No one can come to the formal study of history with a mind like a blank sheet of paper. We are already conditioned to engage with the past by the culture that surrounds us. The past – or, to be more accurate, a selection of highlights from the past – is embedded in Western popular culture in a host of ways. This has implications for our understanding of history even as we aim for the levels of sophistication and complexity that academic study demands. Academic history sometimes tries to project an image of detachment, situating itself above the busy swirl of popular culture. It is often said, with some justice, that one of the benefits of studying history to an advanced level is that it equips people to see through all the misconceptions and half-truths about the past that exist in the public domain. On the other hand, the idea of scholarly detachment can also be taken too far. When this happens, it can quickly descend into pious posturing which severely underestimates the significance of popular culture in all our lives. Exposure to popular culture is not ‘wrong’ or detrimental to your scholarly health. It is not something to be sheepish about as one enters the hallowed portals of academe. Popular culture accounts for some of the instinctive curiosity that makes us interested in history. And it is one of the ways in which we practise thinking about the past and how we stand in relation to it.

Nor is popular culture detached from academic history in a more formal sense. Some historians would argue that there is a trickle-down effect which enables scholarly ideas to seep into the popular consciousness, although this will usually have a built-in time lag, with the result that popular understandings often end up as approximations of once-fashionable but now rather outdated academic interpretations of the past. Other historians are less convinced that this sort of
connection routinely exists. They prefer to argue that popular ideas about the past are mostly generated from within the cultures that accommodate them, like modern-day versions of ancient folklore. In fact both arguments have merit. Ask people where they think they have got their ideas about the past from, and the response is likely to be a combination of many sources, some of them more obviously academic in origin, others broadly popular. Possibilities include family traditions, memories of children’s stories, pictures in the schoolroom, the remarks of a history teacher, school textbooks, exposure to elite culture in the form of outings to museums and galleries, tourism, toys and games, novels, television and film, advertising and many other influences. It will usually be impossible for someone to trace a particular notion about some aspect of the past back to a specific source: instead, it will just feel like an obvious part of the cultural scheme of reference, part of the mental furniture.

What this means is that the academic study of history does not exist in isolation from other ways of thinking about the past, although the connections are complex and variable. Although a phrase such as ‘popular culture’ is very useful, it should always be remembered that it is really a huge oversimplification. The term is shorthand for an enormous variety of perspectives and degrees of complexity, some nudging towards what we associate with academic discourse, others operating on a much more simplified and populist level. No two people assemble identical mental scrapbooks of the bits of the past that have meaning for them, even when they come from similar social, educational and cultural backgrounds. For these reasons, when embarking on the formal study of a historical period such as the Middle Ages, it is very important to keep at least half an eye on the popular cultural dimension. This can enhance our historical understanding, and it reminds us that, just as we each have our own individual take on the mix-and-match past on offer in popular culture, so we also have something to contribute individually to the academic study of history, by thinking for ourselves, weighing up different ideas and posing challenging questions. Popular culture, in other words, equips us to be more thoughtful and informed about the past.

The fact is we are surrounded by the past. We are bombarded with it in numerous ways. History, for example, is a fertile terrain for advertisers and designers. Architects can quote from the past in their plans for buildings. In the world of journalism, the ability to see the long view, that is to contextualize current affairs by looking back into the past, is regarded as a mark of judgement and depth. Museums and sites of