At the dawn of the 1960s, the English historian of Soviet Russia E. H. Carr was anything but a non-controversial man. Known to some as ‘the Red Professor of Printing House Square’ on account of his pro-Stalinist columns for The Times during the Second World War, and already disliked by many others for his approval of appeasement during the 1930s, Carr was about to attract even more opposition on account of his views on the purpose of writing history in the first place. “If Mr. Carr’s remaining volumes equal this impressive opening,” Isaiah Berlin had written a decade earlier in a review of Carr’s first installment of his The Bolshevik Revolution, “they will constitute the most monumental challenge of our time to that idea of impartiality and objective truth and even-handed justice in the writing of history which is most deeply embedded in the European liberal tradition.” Now, in what would become his classic book from 1961 What Is History? Carr wrote simply: “the study of history is a study of causes.”

Carr famously posited the following scenario: Suppose a Mr. Jones ran over a Mr. Robinson on a blind corner, driving a car with defective brakes. Suppose Mr. Robinson had just come out of a party in which he had consumed an excessive amount of alcohol. Suppose further that he has nipped out of the bash to buy a pack of cigarettes. What must we
judge as the cause of the accident: was Robinson killed because of the blind corner? Was his death due rather to the faultiness of Mr. Jones’ brakes? Was it the alcohol that was ultimately responsible for Robinson’s grim fate? Or can one perhaps adduce that were it not for his filthy smoking habit, Robinson would still be alive today, rendering the cigarettes the real cause behind the poor man’s tragic demise? The job of the historian, Carr wanted to claim, was the job of disentangling such issues, painfully and carefully, with the help of logic, good sense and investigation so as to paint a true picture of the events, that is – a true hierarchy of causes. Every effect must have a cause, Carr argued, and it was the toil of judicious matchmaking between the two that was the ultimate burden of the historian. Doing good history was hard work; Oscar Wilde was on to something, after all, when he jibed that any fool can make history but it takes a genius to write it.

That Carr should have engendered the fury that he did is probably more a sign of the times (post-war East–West, Left–Right sensitivities) than a sign of a pure, disinterested intellectual debate. Nevertheless, his claim about history remains one that historians enjoy to argue over, often times bitterly. Fundamentally, it goes to the heart of our thoughts about thinking. When we study the past and, come to think of it, the present (“All history is contemporary history” Benedetto Croce famously quipped); in fact, when we think about anything at all, we tend to think in terms of cause and effect. Kant thought causal thinking was an innate function of human cognition – a ‘category of understanding’ as he called it – producing a necessary way of seeing the world. More recently, evolutionary psychologists have offered reasons why this should be so. But there are, of course, two kinds of causal thinking, one correlational (that is, probabilistic), the other analogical (that is, symbolic). The first of these has become central to the scientific method; the second, central to the method of the humanities. We shall return to this distinction.

Whether or not humans necessarily think in causal terms, why should historians aim to ask ‘why’ in the first place? Is not ascertaining the facts of the matter as far as they exist, or categorizing, or contextualizing good enough? Is ‘why’ some kind of necessary requisite for making the past relevant to the present or even the future? Is it a rationale for writing history in the first place? Must historians see themselves as explainers rather than describers? Must their work necessarily be relevant to their times? Once again, we shall return to these grand questions a bit later. For now, let’s focus on a particular test case that might shed some light on the actual workings of historical scholarship: the story of