

Preface to the Revised Third Edition

This book belongs to a genre of writing about the discipline of history which can be said to have begun with the publication of E.H. Carr's book, *What Is History?* in 1961. The fortieth anniversary was marked by the reissue of the original text in 2001, together with Carr's notes towards a second edition and a new introduction by Richard Evans.¹ *What Is History?* has never been out of print, and it has been a reliable fixture on student reading lists since it first appeared. Its reissue with all the editorial trappings of a classic invites reflection on the current standing of the discipline of history.

In some ways, the continuing popularity of *What Is History?* is surprising. Carr stood at an oblique angle to the historical profession. He was not trained as a historian and he never taught history; only in later life did he devote himself primarily to the writing of history (in his multi-volume *History of Soviet Russia*); before the 1950s he was much better known as an authority on international relations. *What Is History?* originated as a set of lectures delivered in the History Faculty of Cambridge University. It is a strongly polemical work. The title was something of a provocation, considering Carr's position as an outsider. While he demonstrated a respect for the great historians of the past, he was dismissive towards the current practitioners of the craft, and he could not resist the temptation of settling old scores. The book also bears the imprint of a political context which seems a world away from today's. It was written against the background of the Cold War, though at a moment when the prospects for accommodation between the two power blocs looked better than for many

years. Carr himself strongly sympathized with the Soviet Union, especially its ruling élite; he also believed that the coming of independence to large areas of Asia and Africa represented a major step in human progress. In short, the book is very much rooted in its time and place.

It is hardly surprising, then, that *What Is History?* did not prove to be a charter for the future of historical studies. Some of Carr's central concerns raise barely a flicker of interest today. His treatment of the theme of society and the individual seems remote, and his interpretation of historical objectivity idiosyncratic. Conversely many features of today's historical practice are not even mentioned in the book. In Carr's view history is the property of literate and powerful élites. There is no sense that history might be claimed by the dispossessed or marginal, and hence no intimation of what later came to be known as 'history from below'. It is probably safe to say that Carr would have been bemused by the arrival of gender history, and dismissive of oral history. Above all he would have been angered by the Postmodernist assault. For all his scepticism, Carr did not dispute the historicity of textual evidence, and his conception of history was founded on the 'grand narratives' of progress and power. Both have become the target of the deconstructionists.

The claim of *What Is History?* to continuing significance rests on two grounds. First, it virtually established a new genre. Searching questions about the nature of history had been asked since Graeco-Roman times, but they had mostly been posed (and answered) by philosophers. Indeed the history of this kind of enquiry can be written convincingly with virtually no mention of historians.² Historians themselves, on the rare occasions when they stepped back from their researches, wrote guides to method rather than reflections on the nature of history. Carr bridged the gap. He was well read in philosophy; at the same time he was enough of a historical practitioner to root his analysis in real problems of historical enquiry. The outcome is a book which pithily captures many of the unstated assumptions of the historian's work and subjects them to withering critique. At the same time the polemical tone of the book itself stimulates a critical response, since several of its arguments are distorted by the requirements of rhetoric. That iconoclastic quality has been much less evident in the books which have followed in the wake of

What Is History? But 1961 was clearly a watershed in the writing of historiography. The issues which Carr raised became part of the intellectual milieu in which historians worked. His views could not be ignored. They were vigorously debated by a succession of historians – G.R. Elton, Arthur Marwick, Gordon Connell-Smith, H.A. Lloyd, and so on.³ More recent writers – like Ludmilla Jordanova for example⁴ – may make few explicit references to Carr, but they occupy a space which was first opened up by *What Is History?*

The second reason why Carr's work has continuing resonance is that the most obvious and pressing message of the book continues to be so relevant. Carr stated that history was 'an unending dialogue between the past and the present'.

To learn about the present in the light of the past means also to learn about the past in the light of the present. The function of history is to promote a profounder understanding of both past and present through the interrelation between them.⁵

Carr emphasized the conclusion which logically flows from this proposition – that the priorities and findings of historical enquiry inevitably change over time. This argument was partly directed against the unreflecting empiricism which was much commoner among historians then than it is now. Carr wanted to dispose of the idea that following the trusted procedures of the professional will yield authentic or objective knowledge of the past. He showed that at every level of historical enquiry, from the choice of source materials through to the finished work of history, the present intrudes on the reconstruction of the past. What the most casual reader will carry away from reading *What Is History?* is the idea that historians do not stand outside or above history; some rise above the preoccupations of their contemporaries better than others, but even the most objective remain fundamentally 'part of the procession'.

For a historical profession confined within very limited notions of the subject matter of history, Carr's outlook was little short of revolutionary, and it provoked predictably sharp reactions, for and against. It was hardly a coincidence that the appearance of *What Is History?* was quickly followed by the establishment of new strands of history which deliberately sought to address present need: social history in the mould of E.P.

Thompson, the new urban history, and the history of Africa, for example. It was as if Carr's dynamic vision of the relationship between past and present had released a new creative energy among younger historians. In that sense the shape of academic history today bears the unmistakable stamp of Carr's influence. That history continues to be characterized by a high degree of variety – both of theme and method – is a sure sign of health, as is the steady flow of writing which critiques the practice of history in the tradition created by Carr himself.⁶

What, meanwhile, of the impact made by history and historians on the wider public? The record here is much more mixed. The coming of the third millennium in January 2000 provided a convenient vantage point from which to weigh the current social significance of historical enquiry. Temporal landmarks of this kind are as much about evaluating the past as about mapping out the future: indeed the two are indissolubly linked, since any conception of the future is defined in relation to the past (as Carr emphasized). One might, for example, have expected some reflection on Britain's relationship with mainland Europe a thousand years on from the Roman occupation, or a reassessment of our social and cultural life based on a long view of continuity and change. Instead the public celebration of the Millennium in Britain was almost empty of historical content: the tone was set by the exhibition in the Millennium Dome at Greenwich, where major themes of human experience and achievement were presented in a historical vacuum. Historians appear to have played no part in planning the celebrations.

It was therefore in keeping with the millennial atmosphere that historical perspective proved singularly lacking with respect to the most epoch-making event in the twenty-first century so far: the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11 2001. Confronted by a disaster on this unprecedented scale, most Americans – and many of their overseas friends – were overwhelmed by feelings of visceral fear, moral revulsion and a desire for revenge. These responses were entirely understandable, but by themselves they did not furnish the basis for a rational policy towards terrorism. September 11 represented a point where many historical strands became intertwined: the growth of Islamic fundamentalism (linked to notions of a *jihad*, or holy war); the simmering crisis in Palestine; the collapse of central state power in

a number of Islamic countries; the rising tide of resentment in the Middle East against US interventionism; and the unstable world order since the end of the Cold War.⁷ Analytical thinking along these lines requires not only a well-stocked fund of historical knowledge but also cool-headed detachment; it is likely to be the first casualty in a situation which is defined for most people in terms of panic and rage. One of the key questions in the post-September 11 world is how quickly American policy becomes tempered by a sense of historical perspective.

However, loss of historical awareness is not the prerogative of nations caught up in catastrophe. At present the British government is particularly resistant to any critical perspective derived from the past. The Conservative administrations of the 1980s and 1990s had had a vision of the national past which was variously invoked in opposition to European integration, constitutional devolution within the United Kingdom and other issues. Margaret Thatcher had urged the nation to measure itself against the achievements of its Victorian forebears, and her government devoted closer attention to history than to any other subject in the National Curriculum. The advent of Tony Blair in 1997 marked a significant shift. True to its name, New Labour has struck a pose of commitment to novelty, unburdened by the past. The centenary of the Labour Party in 2001 was barely acknowledged, as if a backward glance might stir up memories of its earlier radicalism and thus jeopardize the reinvention of the party. The few public references which Blair has made to the role of history have tended to be negative: during the talks leading up to the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, for example, he expressed the hope that 'the burden of history' could be lifted.⁸ Certainly New Labour regards history as a cultural asset to be lightly worn. The space planned for history in the National Curriculum by the Tories has been curtailed in order to accommodate more pressing requirements, such as 'citizenship'. It remains to be seen whether, in vacating the terrain of history, Blair has handed his opponents powerful cultural resources whose loss he may live to regret.

In sharp contrast to the indifference towards history which prevails at the top levels of government, a wide range of cultural institutions encourage an interest in the past, and many of them receive public funds for this purpose: one thinks of the great national museums, the historical monuments maintained by

English Heritage, and the BBC. This is the domain of what has come to be called 'public history', meaning the past as it is represented for public consumption, and at present it is unquestionably booming. Museums have recently experienced an impressive increase in the number of their visitors, only partly explained by the decision to abolish entrance charges. History now occupies a significant place in the most influential medium of popular culture – television. There are more history programmes than ever before, giving rise to the quip that history is 'the new gardening'. The subject matter is skewed to the Second World War and the history of the English monarchy, and the programmes vary sharply in quality, but at their best they bring the past to life and invite some kind of personal identification with it.

Of course any manifestation of mass culture is conditioned by commercial considerations. The objection can be made that, for example, museums and ancient monuments are promoted less for their contribution to historical education in the broadest sense than as an adjunct to tourism; hence the very mixed reactions to the term 'heritage'. The political assumptions of public history are also suspect: under the guise of entertainment popular images of the past pander to a lowest common denominator of sentimentalism, nostalgia and national pride.⁹ But both these criticisms fall wide of the mark because they overstate the ability of the guardians of public history to determine popular response to their products. The important point about the current craze for historical material on the tourist trail or in the media is that it reflects varied forms of engagement that go far beyond the negative stereotypes. The quest for personal roots, the need for a perspective on present-day cultural identities, securing a better purchase on social problems – all these and more shape the popular fascination with the past. And they are expressed not only through the consumption of materials in the public sphere but also in creative individual pursuits, such as research into family history and collecting old photographs of particular genres or places.¹⁰

Most historians look askance at these popular uses of the past, believing that they are a diversion from the real job of reconstructing and interpreting the past. But professional and popular priorities are not mutually exclusive. On certain historical topics there is so much at stake in political or cultural terms that

meticulous scholarship comes to be regarded as the final arbiter. This is most strikingly true of the Holocaust. The social memory of European Jewry, the moral obligations of the German nation and the legitimacy of the state of Israel are all closely bound up with the historicity of this event. Did six million Jews perish under Nazi rule? Did Hitler plan and order their extermination? Or was the Holocaust a propaganda myth devised by the victorious powers at the end of the war? These issues were brought to trial in Britain in unique circumstances in 2000. A leading 'revisionist' historian, David Irving, claimed that Deborah Lipstadt, an American academic, and her publisher, Penguin Books, had libelled him by describing him as a 'Holocaust denier' who suppressed and distorted the documentary record. In order to rebut the charges, the defence needed to prove both that Irving was dishonest in his use of evidence, and that the historical events which he denied had actually taken place. As a result the views of professional historians were as central to the case as the arguments of legal counsel. Several leading academics either testified in court or were commissioned to write reports on the historical issues at stake. One historian, Richard Evans, was retained specifically to investigate the validity of Irving's research procedures. In his later account of the case, Evans posed the question, 'How do we know when a historian is telling the truth?'¹¹ The answer was, by tracing his or her statements back to the sources on which they were purportedly based. For three months the court heard a mountain of evidence of this kind. The verdict, delivered in a 350-page judgement, was an unequivocal defeat for Irving: he was found to have flouted accepted research methods and to have manipulated the evidence to suit his political prejudices.

The Irving case was obviously important in diminishing the credibility of Holocaust denial. But it had a wider significance. It showed that what professional historians do matters, that some events in the past can be authenticated beyond reasonable doubt, and that society has a vested interest in the maintenance of scholarly standards. Each of these propositions has been a matter of debate in recent years. History has been dismissed by Modernists as an antiquarian irrelevance, and by Postmodernists as a self-serving fiction. Historians have sometimes felt that the scholarly claims of their profession have been locked in a losing battle with sceptical voices from outside. The Irving case may well prove to

be unique: perhaps no other historical issue could lead to such a sharply focused confrontation between scholarship and propaganda. But it nevertheless provides a sober reminder that the most accurate history possible is a social necessity.

That in a nutshell is the position argued in *The Pursuit of History*. The book begins by drawing a distinction between a professionally informed historical awareness and other, more instrumental versions of the past. It concludes by asserting that historians will continue to merit the support of the societies in which they work as long as they acknowledge the validity of relevant history. The intervening chapters support these claims by defining the evidential base of the subject, by outlining its characteristic themes, which have often been soundly practical in origin, and by exploring the limits of reliable and disinterested historical knowledge. For all its infatuation with the modern and the new, contemporary society continues to regard the past as a source of legitimacy and inspiration. It is easy to criticize that focus on the past when, as is so often the case, it is acknowledged in a back-handed fashion, through an entirely present-centred relativism. The Irving case reminds us that there are vital historical issues which transcend the preoccupations of cultural politics, and which place professional expertise at a premium. For as long as that is so, there will be a need for the skills and insights described in this book.

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Notes

- 1 E.H Carr, *What Is History?*, with a new introduction by Richard J. Evans (Palgrave, 2001).
- 2 See for example B.A. Haddock, *An Introduction to Historical Thought* (Arnold, 1980).
- 3 G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (Fontana, 1969); Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (Macmillan, 1970); Gordon Connell-Smith and Howell A. Lloyd, *The Relevance of History* (Heinemann, 1972).
- 4 Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (Arnold, 2000).
- 5 Carr, *What Is History?*, p. 62.

- 6 See for example Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (Granta, 1997); Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (Arnold, 2000); Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (Routledge, 1997). For a recent anthology, see John Tosh (ed.), *Historians On History* (Longman, 2000).
- 7 For a preliminary analysis, see Fred Halliday, *Two Days That Shook the World* (Saqi Books, 2002).
- 8 Tony Blair, quoted in *The Guardian*, 11 April 1998.
- 9 Patrick Wright, *On Living In An Old Country: the National Past in Contemporary Britain* (Verso, 1985).
- 10 For a passionate demonstration of this point, see Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, vol. I (Verso, 1994).
- 11 Richard J. Evans, *Telling Lies About Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial* (Basic Books, 2001), p. 1.