The purpose of this chapter is to consider the ways in which the historian engages with dance analysis. ‘Historian’ and ‘analyst’ are malleable terms, for reconstructors of dance, among others, also engage with history and analysis. For example, in order to ‘build’ the dance for performance, reconstructors amass historical evidence and make informed guesses about gaps, whether in details of the choreography or the performing style. For the purpose of this discussion, however, the ‘historian’ is conceived as someone whose aim is to examine the dances of the past for reasons other than remaking them in present-day performance. Close examination of a specific dance can position it more securely as a culturally significant activity or support claims for its place on a continuum or as innovative practice. Discerning the characteristics of dances can identify their theatrical, social or ritual function. Analysis of dance events might form an integral aspect of biography. The reasons why historians explore the detail of past dances are multifarious for each can set their own distinct research trajectories.

It is only during recent decades that research in dance history has accommodated systematic analysis. Given the breadth of their remit, history books tended to be overviews of periods, places, people or genres. I remember the frustration encountered in my own studies when, having read extensively on Isadora Duncan, I was no closer to knowing what she actually did on stage. Ann Daly’s text (1995) has remedied this. Similarly, Susan Manning’s (1993) close examination of the work of Mary Wigman attends to the detail of the dances. More recently, autobiographies by British contemporary practitioners such as Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie (2006) and Emilyn Claid (2006) have addressed, in
some detail, the choreographic content of their works. Despite these excellent endeavours, however, there is a problem for the historian who wishes to ‘get back to the dance’, for such an aim is, in strict logical terms, impossible. Often, the ephemeral nature of dance is cited as its own special problem in terms of its retrievability. The theatre has its script and music has its score, but even though dance has its notation, this is far less readily used or understood. However, neither score nor script is the same as the performance event, and in this sense theatre and music performance is as elusive as dance performance. Worthen claims that ‘all writing about performance must face its own impossibility: the event is gone, the records are always partial and suspect, and the only thing we know is that nothing we say happened actually took place in precisely that way’ (Worthen, 2003, p. 6). In fact, neither dance nor any type of performance can make special claims, for all of the past is retrievable only in the evidence that remains. As Jenkins (1991, p. 11) claims, ‘as the past has gone, no account can ever be checked against it but only against other accounts…there is no fundamentally correct “text” of which other interpretations are just variations; variations are all there are’. Therefore, because ‘the past itself is beyond reach, the historian is always reading the shadowy remains, the images on the cave wall’ (Postlewait, 1992, p. 356).

To take an example, our primary source history of trench warfare in the First World War is accessible by recourse to written, oral and bodily memoirs, official documents, statistics, photographs, illustrations, poetry, fiction, and so on. Our history of the dances that were popular during the First World War is accessible by recourse to written, oral and bodily memoirs, official documents, criticism, photographs, illustrations, poetry, fiction. The past, therefore, resides in its evidence. The historian’s role in creating history from evidence has led to the claim that the past is simply a construct, a now common claim that has rendered the past a nebulous nothingness. However, despite Elton’s (1969) rigorous claim that the past has an independent existence and is not solely a construct of the historian, and Evans’ (1997) more recent riposte to the views of Jenkins and other postmodern historians, it is a persuasive argument that the past cannot be accessed independently of all the sources which comprise the record of its existence.

These sources are what Manning (1993) and others call the ‘traces’ of performance. Each of these traces she argues, ‘marks, indeed distorts, the event of performance, and so the scholar pursues what remains elusive as if moving though an endless series of distorting reflections’ (1993, p. 12). Although this sentiment might seem so much common