

Memory Stor(i)es

By Stuart Johnson

Review of Alison Winter, *Memory: Fragments of a Modern History* (University of Chicago Press, 2012)

One might expect that a book entitled *Memory: Fragments of a Modern History* would at least discuss Proust, if not begin with him. But significantly, Proust appears only once, as a humorous aside, when Alison Winter quotes a psychoanalyst who has observed Wilder Penfield's brain surgeries in which Penfield demonstrated his ability to trigger detailed memories by stimulating specific points in the brain with electrodes. The observer exclaims that it is like "Proust on the operating table." This volume is more operating table than Proust. It is a series of stories of actual real-world controversies over the nature of memory, with actual real-world consequences, sometimes life and death. But by the end, the "patient" on the operating table is remarkably elusive—as elusive as *le temps perdu*.

Winter relies primarily on two avenues of approach to her subject. First, media—film, photography, flashbulbs, home movies, Polaroids, Brownie cameras. Recording media provide the imagery that many memory theorists have seized upon metaphorically, though the metaphors finally appear so powerful that one wonders if they may have motivated, rather than merely illustrated, the theory.

The second area where memory theory struts and frets its hour upon the stage of history is the law. The courtroom is a stage where memories become evidence, and the judge or jury is charged with evaluating the memories—deciding whether the memories (that is, testimony) are to be believed, whether they correspond to facts that would justify the remedy that a plaintiff or prosecutor seeks. The law has a powerful presence in the history of memory because it is a public institution where memory theories have been definitively

tested and judged. Although one can argue issues of memory indefinitely, the court trying a case has a job to do, and it cannot wait for the ultimate resolution of the theoretical disputes. Winter uses court decisions relating to the testimony of experts on theories of memory to identify reference points for the institutional acceptance of different theories.

The book begins in 1906, in the courtroom. Richard Ivens is accused of murder, and after police interrogation, he confesses. Shortly after making the confession he retracts it. His explanation is striking. He does not claim that anyone forced him to confess to something he knew he did not do. Instead, he says that when he confessed he truly believed that he had committed the murder, but that was because the police questioners had so pressured him that they had implanted the memory of committing the murder in his mind.

This claim presented a conundrum to the legal system. An important principle of our legal practice, which prevails to this day, is that juries are authorities on whether a person is telling the truth. Jurors observe the witness during the testimony and bring their common sense to the evaluation of the testimony. This is something we do every day in going about the business of our normal lives. Courts allow expert witnesses to testify about many things that are outside the knowledge of the general population from which our juries are drawn. But no one had thought that it made sense to have an expert testify about whether a person's testimony was believable. That is the function of the jury, applying a skill that we hone in our everyday lives. Of course, the issue for the experts in the Ivens case was not so much whether Ivens was telling the truth, either in his testimony or his confession. The issue was whether a truthful statement, as in the confession, could be based on a false memory, and thus incorrect.

There were no expert witnesses in the Ivens case testifying about memory and the possibility of implanting memories, and Ivens was convicted, despite testimony providing him with a strong alibi. The jury apparently could not get over the fact of his confession and did not accept the claim that, although he believed it at the time and at the time had an actual memory of committing the murder, he in fact had not done so and the memory was false. Nevertheless, this case marks, in Winter's telling, the beginning of a century-long controversy over the place of experts on mind and memory in the courtroom and regarding the delicate balance between, on the one hand, the "expertise" of the jury in evaluating

witnesses and their credibility and, on the other hand, the expertise of scientists focusing a very different kind of attention on this same area.

Winter presents a compelling drama with multiple intertwined subplots. One thread is the role of the courts as arbiters of which scientific theories are “legitimate” and of which experts can be allowed to testify. Another thread is the theory that memory is a trace laid down in the brain, where it resides intact, ready for later recovery. A dramatic illustration of this theory comes from the surgeries of Wilder Penfield in which he discovered that he could trigger detailed memories in his patients by simply stimulating a point in the brain. The implication was that the patient’s recollection was “there” in the brain waiting for the right stimulation to bring it to the surface.

By contrast, there is the theory that memory is malleable, as in the Ivens case. This theory is connected to a theory that mind and consciousness are themselves malleable, as evidenced by the fears during the Cold War that the Communists were brainwashing certain people and setting them loose in American society, where they awaited the signal that would put them into action carrying out their masters’ instructions. This theory had its ultimate Cold-War expression in the film *The Manchurian Candidate*.

The ultimate showdown in Winter’s tale is the story of the “memory wars,” the battle over recovered memories, which first made headlines when adult abuse survivors attempted to bring claims against their abusers based on abuse that had allegedly occurred many years before. The survivors claimed that their memories of abuse had been repressed for many years and only resurfaced recently, often with the aid of hypnosis. The theory of recovered memory became a national trend by 1990. Winter presents the historical and cultural background for these claims in a way that helps to explain how they came to have such power.

In 1977, two psychologists from Harvard proposed the concept of “flashbulb memories.” The best illustration for those of us of a certain age is the familiar question: “Where were you when Kennedy was assassinated?” Most of us have a specific memory of the moment we heard the news. (I was in seventh grade “shop” class—a class in woodworking, metalworking and the like, then required of all boys, the male counterpart to the girls’ “home economics.”) “Flashbulb memories” are memories that are particularly powerful and particularly reliable because they are related to a distressing event.

When people (most commonly adult women) recovered memories of childhood abuse, such memories fit well the concept of flashbulb memories, and as a result were thought to be especially reliable. As Winter says, “One influential argument held that newly resurgent memories were *more* reliable than ordinary ones.” This result was ironic, because it took a phenomenon that otherwise provoked heightened skepticism—as a result of the fact that the “memory” had only surfaced years after the alleged event—and presented it as something instead deserving heightened acceptance.

Running parallel with the psychological theories was the social and political context. The “survivors” making claims of childhood abuse fully and truly believed their claims and probably had authentic memories of the abuse, whether or not such memories corresponded with actual events. They were individuals clearly deserving of compassion. But in the context of the legal claims they were making against their alleged abusers, the initial question, “do you believe me?” quickly became “whose side are you on?” That is, do you believe me, or are you on the side of the abuser and the society that enables the cover-up? Scientific objectivity and philosophical contemplation were far removed from this battleground over the nature of memory.

Winter’s attention to media pays special dividends in her analysis of the memory wars, showing how the emergence of amateur photography, spurred primarily by Kodak advertising campaigns, popularized a way of thinking about photography that dovetailed with the recovered memory movement. Winter writes,

Kodak reinvented photography, and, arguably, memory in the early twentieth century by inventing a campaign to make amateur photography into a means of archiving family experiences, and to create in every American family the imperative to assemble such an archive.

The importance of photography to record ordinary family life highlighted, or even created, a sense of the importance of the captured “moment,” and it reinforced, with the power of relentless corporate advertising, the sense that memories were moments to be captured and stored. In this way, a corporate advertising campaign provided a counterpart to and reinforcement of the implications of “flashbulb memories,” the memory theories relied on by the recovered memory claimants.

Winter marshals all of these strains in the service of the drama leading to the fascinating moment when recovered memory fell from grace. It happened when an adult woman accused her father of sexual abuse during her childhood. The father and mother

searched their souls and memories and together denied the possibility that the daughter's claims were accurate. But they did much more. They set out to attack the entire theory of recovered memory, and they did so in a remarkably organized way. They organized the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF), which provided a forum for experts questioning the accuracy and validity of recovered memories, and provided aid and advice for those accused of actions based on recovered memories. In the FMSF we see a coming together of theory and institutions to create a powerful movement whose ultimate aim was to have an effect on our understanding of memory.

This history provides a wide-ranging exploration of twentieth century theories of memory. But in the end, we are left with the question: so what is the nature of memory? Has this century of exploration led anywhere? I suspect Winter would reject the question as being outside the competence, or the purview, of the historian, and in fact she does not address it in this book. The implicit argument seems to be that memory is a social and intellectual construct. Although social scientists have studied "it," the end point of their studies has been to determine what "it" is. Memory is not there to be studied. What would that be? A trace laid down in the brain and thus having a physical embodiment waiting for the proper stimulus such as an electrode, or perhaps even a madeleine? Or, by contrast, a continually changing phenomenon, having an identity only until the next experience comes along to modify it? Just as one could argue that we construct our own memories, so the very concept of memory is constructed. It is constructed by the scientists who tell competing stories about what it is. It is constructed by the courts as they decide who's up and who's down in the memory wars. And it is constructed by the media, purveying images that by their very nature suggest (or implant) concepts of memory.

The notion of memory as construct helps to explain the sprawling nature of this book. Winter has many stories to tell, and it can seem at times that she is carried away by the interest of the stories. But ultimately it is that very texture, the stories that have their own lives, that conveys memory as a phenomenon of history. Winter's subtitle, "Fragments of a Modern History," is a signal of the nature of the enterprise. The fragments may be tesserae that combine into a recognizable mosaic, but the better comparison may be the cairn, a pile of rocks left by passing hikers as a sign of where you are, except you are only "there" where the cairn arose.

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