGINS RUTHLESS SEA WARFARE; DRAWS 'BARRED ZONES' AROUND THE ALLIES; CRISIS CONFRONTS THE UNITED STATES

**THIS PORT CLOSED**  
Collector Malone Ships All Outgoing Ships at Harrows.

**GERMAN SHIPS SEARCHED**  
No Evidence of Unusual Activity on Vessels at Harrows.

**SHIPS SET ON FIRE**  
Police Discover that of Harrows to Keep Watch Over Ships at Harrows.

**REARMS FOR SHIPS**  
Shipping Men in New York Ports Fear for Their at Harrows.

**Call Home**  
Off in Washington.

**BRITAIN TO MEET GERMAN MENACE**  
Part of 4,000 Tonnage Ready to Leave Harrows and Proceed to Harrows.

**PARTS WILL BE KEPT OPEN**  
London and Harrows to be Kept Open for All Vessels.

### Text of Germany's Note to the United States

Washington, N. Y., Jan. 21, 1917.  
The German Government has the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your communication of the 17th inst. in relation to the subject of the proposed extension of the blockade of Germany by the United States. The German Government has the honor to inform you that it has received your communication of the 17th inst. in relation to the subject of the proposed extension of the blockade of Germany by the United States. The German Government has the honor to inform you that it has received your communication of the 17th inst. in relation to the subject of the proposed extension of the blockade of Germany by the United States.

### Text of the Answer to German Note, Outlining Barred Zones and Prescribing Conditions for American Vessels

The United States Government has the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your communication of the 17th inst. in relation to the subject of the proposed extension of the blockade of Germany by the United States. The United States Government has the honor to inform you that it has received your communication of the 17th inst. in relation to the subject of the proposed extension of the blockade of Germany by the United States.

### A SHIP A WEEK FOR US

To and From Fal-mouth on a Pre-scribed Route.

Bismarck Delivers a Note Which Ends Germany's Prodiges to Us.

REARMS OF PRIZE CARGO  
The Kaiser Now Prepares to Engage in the Battle of the Atlantic.

CAPITAL TAKES STEADY  
President Shows New Attitude Toward the German Situation.

President Announces to House  
Germany's Position on the War.

### CHANCELLOR TELLS GERMAN DECISION

He Declines to Revoke Com-mitted Resolutions Concerning the War and Sea.

ARMED ON AT CONFERENCE  
Results of Negotiations Dis-closed to the Press.



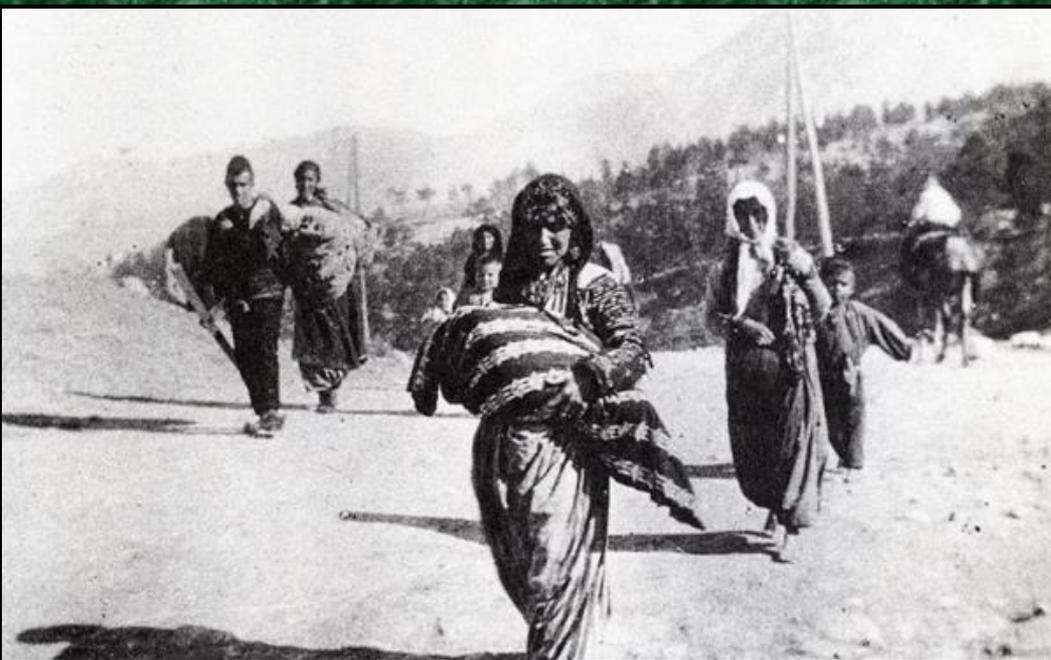
**Wilson delivers war message to joint session of Congress, April 2, 1917**

**b. The *Lusitania* in the context of  
“the bloodiest of centuries”**



**British infantry in trenches**

**British dead after  
gas attack, 1917**



**Forced march of Armenians  
1915**