

What is History Now?

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Edited by

David Cannadine

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Preface

The chapters gathered together in this volume, ranging widely (though not all-encompassingly) across our present-day perspectives on the past, were originally delivered as lectures at a two-day symposium, held at the Institute of Historical Research in London on 14 and 15 November 2001, to mark the fortieth anniversary of the original publication, by Macmillan, of E.H. Carr's seminal-cum-perennial *What is History?* Accordingly, my first and most grateful thanks are to the generous co-sponsors of that lively, memorable and well-attended occasion: the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge (where Carr was for many years a Fellow), and Palgrave Macmillan (the lineal descendant of Macmillan's). I am equally indebted to each of the principal speakers, not only for performing with such vigour and elan on the day, but also for rapidly reworking their lectures for publication against a very tight deadline. As originally delivered, each lecture was followed by a respondent, and I am most grateful to Judith Herrin, Warren Boutcher, Peter Marshall, Philip Williamson, Lyndal Roper, Daniel Pick and Catherine Hall for their stimulating comments and suggestive remarks, which not only helped initiate and sustain vigorous discussion at the conference, but were also of much help to the contributors to this volume in revising their lectures for publication.

From the outset, and in conformity with the mission of the Institute of Historical Research to provide a setting where scholars from Britain and around the world may congregate and connect, confer and contend, the purpose of this gathering was threefold: to celebrate and re-evaluate Carr's original publication four decades after its first appearance; to explore and explain the many developments and astonishing diversification of history in the intervening years since Carr wrote his book; and to create a volume which might reach the sort of broad public audience for whom history rightly remains (as it should, and as it must) an essential element in educated citizenry, public culture and national life. In a conference which, for various practical reasons, could only last for two days, it was impossible to cover all the strands in Clio's widely woven raiment, and economic historians, military historians, business historians, local historians, maritime historians, historians of art, of science, of population, of the family, and of diplomacy (to name the most

immediately obvious examples), may well feel themselves unreasonably neglected and unhelpfully excluded. To which the only possible reply can be that a second, complementary volume is not at all beyond the bounds of possibility.¹

E.H. Carr's *What is History?* originated as the George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures, delivered at Cambridge University between January and March 1961.² As such, they were a salute by a Fellow of Trinity to a former Master of the College who was widely regarded as the Grand Old Man of British History and the last great Whig historian. By then, Trevelyan was very much out of fashion among professional historians, and developments in the writing of history during the 1960s – many of them prefigured and foreseen by Carr – would only make this appear more so. To be sure, in describing history as a constant encounter between then and now, in which the time-bound preoccupations of the scholar needed to be recognized and appreciated, Carr was saying nothing which Trevelyan would have found exceptionable. But in urging the primacy of long-term economic and social forces, in insisting on the validity of extra-European history, in giving significant attention to sociology and causation, and in denying the importance of the individual or the unique event, Carr was advocating a very different sort of history from Trevelyan's national narratives and admiring biographies.³

Moreover, it was precisely this kind of history, as defined and described by Carr, which became very fashionable on the new and expanding campuses of Britain, Western Europe and North America during the 1960s and 1970s, as economic and social history (aided and abetted by the cult of quantification) threatened to marginalize traditional political history, as the preoccupation with causes and with analysis superseded the conventional interest in narrative and chronicle, and as the belief that history could help us master the present and even change the future seemed to give it a progressive public purpose that many conservative scholars detested and distrusted.⁴ Chief among them was G.R. Elton, whose *The Practice of History* (Sydney: Sydney University Press 1967) was written in what even he feared was vain protest against the trends (and the trendiness) of the 1960s, and explicitly against E.H. Carr – seeking as he did to re-assert the primacy of political history and of narrative; to re-state the view that history did not help us understand the present, let alone influence the future; and to denounce the faddishness of sociology and social history, and the study of the (non-existent?) extra-European past.⁵

To be sure, a great deal of the best history accomplished during the 1960s and 1970s was of the sort that Carr encouraged and Elton disliked: works such as Lawrence Stone's *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), J.H. Plumb's *The Growth of Political Stability in England, 1675–1725* (London: Macmillan, 1967), E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963) and Ronald Robinson and J.A. Gallagher's *Africa and the Victorians* (London: Macmillan, 1961). Yet despite his increasingly paranoid fears, much history during the 1960s and 1970s was still being done the Elton way: it was traditional political and constitutional scholarship, deeply grounded in the archives, and conservative and empiricist in its academic values. Indeed, by the end of the 1970s, there was something of a crisis in the much-vaunted 'new' history of which *What is History?* had been in some ways the precursor: quantification did not seem to deliver as much as was hoped; sociology provided less of a help than had originally been believed; and the stress on the causal and the analytical no longer seemed so appealing. This sense of disillusion was well captured in Lawrence Stone's article on 'The Revival of Narrative', which appeared in *Past & Present* in 1979, and which might equally well have been entitled 'The Demise of Causation'.⁶

Within a year of Stone's article, the intellectual landscape was changed even more significantly, with the advent to power of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States. The fact that the 1980s also witnessed the rise of historical 'revisionism' was no coincidence: in stressing the importance and autonomy of the political past, the revisionists were deliberately rejecting the economic and social determinism fashionable in the 1960s, in the same way that Thatcher and Reagan sought to do in the political present. But for all his ardent support of the revisionist cause, this did not mean, as Geoffrey Elton hoped, that the 1980s and 1990s saw a 'return to essentials', for these decades also witnessed a profound array of other developments which changed the nature of historical enquiry in ways that Elton did not like and Carr did not foresee.⁷ Among them were the revolution in IT, which transformed and democratized scholarship, and the further expansion in higher education; the shift from sociology to anthropology as the most fruitful subject from which historians were now borrowing; the influence of Michel Foucault, postmodernism and the 'linguistic turn'; the rise of women's history, gender history and cultural history, and the reconfiguration of 'imperial' history; and a broader shift away from the search for causation to the search for meaning.⁸

Many of these developments are addressed and analysed in the chapters which follow. As even its most ardent apologists admit, social history is no longer the confident, all-encompassing subject it seemed to be during the 1960s and 1970s. Instead, it has settled down to a more modest, more realistic and thus more helpful agenda – not the history of society as a whole, but the history of various aspects of society. By contrast, political history, which seemed so under ‘threat’ during those decades, has re-established and revived itself, not by reasserting the Eltonian claims of separateness and superiority, but by broadening its scope and embracing many of the more recent changes that have taken place in neighbouring disciplines. In the same way, ‘imperial’ history, which seemed so peripheral a subject in the history syllabuses of the 1960s, has now moved centre-stage, transformed and enhanced by the influence of postmodernism and post-colonial studies, and providing an essential bridge between national and global histories. In all these areas, the shift in interest from causes to meaning, from explanation to understanding, is well-marked; and as such they are all to some degree following the alternative agenda which was sketched out for historians of political thought more than thirty years ago.⁹

However, of all the historical sub-specialisms that were already in being when Carr wrote his book, it seems likely that religious history has been the most fundamentally transformed by developments since then – away from the history of theology and of the (male-dominated) institutions which proclaimed and supported it, and towards a broader concern with popular religiosity, as approached through ritual, culture and gender, which has opened up large swathes of hitherto ignored territory. Indeed, just as social history seemed poised to sweep all before it in the 1960s, now cultural history seems to be in the ascendant: partly because it has been the most receptive to the insights of anthropology; partly because it makes very large claims about the terrain of the past which it encompasses; and partly because it has benefited most from the shift in interest from explanation to understanding. Yet for many people today, both within academe and outside, the most significant development during recent decades has been the rise of women’s history and gender history: the recovery of the lives and experiences of one half of the world’s population, based on the recognition that gender was not merely a useful, but arguably an essential category of historical analysis and comprehension.¹⁰

As these chapters make vividly plain, history as practised during the first decade of the twenty-first century is going through an exceptionally vigorous, lively and innovative period. More people are writing more history than ever before, in an unprecedented range of sub-disciplinary

specialisms and expositional modes. So much so, indeed, that a great deal of the history that scholars are producing now was completely unthinkable or literally unimaginable when Carr set out to describe and define the subject forty years ago. But this is not the only way in which history has expanded and developed since then, for it has extended in both scope and appeal at least as much outside the academy as it has within. The widespread pursuit of family history, the growing concern with defining and preserving the 'national heritage' and the unprecedented allure of history on television: all this betokens a burgeoning popular interest in the past as energetic and enthusiastic as that to be found within the walls of academe. History is now acclaimed as the 'new gardening' or the 'new rock and roll', and there can be no doubt that its massive potential for entertainment and recreation has not yet been fully exploited. But it is also a serious subject with a powerful public purpose.

As that caveat suggests, some words of caution are also called for. However fertile and vigorous the present historical scene, both within academe and outside, there are also criticisms and challenges. So much history is now being written that very few scholars can keep up with more than a tiny fraction of what is being published: all of us know more and more about less and less. The rise of so many new sub-specialisms threatens to produce a sort of sub-disciplinary chauvinism, where some practitioners insistently assert the primacy of their approach to the past and show little sympathy with, or knowledge of, other approaches. And far too much history today is written in dismal prose or impenetrable jargon which can only be understood by a few *aficionados* and which fails utterly to reach a broader public audience.¹¹ Nor is history outside universities without its problems: family history is often excessively antiquarian, devoid of any sense of the broader picture; the cult of the 'national heritage' is frequently blinded by nostalgia and distorted by snobbery; and television history, while undeniably popular and at its best quite excellent, would greatly benefit from a more searching and sustained dialogue between the people in the media and the historians who ply their trade outside. There is, then, cause for both celebration and discomfort. And perhaps for a sort of humble scepticism, too.

Today, most historians are no longer impressed by the efforts of their professional forebears, back in the 1960s and 1970s, to enumerate the causes of historical change and to offer convincing explanations as to how, why and when things happened. Yet during those two decades, this way of approaching the past seemed simultaneously innovative, exciting, plausible and relevant. Today, many of our foremost scholars claim that in moving from explanation to meaning, from causes to understanding,

we have become much more sophisticated in our comprehension of the past. Perhaps this is right. Certainly, there is an impressive body of scholarship in many of history's sub-disciplines which would suggest that it is. But then again, perhaps it is not wholly right, for historians, as Carr insisted time and again, are themselves both agents and victims of the historical process. Every generation, scholars have arisen proclaiming that they have found a new key which unlocks the essence of the past in a way that no previous historical approach has ever done. Our own generation is no exception to this rule – and it will probably be no exception to this fate. For these claims have never yet stood the test of time. Twenty years from now, scholars will probably be concerned with something very different, and they will look back with bemused amazement that our generation could believe so confidently that unravelling the 'meaning' of the past was the historian's crucial and essential task.¹²

These are some of the issues raised but – rightly – not fully settled by the contributors to this book. They themselves are based on both sides of the Atlantic; they practise many, but not all, of history's varied and differing sub-specialisms; they range in their interests from the ancient world to twentieth-century Germany; and (again in a manner that would have been unimaginable forty years ago) the majority of contributors are women. When originally delivered as lectures, these chapters informed, enlightened, stimulated and provoked, and they will surely continue to do so in their final form, and also reach a much broader audience. Forty years after Carr wrote *What is History?*, the answers to that question offered here are in many ways rather different from the answers Carr provided. But not entirely. 'History', he informed us, 'is an unending dialogue between the present and the past.'¹³ So, indeed, it was, then; so, indeed, it still is, now. The nature of the conversation may change, along with the subjects for discussion and the people discussing them. But the dialogue continues as, in any free society with a sense of itself existing in time and over time, it always should and always must.

In getting this multi-authored book to completion, and in seeing it through to the publisher in extra-rapid time, I am conscious of three great debts which I, as editor, particularly owe. The first is to Josie Dixon of Palgrave Macmillan, who initially conceived this project, did her utmost to make it happen, was a constant source of advice, encouragement and support throughout, and was unwavering in her determination to drive the enterprise forward to a successful outcome. The second is to Chase

Publishing Services, who have copy-edited the text with meticulous care, dealt with each of the contributors with a matchless combination of tact and firmness, checked the proofs and made the index, and generally overseen the book through its production. My third debt is to Dr Debra Birch, Head of Events and Facilities at the Institute of Historical Research, who not only planned and arranged the original conference itself – with her customary enthusiasm, dedication, efficiency, intelligence and good cheer – but also ensured that all the contributions for this book came in to length and on time. To all three of them, and also to the stimulus and example of E.H. Carr, I extend my heartfelt thanks.

David Cannadine
Norfolk
December 2001

Notes and references

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2. For the background to this book, see R.J. Evans, 'Introduction' in E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (40th anniversary edition), (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. ix–xlvi.
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