John Lewis Gaddis' *The Landscape of History* is part of a long tradition of prominent historians publishing a book defining the nature and problems of the discipline. It's a tradition because historians are still trying to figure out exactly what it is that they do and how to do it. They put in for consideration an accumulation of their wisdom and anecdotes and hope that this amounts to a conclusion about the nature of history, (some do it well, such as R.J. Evans' *In Defense of History*, and some do it badly). But the discipline of history has never found its bedrock, its fundamental principles. The effort to define its practice has been sort of like the hammer-and-bell game at an old time fair: anyone can step up, swing the hammer, and try to ring the bell at the top- most try, few succeed, but essentially, the game must be a scam.

The Landscape of History is another such noble failure. It is written in the tone of an old scholar passing wisdom on to a young one, and there's nothing wrong with that, but it does tend to inflate the importance of Gaddis' observations. He is enthusiastic about the nature of history and its problems, and his well intentioned disposition are everywhere visible in the book. It is hard not to like Mr. Gaddis for his good faith and honesty, but in the end, I did not get much more out of the book than that.

The first thing Gaddis needs to be rebuked for was his insatiable deployment of metaphor, often for things that are easily described and understood without metaphor; this was terribly distracting and held up the flow of ideas rather than helped. What this taught me about history was to avoid confusing eloquence with metaphor, or that explaining complex ideas to the layperson does not require a puppet show. This was compounded by his obsession with deploying one or all of the trifecta of Hitler, Stalin and Mao every time he needed an example of evil and/or tyranny in history. Finally, Gaddis lurched towards his conclusion with the disastrous

habit of likening historiographic considerations to the plots of recent films, the films themselves also becoming a distraction. Trying to wrap one's head around how *Being John Malkovich* depicts the problems of the biographer was a time-waster and bore small, relatively bland fruit.

The substantive problems with his work were no less confused. Gaddis seems interested and delighted in many subjects ranging from the natural sciences to the social sciences to the arts, but doesn't appear to know very much about any of them, at least not enough to make strong insights about them. Gaddis' thrust is that the historical method (whatever that is) is more like modern science than social science. Gaddis argues that the historian's work of incorporating a multiplicity of causes rather than a single-cause explanation in order to explain an historical event is exactly like the job of evolutionary science or astrophysics. Galaxies move and change, as do species evolve, according to not just one factor but many complexly interacting ones, Gaddis observes. This is true insofar as we are exploring why a particular galaxy took a particular shape or trajectory, or why a particular species evolved along a certain path, say Darwin's finches or the present shape of the Andromeda galaxy. These unique events can only be understood by weighing the many forces involved, the same way we look at the development of industrialism in Europe or the dynasties of Chinese empire. But Gaddis appears to be totally unaware that these sciences have also identified forces that shape the trajectories of all galaxies and all species, the mechanism of selection, the laws of gravitation. History has not done this at all. There are compelling theories and theologies – various forms of Hegelianism, Mayan epochal cycles, etc. but even Gaddis acknowledges that history doesn't have basic, *established* laws.

Gaddis reveals his enthusiastic but oafishly amateur grasp of science by irresponsibly stretching the definition of principles of scientific method to allow them to fit closely with history, and apparently is entirely unaware of others. He suggests that principles of repeatability, prediction and quantification (he does not mention the isolation of variables) exist in the historical discipline the same way they exist in the hard sciences. When these principles don't fit history at all, he makes a strange distinction between Newtonian "methods" and modern, (one supposes), Quantum "methods." I'm not sure what he means by that, except that he thinks experiment has been supplanted by the theoretical mathematics and educated speculation of wormhole theories and time travel models. But of course, it hasn't – experiment is the cornerstone of science and it is the reason science is so incredibly productive, reliable, and limited in the phenomena it can explain. Gaddis goes further – he argues the search for key variables as somehow antiquated, even though this continues to be the stock in trade of the sciences, but can't do much of a job of articulating what it is the notion of "interdependent variables" achieves. This makes for great and mildly tragic humor when Gaddis recounts times when scientists and historians react in consternation and shock to his visionary interpretations – He thinks he might be challenging convention and dogma, but he isn't sure if he hasn't just failed to grasp a basic concept.

But the most sinister issue is that Gaddis never quite faces the problem of not knowing things – that is, the fundamental problem of history is the gulf between the record and reality. To be fair, Gaddis is hardly alone in neglecting the depth of this problem. He does arrive at the technical question of how to reconstruct the past and does a pretty good job of showing that history is a representation – that histories are like maps in that they are intended not to be a perfect reconstruction but are designed to suit their purpose, and hopefully many different kinds

of maps will build a more subtle picture over time. But even in doing so, he never quite admits that historians, in trying to link together a coherent picture, are sometimes just making stuff up, and perhaps should take great care to be precise about when and how they do that. Indeed, he seems to suggest the opposite, that its all a wonderful part of the project of exploring the past. Speculation replaces experiment. Argument replaces inquiry. And historians are scientific because they explain complicated stuff. Gaddis represents more than anything the deep problem of accountability among historians, that as long as your facts are supported you can twist them to take any meaning you like.