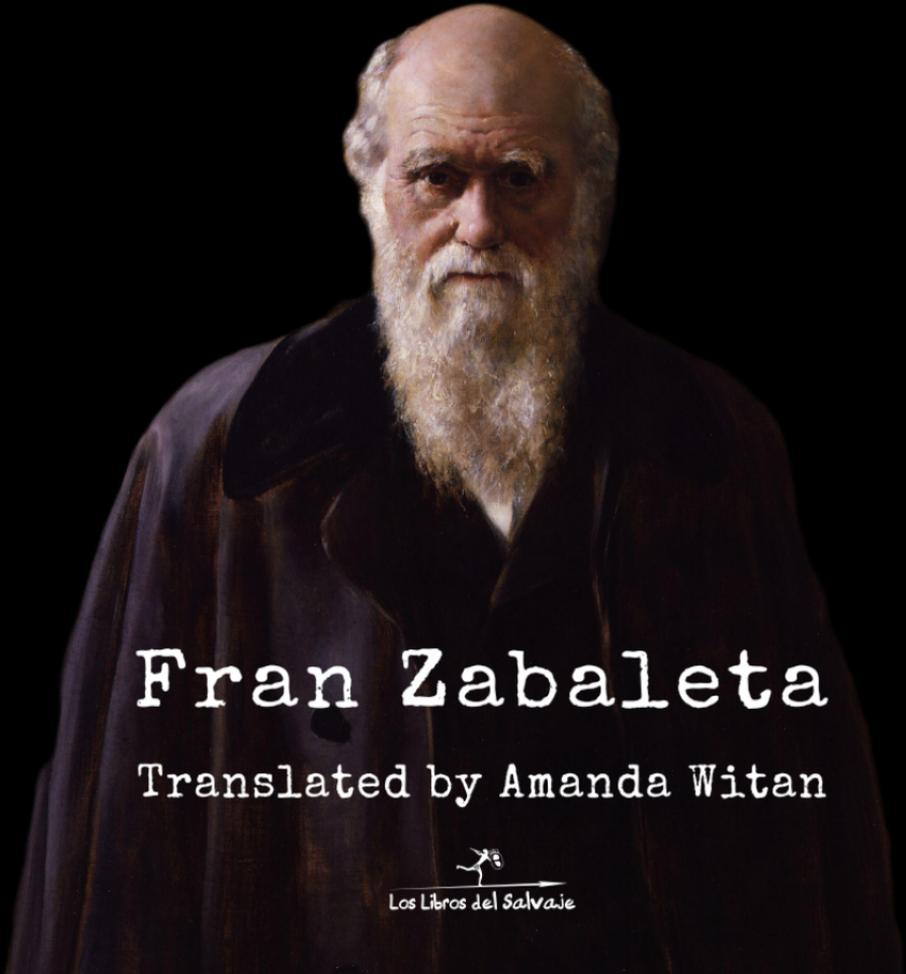


01  
THE  
HISTORYTELLER

*Five decisive episodes that changed who we are*

A portrait of Fran Zabaleta, an elderly man with a long, full white beard and balding head, wearing a dark, heavy coat. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark, making his face and beard stand out.

Fran Zabaleta

Translated by Amanda Witan



01  
The Historyteller



Fran Zabaleta  
Translated by Amanda Witan



*This is for Elena, to whom I owe a great deal.*



*To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is  
to remain always a child.*

**Cicero**

© Fran Zabaleta, 2019

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# PROLOGUE

## Stories for those who don't like history... and also for those who loved it

When I was a teenager, I had a history teacher to whom a monument should be erected, if only so that it would be possible to enjoy throwing rotten eggs and tomatoes at it.

She alone killed the natural curiosity of dozens of generations. She had a special knack for crushing the interest and imagination of teenagers: she would come to class, put the book on her table, have us take out our own book, and spend the hour reading word for word what the lesson of the day was. She read slowly, without intonation, watching us with one eye to make sure we were following in our own books the text that she was reciting. She read in such a monotonous voice that it was a heroic achievement not to fall asleep. From time to time she would stop, take one more perfunctory look at us, shout at so-and-so to wake up, and then summarize the paragraph she had just read, which basically consisted of reading it again a little faster.

After several months of this procedure, there was not a single one of her students who showed the slightest inclination to learn history.

She was not the only teacher with such outstanding talents for teaching that I was lucky enough to come across. I do not know whether it was some cosmic jinx or simple statistical probability, but I had to suffer from a good handful of teachers who, like her, possessed an extraordinary ability to stifle any hint of intellectual thought in their students. The result was that up until almost the year I reached university, I was convinced that history was a system of torture invented by adults to subdue teenagers.

Now that I think about it, I must have had a screw loose... because I ended up studying Geography and History. I prefer to think that no, in reality, despite all the bad teachers in the world, history managed to attract my attention through the books and historical novels that filled the shelves of my house, patiently waiting for me to discover their existence.

Tortures like the one my teacher used to inflict on us in every class have made thousands of people yawn when someone mentions the word history. They have made it unsurprising that the son of a friend of mine, who is eighteen years old and has an extraordinary school record, confessed to me one day that he had no idea who Mao Tse Tung was. "Well, if I don't know," he said with a shrug as I looked amazed, "then I can assure you that no one else in my class does either."

So, we continue, doomed to repeat the same mistakes over and over again because we do not know our past.

That's why I've made up my mind to write *The History-teller*, a series of fictional stories about decisive episodes of world history that changed the course of events: discoveries, battles, works of art, inventions, philosophical ideas... They are short pieces that explain different events and their significance, but above all, they seek to enable you to get pleasure from reading books and learning about history.

## Prologue

For your own enjoyment, of course, but also for that of your children, so that they cease to believe that history is no more than that same system of torture which I and many others endured.

In this first instalment I have selected five momentous events of human history, one for each major period: Prehistory, Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Modern Era and the Contemporary Era. They are not necessarily the *most* momentous because I have no idea how we would classify them as being of greater or lesser importance, nor do I think we will ever agree, to give just two examples from the same period, on whether the first round-the-world trip or the conquest of Mexico was more significant. One thing is certain, however: these are five events that had great repercussions and that, in some way, made the course of history change. And they are also five thrilling moments from our past.



# PREHISTORY







## The discovery that turned us into human beings

The female senses the intense cold of the wind as she reaches the top of the hill but ignores it. She is solidly built, broad hipped, with a strong jaw with no chin and with very prominent eyebrow ridges. Above them, the forehead flows towards a wide, low skull. She measures one metre sixty-five centimetres; she is a considerable height, although less than that of the males of her species, which easily reach one metre eighty.

She stands as high as she can on her toes and gazes at the horizon. She remains like this for a long time, almost motionless, slowly turning her head to observe in all directions. As far as she can see, a vast, desolate landscape stretches out. A plain of marshy and peaty soils, swept by icy winds and sparsely covered by a coarse brown grass, a few bushes, mosses and lichens. Without realising it, she holds her breath as she scans the tundra.

Smoke. She searches for the slightest sign of smoke.

She stops scanning and clenches her jaws tightly. She locates the rest of her group at the foot of the hill. Seen from

above, cowering to preserve their body heat while waiting for her return, they look distraught and helpless.

They are. She knows it. She sees it in their eyes when they look at her. She notices it in their abrupt gestures, in the unaccustomed silence of the youngsters, who sense the tension of the adults. She notices it in the brief, harsh sounds that they exchange amongst themselves. They've been like this for several days now. The female is already old, having lived more than thirty summers. That's why she knows things will get worse.

She has seen no smoke.

There is no sign of fire. They need to find fire as soon as possible.

She utters a groan of disappointment that no one hears and begins to descend the slope, back to her companions.

~

Those were hard times. Many thousands of years needed to pass before we could arrive at the present day. The most recent research speaks of a million years, an amount of time so immense on the human timescale that it is barely possible to imagine. Perhaps that is why we do something peculiar: we chop up time, as if by dividing and organising it, we could understand it better. Thus, we have divided the geological history of our planet into four great eras which cover, together, the chilling figure of 4.5 billion years: the Precambrian, Palaeozoic, Mesozoic and Cenozoic eras; the latter, in turn, we divided into two, the Tertiary and the Quaternary eras.

The Quaternary era, in which we find ourselves, began about two million years ago. A sigh on a geological scale, an eternity if we compare it with the length of human life. The surface of the Earth had already acquired more or less the

## Prehistory

present aspect: the continents had separated, the dinosaurs had been extinct for an eternity, and most of the animals and plants that populated the planet would be recognisable to present day men and women.

However, the world was very, very different.

They were, as I said, hard times. At that point, let us agree that it was a million years ago, the Earth was suffering the effects of a terrible glaciation which is known as Günz, the first of the four that the planet would undergo during the Quaternary era.

A glacier is an immense mass of ice. It forms when the snow does not melt during the summer as a result of low temperatures, so it accumulates from one year to the next. Little by little the pressure increases, and the snow loses the air that it contains, until it ends up forming a blue ice as transparent as crystal.

During the glacial periods, these large masses of blue ice covered a large part of the northern hemisphere and large areas of the south. They extended over the Scandinavian peninsula and northern Europe, almost completely suffocated Canada, and extended across the United States to Seattle and the Great Lakes. Large glaciers were also formed in the Alps, the Pyrenees, the Atlas, Kilimanjaro, the Andes, the Rocky Mountains, the mountains and plateaux of Central Asia, and the mountains of Australia or New Zealand.

But the effects of the ice extended beyond the areas occupied by the glaciers.

On the one hand, the level of the seas fell because a large part of the planet's water froze, so that areas such as the English Channel or the Straits of Gibraltar that are at present submerged, rose to the surface.

On the other hand, in lands where the ice did not reach, what prevailed was cold, tundra, swamps and icy winds blowing across the steppes. In these areas the ground stayed

frozen most of the year, and even during the brief summer interval the ground remained solid from a certain depth: this is what we call *permafrost*. Even in today's warm Africa, where, by the way, the character in our story was located (somewhere in the interior of present-day South Africa), glaciers spread their tongues of ice over the mountainous areas. Around the equator, where the glaciers did not reach, a cold and endless rain was falling incessantly, drowning the world.

Yes, times were hard, but our female did not know it. She knew virtually nothing, really. She didn't know that thousands of years in the future other hominids would call her *Homo erectus*; in fact, she didn't know that the future existed, because in order to understand the concept of future it is necessary to understand the notion of evolution, of change, and her perception was limited to the short term; she didn't even know that it was cold, because she didn't know anything else but cold. For her, that was the norm. This was the world she knew: hunger, cold, fear.

Especially at that moment when they had lost the fire. When she had lost it.

~

A circle of expectant glances greets her when she rejoins the rest of the group. For a moment she has the thought of telling them that she has seen smoke, that she knows where they can find fire. That way they will be encouraged and, who knows, maybe they will manage to survive. But she is not good at pretending and does not even get a chance to try: as soon as they look at her face, the others understand that she has not seen smoke.

She doesn't speak. She does not respond to the violent grunts of one of the young males, nor to the whimpering of

## Prehistory

one of the mothers who fears that her infant will soon die. There is nothing she can do, so she just sets off. They need to find shelter as soon as possible if they're not to fall prey to predators. The territory they are crossing is dangerous. Herbivorous animals abound there. And the female knows very well that where there are herbivores there are also predators.

Little by little the others begin to follow her. They are only a handful: five males and three females of reproductive age, three unweaned infants and her, the oldest in the group, the most experienced. So, they follow her. That's why she's the fire keeper.

But she has lost it.

It happened one night. The embers glowed in the dark, as always, little points of light in the midst of the most complete blackness. They were in the depths of the cave. All around her everyone was sleeping, huddled against each other to keep warm. She heard the rhythmic sound of breathing, and the familiar smells of their skin and their bodies came to her nostrils. It was a comfortable place. It was safe.

She finished banking up the fire with stones, to protect it, and groped in the darkness until her fingers grasped a large log to feed the blaze. The flames were as voracious as a new-born baby: always asking for more and more. They needed to feed constantly to grow. Life was feeding on life.

Tired, already thinking of lying down to sleep, she placed the log on the fire. Then she heard that hissing sound that made her heart freeze. She let out an involuntary cry and bent over the fire in despair. A dying smoke rose from what a moment before were living embers. She blew frantically to try and revive it, again and again and again, but her instinct was not wrong.

The fire was gone.

A patch of moisture obscured the ash. She examined the log she had deposited on the embers and saw that it was hollow. Inside she could still smell the moisture. Water. It contained water. The water made the fire vanish.

Without the fire they are dead. Or they will be soon. They don't know how to make it; they've only learned to keep it when they find it in nature. That's why they've abandoned the safety of their shelter and are on the move.

They need to find fire as soon as possible.

~

Today we have so many sources of energy to cover our needs that it is difficult to understand the importance that fire had in prehistoric times. But it did, to the point that, most likely, it was fire that made the difference. The thing that drew the line between animals and humans.

To understand this, you have to take your imagination back to the time when the world was an immense hostile territory full of enemies. A world in which survival was a complicated task and which demanded that all efforts be dedicated to obtaining food... and avoiding becoming food yourself. In that world, fire was a powerful ally for our ancestors.

It provided them with warmth during the freezing nights of a world subjected to the ice age, reducing the numbers that froze to death.

It defended them from predators, who would not approach a fire because they feared the flames; and, at the same time, it helped them to hunt by causing stampedes or setting fire to meadows in order to direct their prey towards cliffs or precipices.

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It gave them freedom of movement and allowed them to explore colder territories to hunt and gather fruit, as they could carry the fire with them.

It allowed them to cook food, which became more tender and tastier, and above all, even if they did not know it, it killed parasites and bacteria, making it safer to eat meat. Uncooked vegetables are more indigestible and require a lot of time and energy to be assimilated, which is why chimpanzees, for example, spend hours chewing their food before swallowing it.

The consumption of cooked food reduces the time dedicated to digestion and, as a consequence, it also reduces the energy expended and increases the number of calories obtained.

In addition, cooked foods, which are softer, can be consumed by those who have lost their teeth, a high percentage of the adult population, which improves their life expectancy (and, as a not inconsiderable side effect, favours the transmission of knowledge from the elderly to the young, which is fundamental for survival in a hostile world). Cooking makes it possible to preserve and store food for times of shortage, thus increasing the chances of survival.

In the long term, eating cooked food caused the reduction in size of the jaws and teeth and a transformation of the digestive system: fire even changed us physically.

At a more advanced stage, fire also made it possible to make tools (for example, by burning and sharpening the tips of wooden sticks to make them into spears of great strength and penetrating power) or to improve health (by boiling plants to make infusions or inhaling steam to decongest the airways).

However, the deepest impact of fire was the transformations that its use caused in the hominid brain.

The fire provided a source of illumination independent of sunlight, which made it possible to maintain activity for more hours a day. Also, by providing security and keeping predators away, it made it possible to remain in the REM phase of sleep for longer each night. During this phase, the nervous system blocks the motor neurones, which produces a muscular paralysis that prevents the sleeper from moving. Today's human beings remain in the REM phase for 25% of their sleep, compared to a maximum of 15% for other primates.

And this difference is fundamental: during the REM stage the brain consolidates the memory that allows it to remember how to perform tasks, something that is key to executing complex processes such as skinning animals, making clothes or fabricating tools.

Not only that: according to the most recent research, fire and its contemplation favour meditation and regulate attention, which stimulates the elaboration of complex plans and allows us to anticipate possible solutions to future problems.

The use of fire was not only a fundamental competitive advantage in the struggle for survival: it also allowed people to learn more and in a better way and provoked profound changes in the brains of hominids.

~

A distant roar causes the group to freeze.

The mature female turns her head round and sniffs the air. The males exchange grunts and move their hands with sudden agitation. A mother squeezes her baby tightly to her chest, as if to protect him from the threat. The bodies of the hominids shake with fear and uncertainty. They know all too well the origin of the noise.

## Prehistory

They are being chased by a *Megantereon*, a big cat similar in size to today's leopard, but heavier and more muscular with elongated, slightly curved upper fangs that we know as sabre teeth.

The cat must have crossed their path and started to follow them. It is a powerful and cunning beast. It roars to frighten them, so that they start to run away and make the weaker ones fall behind.

They've just become prey.

When she turns back to her group, the female realises that everyone is looking at her. There is fear on their faces. And anger. They blame her. Without the fire that she has lost, how can they face such a beast on that desolate plain? Their only hope is to get away as fast as they can and hope that the big cat will lose interest in them. That it will find another prey.

She gestures with her head to the dominant male, a tall, sturdy specimen that is at the peak of his strength. After a few moments, as if he wanted to make it clear that he does not follow anyone's orders, he emits a dry grunt and starts off with a lively rhythm. The others rush to follow him, huddled around him, fearful of being left behind. She is the last to get going. She's afraid, like everyone else. She has seen the wild cat in action more than once and knows the terrible power of its claws, capable of tearing the body of a hominid to pieces with one paw.

The group moves silently through the frozen tundra. They head towards a small forest that can be seen in the distance, on the slope of a small elevation. It's a good choice. There, attracted by the vegetation, there may be herbivores that distract the predator's attention. Or a cave in which to take refuge.

The day is beginning to decline. At first the female keeps up with the group, but gradually she lags behind. She

is the oldest and her body no longer possesses the agility of former times. She can still keep up if the flight is not too long, but she does not exert herself. The others move away, eager to widen the distance from their pursuer. From time to time they look back and see her further and further away. They realise why she is doing it. She is the oldest and her wisdom is needed by the group, but she is weak and can no longer reproduce. And she let the fire go out. They don't stop.

When night falls, she has lost sight of them. The wind has picked up and howls in her ears, piercing her skin and making her shiver. It is raining heavily, frozen drops that hit her like shards of ice. She is at the limit of her strength. She hasn't heard the wild animal in a long time. Perhaps it is no longer following them, perhaps it has found another prey or lost the scent because of the rain. Nevertheless, she forces herself to keep going. The hill can't be far now.

It's already very late when she catches up with the rest of the group. They've been lucky. They've found a narrow-mouthed cave with a wide, deep gallery. It's a comfortable and sheltered refuge, suitable for a much larger group than theirs.

The interior is completely dark, but she has no trouble finding them. Their voices echo in the depths of the cave: the reassuring murmurs of the mothers to their children, the dry grunts of an order or a warning. They remain huddled against one of the walls at the back of the gallery, as far as possible from the entrance.

Without saying anything, the aged female enters the cave. The floor is carpeted with dry leaves that crunch at every step. There are many leaves. She likes that, she can wrap herself in them to give herself some warmth.

## Prehistory

She drops halfway between the entrance and the bottom of the cave. She is still not at ease; she knows that the beast is stubborn and that it is very possible that it will not give up the chase. But she can't take any more. She's hungry, frozen, exhausted. Her body needs to rest.

~

She's woken from her sleep by a crunch.

It's still night. Suddenly she's alert, she's motionless, her ears are ringing. Her heart beats violently in her chest, so much so that it prevents her from concentrating.

There it is again. A new crunch, very slight. And something else: the pungent stench of the predator. He's located them. He's at the entrance, sniffing around, studying the terrain, preparing to attack. She distinguishes the silhouette of the beast from the faint light of the night outside.

Fear paralyses her. Her whole body is telling her to flee, to lose herself in the depths, in the very belly of the mountain, to save herself, without worrying about anything else.

She forces herself to breathe calmly. She gets up very slowly. The others continue to sleep, oblivious to the danger. She needs to wake them up, to warn them to escape, and to do so without attracting the attention of the cat. She fumbles around with her hand until she finds a large enough stone. She weighs it carefully. She must throw it with all her strength if she wants to injure him. At the same time, the noise will wake the others up.

She throws the stone against the silhouette of the entrance, but immediately realises that it has gone astray. She hears the thud of the impact against the rock at the mouth of the cave. The noise startles the predator, who retreats a few steps. At the bottom of the cave, males and females jump

up amidst grunts and screams, caught up in a sudden agitation.

But the aged female doesn't notice. Her mouth is open. Her little hominid brain is working at full speed, trying to understand what she has just seen.

Fire.

She's just seen fire. A tiny burst of sparks that jumped from the cave wall to the ground when the rock hit it. Fire! Is it there, somewhere? Fire would be her salvation. But where is it hiding? What do you do to get it back?

Suddenly, she has an inspiration. She gropes around again until she finds more rocks and starts throwing them against the wall of the cave. There it is! Every time a stone hits the rock, sparks of fire fly out. She is so fascinated by her discovery that she does not notice the chaos around her: the feverish grunts of the adults who are looking for a passage to safety, the children's cries of fear, the low, deep roar of the beast that, after the initial surprise, is about to attack.

An unmistakable smell fills her nostrils. The sparks, falling on the dead leaves, have set them on fire. A weak flame, very small, that draws on a leaf. Fire! She is overcome by a sense of deep satisfaction, awe and contentment. She has managed to summon fire! Not only to find it and keep it, but something that has never happened before: she has created it. There it is, growing and spreading at great speed across the covering of dry leaves.

The beast smells it too, sees the flames blazing up. With a roar of frustration that echoes in the cave, it turns around and disappears into the darkness outside.

The female smiles, unable to take her eyes off the fire.

## Did you know...?

- ☞ There are two basic ways of kindling fire: by friction of a harder wood on another soft and dry one and by percussion of a hard stone like flint and an iron-rich one like pyrite. What happens to the aged female in the story is obviously fiction, but it reflects something that must have happened many times: the chance discovery of the sparks that were produced when two stones struck each other.
- ☞ *Homo erectus* lived between 1.9 million years and 70,000 years before today. He is thought to have evolved from *Homo habilis*. Some authors believe that *Homo ergaster* should be placed between *habilis* and *erectus*, but other specialists consider *ergaster* and *erectus* to be one and the same species, due to their great anatomical similarity. Both have a physical constitution quite similar to ours and a similar height, although they were more solidly built.
- ☞ *Homo erectus* is thought to have been the first hominid with the ability to use articulate language and the first to establish complex social relationships, thanks to the fact that its brain, which is larger than that of *Homo habilis*, was already capable of elaborating rudimentary abstractions (such as the deduction that the female in the story makes when she sees the sparks that fly when the rocks strike each other). Furthermore, it is very likely that the larger size of the sclera (the white part of the

eye) in contrast to the pupils allowed them to discern the moods of their companions by observing their gazes.

- ☞ Fire was the first source of energy that man controlled. Its mastery was the beginning of the technical development that has made us the dominant species on the planet.
- ☞ The fossil remains show that fire has been used to cook food since about two million years ago, although its use was not generalized until 400,000 years ago. During that long period, hominids first learned how to feed and conserve fire, and later how to make it. Until very recently, it was believed that the earliest evidence of the mastery of fire was found in the remains of charred containers found in Israel between 700,000 and 800,000 years ago, but recently, fragments of burned animal bones which are about a million years old, have been found in the Wonderwerk cave in central-northern South Africa. It's the same phenomenon. It probably happened several times, many times, throughout prehistory. It was learned. It was forgotten. It disappeared. It was rediscovered. But no matter how it happened, that discovery changed us forever. And, with us, the whole world.