Conclusion

This study has explored moral didacticism in the best-preserved works of history from the beginnings of the genre in the fifth century BC to the time when it began to merge with the Roman tradition in the first century BC. It has shown, I hope, that moral didacticism was an integral and indispensable part of the historiography of these four formative centuries. In the works of Polybius and Diodorus moralising is ubiquitous, and the reader is repeatedly and explicitly told to take it to heart in his own life. We misread these authors if we do not take that seriously. This seems also to have been the case in most of the Hellenistic works of history which now exist only in very fragmented states. In Herodotus and Thucydides, the moralising is a lot more subtle, and the moral lessons are more intellectual and thought-directing, but both the lessons and the didactic intention are certainly there. The historiographers of the fourth century, the Oxyrhynchus Historian, Xenophon, Ephorus and Theopompus, seem to constitute a bridge between the subtle Classical moralising and the explicit Hellenistic moralising, with Theopompus being the innovator who made explicit moralising a frequent and striking feature of his work.

I shall not here reiterate all the conclusions drawn in individual chapters, but simply wish to dwell for a moment on what strikes me as the most surprising finding of this study: these differences between early Classical, late Classical and Hellenistic historiographical moralising exist on the formal plane; they are differences in technique and intensity of moralising, as we have explored in detail in the preceding chapters. In terms of moral lessons, by contrast, the picture is remarkably constant. The message that human success is unstable and that we should remain moderate in times of good fortune runs like a red thread from Herodotus through Thucydides and Xenophon to Polybius and Diodorus via the now fragmentary works of history. It has variations between authors – for some the fall of the arrogant is linked with divine punishment, for others it is a purely human
mechanism – but the central action-directing message of the importance of moderation, especially in times of good fortune, remains unchanged. Similarly, in all of the historiographers examined apart from Thucydides (more about him below), being good is likely to stand you in better stead than being immoral. The virtues and vices are also remarkably consistent. Virtues are moderation, kindness towards those in one’s power, piety, lack of greed, and courage. Vices are greed for power or money, impiety, cruelty and an immoderate lifestyle. There are variations, of course: piety and cruelty play a smaller part in Polybius than in any of the other well-preserved historiographers, and kindness towards those in your power is more important in Diodorus than in any of the others. In Xenophon, more than in any of the other historiographers, the complications of friendship are a burning issue.

Herodotus stands slightly apart from the genre he initiated by offering less clear-cut messages than any of his successors. His picture of how the world works offers patterns and chains of causation, but they are always problematised and produce the overall impression that the ways of the world are unpredictable. Consequently, his lessons about how to act in the world are more a form of thought-directing guidelines than any prescriptive advice. Nonetheless, his main moral guidance for the reader corresponds to the moral messages offered by those who come after him in advocating humility, mildness towards those in one’s power and an avoidance of greed and cruelty. Thucydides is the odd one out for another reason: firstly, he has a slightly different palette of virtues and vices from the others. The vices are greed for power, strong emotion, indecisiveness and self-seeking, surely vices in the other historiographers as well, but not major ones (apart from anger, which is a major vice in Xenophon). Cruelty/brutality is the only major vice in Thucydides which is also a major vice in most of the other historiographers. Virtues in Thucydides’ History are few and far between, but those that can be discerned correspond more closely to those propounded by other historiographers – moderation, avoidance of violence, foresight, loyalty, honesty, abiding by oaths, lack of greed for money and power, justice, and willingness to put city interests before self-interest. None of these virtues, however, relate to the private individual: in contrast with the historiographers who came before and after him (perhaps with the exception of the Oxyrhynchus Historian), Thucydides was uninterested in the dining habits and private conversations of the men who influenced history. What sets him apart the most, however, is the fact that being moral does not give a character a better chance of success or even survival in his narrative world than being immoral. In this, Thucydides differs dramatically from the other authors of his genre.

Even with these divergences in the two originators of the genre,
Moral History from Herodotus to Diodorus

Herodotus and Thucydides, the similarity of the moral lessons offered over the course of these 400 years is remarkable. Not only is it mostly the same virtues that are held up for emulation and the same vices that are criticised, but many moralising topoi are common across time. The topos of the victorious commander who either mistreats his prisoners/the defeated or passes the test of success and refrains from abuse is seen in Herodotus, Xenophon, Polybius and Diodorus, as well as very possibly Timaeus, Duris, Phylarchus and Hieronymus.\(^1\) The topos of the wicked suffering a punishment that somehow echoes their crime is seen in Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Diodorus, Phylarchus and very possibly Timaeus and Theopompus. It is easy to forget how extraordinary this agreement about morality is: if we were to compare the work of a historian writing today with that of, say, Voltaire writing three hundred years ago, we would be unlikely to find such constancy of values, not to mention such a uniform presentation of them. The fact that Herodotus, writing in a Greece populated with city-states still flush with their victory over Persia, and Diodorus, writing in a Rome ravaged by civil war, largely agree on the main lesson to be learned from history (do not become arrogant in your good fortune) testifies to the tradition-bound nature of Greek popular morality. It supports the argument that the ancient Greeks thought of the present and the past as a timeless continuum in which human psychology and motivation – and, we should add, human virtues and vices – as well as the social and cultural parameters within which they functioned, remained more or less constant.\(^2\) However, it also shows the power of topoi and imitatio in making a literary work recognisable as historiography.

An unavoidable question is how the realisation that all the works of Greek historiography from the fifth to the first century BC engage in moral didacticism should influence our use of these works as historical sources. Can we still trust them? My answer would be that the jumble of random events that is the past is always turned into historiography (and, indeed, history) by a process of narrativisation and emplotment. White has argued, as we saw in the Introduction, that this process is always driven by a desire to moralise (a ‘moralising impulse’), and that is certainly the case of the historiographers we have examined.\(^3\) They looked at the past through a moralistic lens, and it influenced their selection and organisation of events as well as their emplotment of (some of) those events – as a series of moral paradeigmata or a recurring pattern – and, especially in the cases of Polybius, Diodorus, Theopompus and probably also some of the other

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1. See Hau (2008) for a diachronic exploration of this topos.
now fragmentary Hellenistic historiographers, the tone of their narrative. In this, historiography with a moralising agenda is no different from history with a Marxist, feminist, international relations or economic agenda: it just uses a different lens.

But is moral didacticism always just a lens – or does it sometimes drive the historiographer to invent details, or even events? The problem with asking this question about ancient historiography is that in many cases we simply cannot tell. It is perfectly possible that Scipio cried and quoted Homer while watching Carthage burn – he was keen on Greek literature and had had Polybius as mentor for twenty years, so knew what was expected of him; moreover, he knew that Polybius was going to record the scene in his *Histories*. However, it is also possible that Scipio was too exhausted and preoccupied to think of such self-staging at that moment and that he watched the flames in stone-faced silence. Then, perhaps, later over dinner and wine, he expressed his sentiment about the changeability of fortune to Polybius, prompted or not, and quoted Homer. Or Scipio expressed the sentiment, and Polybius added the Homer quotation when writing up the episode. There is no way now to be able to tell which of these scenarios (if any) really took place. But if one of the latter two did, then Polybius engaged in a minor type of invention, which we might call poetic licence – or moralising licence. By doing it, he made the scene memorable and famous and also crafted a powerful moral *exemplum*. Instead of the factual truth he has then given us a more symbolic truth that distils Scipio’s character and the moral lessons inherent in the moment into something more pertinent.

A more extreme example can be taken from Thucydides. Apart from Thucydides’ well-known selectivity in choice of events to record, and apart from his doubtless partly invented speeches, the Melian Dialogue stands out as a flagrant invention. The Athenians and Melians held discussions in the council chamber behind closed doors. In those days no one took minutes. Later, perhaps, at most, Thucydides was able to meet with one or more of the delegates on one or both sides and get a brief of what had been said. But when he sat down to write it up, he did not give his reader such a vague impression of a diplomatic negotiation, but instead composed a full-scale dramatic dialogue like something out of a contemporary tragedy for the stage. Dionysius of Halicarnassus already recognised its fictitiousness. Thucydides’ purpose with this fiction, I have argued, was to present to his reader two different worldviews and sets of rules for behaviour which he saw repeatedly clashing in the world around him. The Dialogue presents them in a riveting way, making the reader emotionally as well as intellectually involved in a way a report of a council meeting could never do. It is brilliant literature, but also brilliant historiography, despite employing
poetic and moralising licence. It may not represent the truth of what was actually said that day, but it presents the more profound truth of the assumptions and worldviews on which those utterances and the actions that followed were based. This is Moral History in the hands of a master: it does not offer prescriptions for behaviour, it does not even offer a guideline for which behaviour is right and which wrong; it simply offers an exploration of a complex moral issue. Herodotus does something similar in his Constitutional Debate and Xenophon in his vignette of Agesilaus and Pharnabazus reclining in the grass. Polybius may well have done it with scenes involving one or both Scipios, and Diodorus with the speeches at Syracuse about the fate of the Athenian prisoners. In this the ancient Greek historiographers differ from most modern history writing, regardless of its agenda or ideology: although many historians working today are happy enough to hypothesise about what their long-dead subjects thought and felt, few are willing to make up scenes like these.4

Nonetheless, Moral History is still history. If we compare ancient Greek historiography with other ancient genres that have a partly or wholly moral-didactic purpose (as we have done briefly in the Introduction and in Chapter 6), we notice a crucial difference: moral historiography, as opposed to lyric poetry, tragedy, encomium and philosophical narrative, is committed to telling if not the truth about the past, then a truth about the past, at the same time as presenting this past in a way that will be morally useful to the reader. Most of the time these twin purposes can coexist peacefully, but sometimes they come into conflict. At those times the resolution can go either way: the historiographer can decide to go with factual truth to the detriment of moral didacticism, like Xenophon in the narrative of Agesilaus’ Sardis campaign in the Hellenica, or he can decide to teach a moral lesson to the detriment of factual truth, like Thucydides in the Melian Dialogue. This, I would argue, does not make Moral History poor historiography. Rather, it displays a tension that exists in all (good) history writing, modern as well as ancient, between telling a particular story and making general points about history and the world.5 When the historian decides to aim for the general level, he has the opportunity to point at more universal truths than he could if he stuck to the simple facts, and so to make his history more relevant, more important, or true on a higher plane. This is harder to do for a present-day historiographer, working within the established limits of his discipline, than it was for the ancient trailblazers who invented it, but if we were to try to learn from it, we might be able to

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4 Although there is a small movement within the present discipline of history which experiments with the use of creative writing techniques. See some of the papers in five special issues of Rethinking History (2010–14).

5 As observed by Moles (1993).
write works of history that would last through the ages rather than being read only by our academic peers.

In a postmodern world where objectivity is recognised as impossible and the past – or the present – can never be fully known, teaching readers ethical behaviour is surely a worthier goal for historiography than most of the possible alternatives.