
**IN
DEFENSE
OF
HISTORY**

Richard J. Evans

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For Christine, with love

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PREFACE TO THE AMERICAN EDITION

FOR this American edition I have included consideration of major work that has been published in this field since March 1997, added or amended a few historical examples to make them more relevant to an American readership, and altered a few passages where it seemed to me that the critics of the British edition had succeeded in finding obscurities or errors in the text. The essence of my arguments, however, remains unchanged. I am grateful to Steve Forman, of W. W. Norton & Company, for his In Defense of History help and advice. A comprehensive and periodically updated reply to my critics can be found at the following Web site:
<http://ihr.sas.ac.uk/ihr/reviews.mnu.html>.

RICHARD J. EVANS

London, February 1998

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INTRODUCTION

THIS book is not about history, but about how we study it, how we research and write about it, and how we read it. In the postmodern age, historians are being compelled to address these questions afresh. Of course, there have been many attempts to tackle them in the past. But they need to be confronted by every new generation of historians in turn. Currently the field is held by two books published thirty or more years ago by the British historians Edward Hallett Carr and Sir Geoffrey Elton. E. H. Carr's *What Is History?* has been widely used as an introduction to historical study by teachers and students since its first publication in 1961, and it is easy to see why. Carr In Defense of History In Defense of History was a practicing historian of vast experience, who had the ability to think clearly about difficult philosophical issues and to communicate his thought in a concise, witty, and thoroughly readable manner. *What Is History?* In Defense of History does not talk down to the student in the manner of conventional history primers or introductions to In Defense of History the study of history. It addresses itself to the reader as an equal. Carr engages in lively arguments with many other historians about the nature of history. He challenges and undermines the belief, brought to university study by too many students on leaving high school, that history is simply a matter of objective fact. He introduces them to the idea that history books, like the people who write them, are products of their own times, bringing particular ideas and ideologies to bear on the past.

Against Carr's relativistic approach to historical study, it is common practice to pit G. R. Elton's *The Practice of History*, published in 1967. Elton's book mounts a trenchant defense of the belief that history is a search for the objective truth about the past. It concludes optimistically that historians' efforts in this enterprise more often than not meet with success. Elton, too, was a practicing historian of enormous experience, and in the course of dispensing a good deal of sensible advice on how history should be studied, written, and taught, his book also had a lot to say about particular historians and the ways in which they either lived up to or (more commonly) failed to live up to the ideals he proclaimed. While Carr championed a sociological approach to the past, Elton declared that any serious historical work should have a narrative of political events at its core. Those which did not, he dismissed as not really being proper history at all. And while Carr enjoined his readers to study the historian before they studied his "facts," Elton told his readers to focus above all on the documentary record left by the past, the ultimate arbiter of historical accuracy and truth, and to leave historians and their motives to themselves.

While both Elton and Carr are still very much worth reading, there is, however, as critics have remarked, something rather strange about two books written more than thirty years ago still serving as basic introductions In Defense of History to a scholarly discipline.¹ Yet in many colleges and universities in Britain, the United States, and other countries they undoubtedly do.² Although some historians seem to think that Elton continues to represent "conventional wisdom in the historical profession,"³ or (more pretentiously) the "*doxa* amongst professional academic historians,"⁴ in practice this has long ceased to be the case. Few historians would now defend the hard-line concept of historical objectivity espoused by Elton. The prevalence of historical controversy, In Defense of History endemic in the profession for decades, has long since disabused historians of the idea that the truth lies buried in the documents and that once the historian has unearthed it, no one ever need perform In Defense of History the same operation

again. It is more true to say that there has been a “merging of the mainstreams around the E. H. Carr position,” insofar as there is any general agreement among historians at all.⁵

Nothing has outdated the views not only of Elton, but even of Carr, more obviously than the arrival in the 1980s of postmodernist theory, which has called into question many, if not most, of the arguments In Defense of History put forward by both of them.⁶ Instead of causes, which Carr regarded as central to historical scholarship, the “linguistic turn” has given us discourses. History is widely argued to be only one discourse among many. The notion of scientific history, based on the rigorous investigation of primary sources, has been widely attacked. Increasing numbers of writers on the subject deny that there is any such thing as historical truth or objectivity—both concepts defended, in different ways, by Carr as well as Elton. The question is now not so much “What Is History?” as “Is It Possible to Do History at All?” The result has been that in place of the optimistic belief in the progress of the discipline held in different ways by both Carr, who saw it in the expansion of historical scholarship, and Elton, who saw it in the accumulation of historical knowledge, historians at the end of the twentieth century are haunted by a growing, fin-de-siècle sense of gloom. “A time of uncertainty and of epistemological crisis; a critical turning point: such,” observed the French historian Roger Chartier in 1994, “are the diagnoses, mostly apprehensive, given of history in recent years.”⁷ The intellectual historian David Harlan, writing in 1989, thought that historical studies were indeed undergoing “an extended epistemological crisis.”⁸ In the mid-1990s, American historians Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob echoed this view: “History has been shaken right down to its scientific and cultural foundations.”⁹ The postmodernist view that language could not relate to anything except itself must, as another alarmed In Defense of History historian observed, “entail the dissolution of history” and “necessarily In Defense of History jeopardises historical study as normally understood.”¹⁰ The postmodernist challenge, warned distinguished Princeton historian Lawrence Stone, had plunged the historical profession “into a crisis of self-confidence about what it is doing and how it is doing it.”¹¹ The sense of crisis is widespread.¹² “Historians,” declared another writer on the subject, “have suffered a major theoretical challenge to the validity of their subject.”¹³ Some indeed see this challenge as more than merely theoretical: “Poststructuralism,” in one historian’s opinion, even “threatens to throw historians out of work” by robbing their discipline of its traditional legitimacy and *raison d’être*.¹⁴ Thus, according to one outraged Australian academic, what we are witnessing is the “killing of history,” in which the traditional practice of the discipline “is a visibly deteriorating path to research grants, publication, conferences and academic employment.”¹⁵ Such has been the power and influence of the postmodernist critique of history that growing numbers of historians themselves are abandoning the search for truth, the belief in objectivity, and the quest for In Defense of History a scientific approach to the past. David Harlan has even gone so far as to remark that “by the end of the 1980s most historians—even most working historians—had all but given up on the possibility of acquiring reliable, objective knowledge about the past.”¹⁶ In Defense of History If this is indeed the case, no wonder so many historians are worried about the future of their discipline.

YET far from this sense of crisis being universal among practicing historians, many commentators have discerned a widespread sense of complacency among historians in the mid-1980s. While In Defense of History American intellectual historian Allan Megill indicted the historical profession in 1989 for what he called its “sclerotic self-satisfaction”

In Defense Of History

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