



In Defense of History

By Richard J. Evans

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A master practitioner gives us an entertaining tour of the historian's workshop and a spirited defense of the search for historical truth.

E. H. Carr's *What Is History?*, a classic introduction to the field, may now give way to a worthy successor. In his compact, intriguing survey, Richard J. Evans shows us how historians manage to extract meaning from the recalcitrant past. To materials that are frustratingly meager, or overwhelmingly profuse, they bring an array of tools that range from agreed-upon rules of documentation and powerful computer models to the skilled investigator's sudden insight, all employed with the aim of reconstructing a verifiable, usable past. Evans defends this commitment to historical knowledge from the attacks of postmodernist critics who see all judgments as subjective. Evans brings "a remarkable range, a nose for the archives, a taste for controversy, and a fluent pen" (*The New Republic*) to this splendid work. "Essential reading for coming generations." -Keith Thomas

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In the 19th and 20th centuries, historiographers established scientific methods and standards for the historical profession. History's claims to objective knowledge have recently been critiqued by post-foundationalists who argue that facts cannot exist outside of the "prison house" of language. Richard Evans's *In Defense of History* not only defends historians from these fashionable barbs, but shows how the discipline is adapting to this assault on its empiricist base.

Like most historians, Evans confronts accusations that history is either dead or mere ideology designed to prop up bourgeois institutions by answering that the past "really happened, and we really can, if we are very scrupulous and careful and self-critical ... reach some tenable conclusions about what it all meant." Evans defends time-honored methods for proving the validity of facts, upholding faith in the notion that causality can be reasonably deduced from the proper chronological arrangement of events. Verification and causation, he points out, do not simply mean that change is initiated by singular people or monolithic institutions, and he rebukes those who portray recent writing in social history in such medievalist terms. Unlike conservative diatribists against postmodernism, Evans believes that the "linguistic turn" can help break historians from the narrowness of theoretical orthodoxy. While critical of postmodern excesses, he supports conjoining various methods of intellectual inquiry so as to deepen the relevance of history in an overly skeptical age. "Why should we not too," he asks, "raid the various genres of historical writing which have been developed over the past couple of centuries to enrich our own historical practice today?" --John Anderson

From Library Journal

Evans (history, Cambridge Univ.) defends traditional history against the onslaught of postmodernist theories, which hold that ultimate historical truth is not only unattainable but does not exist. In the process, he provides the reader with an insightful critique of the evolution of historical methodology, and by implication the historical profession, in the generation since Edward Hallett Carr's classic *What Is History?* (LJ 2/15/62) appeared. Evans's analysis of the link between postmodernist theory and Holocaust denial is particularly insightful. The idea that no historical "theory" is more valid than another, combined with the American notion that both sides of any issue must receive "fair" play, brings Holocaust denial dangerously close to legitimacy. Evans manages to address a number of issues without being polemical. The book is particularly useful for beginning graduate students. Recommended for all libraries. --Frederic Krome, Jacob Rader Marcus Ctr. of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati

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From Kirkus Reviews

A lucid, muscular, and often sly reflection on the nature of historical knowledge by an experienced practicing historian. It is difficult to imagine a stronger or more convincing case than Evans's for the distinctiveness of historical knowledge as a mode of human thought. For in reading him, one joins company with someone who finds history a matter, as Allan Nevins long ago put it, of "free and joyous pursuit." Amid agonies of doubt about the future of history in a postmodern world, Evans, a historian of Germany (Cambridge University), confidently defends the autonomy of historical knowledge. Amid an outpouring of dire warnings about the crisis in historical studies, he bracingly champions history's enduring value even as its intellectual underpinnings undergo great change. He resolutely avoids ideology. In fact, contrary to its title, his book is more an explanation of what historians seek to accomplish than it is a defense of what's written in Clio's name; he takes the offensive against the worst excesses of postmodernism. Some may tire of Evans's steadfast centrism, but common sense may be scorned at some cost. The author doesn't confuse a

piety for history with a piety for individual historians. Rather, he brings colleagues, quick or dead, left or right, north or south, into the ring and merrily wrestles many to the ground. He does so always with respect, never with the moralistic or ideological animus of so many works in the same vein. His chapters about the history of history, historical facts, causation, and objectivity, and about issues of historical ``science,'' morality, evidence, and power are models of their kind. A highly useful bibliographical essay tops it all off. A deft, accessible work for anyone who wishes to learn what historians do, how they think, and where they fail. -- *Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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