Some philosophers and many historians have denied the importance, or even the existence, of the philosophy of history and historiography. (I will discuss the difference between “history” and “historiography” momentarily.) But if these deniers were to have this massive volume of essays (fifty in all, including an introduction by its acute and indefatigable editor, Aviezer Tucker) dropped in their laps, the only way they could maintain their skepticism would be to respond in the way the woman did in a story told by Alasdair MacIntyre. In that story the woman, when confronted by a giraffe, declared imperiously, “It’s impossible!” (Actually, Tucker’s volume, in its solidity and mass, resembles a hippopotamus more than a giraffe.)

That the philosophy of history and historiography is alive and kicking should not be altogether surprising. We live in an age saturated with works of historiography, inundated with hundreds of scholarly monographs and thousands of scholarly essays every year; with bestselling history books, the History Book Club, popular TV series, and wildly successful interactive history video games; with museums, theme parks, and websites devoted entirely to historical subjects; and with movies, comic books, graphic novels, re-enactments, historical novels, and documentaries. American television has an entire channel devoted to it (the History Channel), and the presence of history in the programming of most of the TV networks around the world is unmistakable. In other words, historiography is everywhere. Given this explosion of works of historiography, and given the highly self-conscious nature of the humanities in our time, it isn’t any wonder that questions about the how and why and whether of history and historiography should be posed and explored and debated.

Tucker is to be congratulated for recognizing this, and thus for conceiving of this work, and for soliciting, selecting, organizing, and editing its essays – all of which were written especially for the volume. He also should be congratulated for insisting on some terminological consistency throughout the work. The most
important instance of this is the use of the terms “history” and “historiography”. Basically, in the book “history” means “what happened in the past”, whereas “historiography” means “accounts of what happened in the past”. The Battle of the Somme is an instance of history, and John Keegan’s account of it a work in historiography. (This would entail, I suppose, that the essays in the book are themselves meta-historiographical, though Tucker doesn’t attempt to characterize them by a single term.) These definitions don’t accord with a lot of contemporary usage, but this is all to the good, since that usage is typically confused and confusing (especially in English). Thus, when the title of the book speaks of the “philosophy of history” it refers to, in the words of Tucker, “the direct philosophical examination of history” (4), such as whether what happened in the past is contingent and/or teleological; and when it speaks of “the philosophy of historiography” it means “the philosophical examination of all the aspects of our descriptions, beliefs, and knowledge of the past” (4), such as the nature of evidence or explanation in giving accounts of the past.

The book’s title identifies the book as a “companion”, and this seems a most apt characterization of its essays. They are not like those of an encyclopedia in which each essay is meant to sum up the latest thinking about a subject (though most of the essays do this to some extent), and which together serve as a compendium of contemporary knowledge about a subject. Nor is the book a dictionary, a manual, a catalog, a concordance, a directory, a gazette, an index, or a study guide – though it contains elements of all of these. Rather, each essay presents a particular author’s take on a subject, often ending with further questions and suggestions. In this way it resembles a conversational partner who accompanies one along the way, stimulating further reflection as well as providing interesting information and observations. A companion literally is someone who breaks bread with another (com: with; panis: bread), and it certainly is the case that these essays – so clearly written, so mercifully manageable in length, and so sharp in focus – collectively and individually provide a great deal of food for thought.

The book contains four main sections: “Major Fields” (essays 2–5; they explore the nature of the philosophy of history and the philosophy of historiography); “Basic Problems” (essays 6 through 24; they explore topics and problems in both the philosophy of history [necessity and contingency; the ontology of the constituents of historical reality]; and the philosophy of historiography [evidence; causation; counterfactuals; explanation; understanding; colligation; laws; objectivity; realism and anti-realism; narrative; historicism; the ethics of history writing; logical and historical fallacies]); “Subfields of Historiography” (essays 25–33; they explore the history of science; philosophy of the social sciences, of geology, of archeology; evolutionary theory; myth; memory; and various historiographical schools); and “Classical Schools and Philosophers of Historiography and History” (essays 34–50; they discuss Ranke; Darwin; Vico; Herder; Kant; Hegel; Neo-