

How Historiology defines History

By Penelope J. Corfield

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BOOKS REVIEWED

John Tosh: **WHY HISTORY MATTERS**
173pp. Palgrave Macmillan 2008. £9.99.
978 0 230 52148 3

Jeremy Black: **THE CURSE OF HISTORY**
234pp. The Social Affairs Unit 2008. £10.
978 1 904863 29 8

David Cannadine: **MAKING HISTORY NOW AND THEN: DISCOVERIES,
CONTROVERSIES AND EXPLORATIONS**
390pp. Palgrave Macmillan 2008. £19.99.
978 0 230 21889 5

Peter Charles Hoffer: **THE HISTORIANS' PARADOX:
THE STUDY OF HISTORY IN OUR TIME**
213pp. New York University Press 2008. \$30.00.
978 0 8147 3714 9

Historiology is the name of the game. The term has the authority of the British Library catalogue, which so classifies all studies in the approaches, themes, and concepts that underpin the academic study of history. These quartet of books fall centrally into this emerging field. They are 'about' historical research, but

they are neither ‘How to’ advice manuals, nor discourses upon the philosophy of history. Moreover, they are differentiated from historiography, which focuses upon the study of historical writings as a genre. That adjacent field today remains relatively fallow. It still interests certain senior historians, who relish the opportunity to assess their colleagues with barbed commentaries. Yet it tends to bore students as too much ‘shop’.

Instead, core courses in History in the Universities now confront the nature of the discipline, as well as the skills that it integrally requires. For such readers, John Tosh’s *Why History Matters* provides an accessible brief introduction, in effect as a post-postmodern primer. That is, the recent relativist challenge to the basis of historical knowledge, under the banner of postmodernism, is dismissed as an unhelpful distraction. So the debate is advanced from ‘Can historians know the past?’ to ‘Why is it important to know about the past?’

Tosh’s answers are practical rather than philosophical. Fundamentally, he argues, all citizens need to understand the historical contexts of the issues of the day, in order to function as responsible citizens. ‘Public history’ is especially imperative within democracies; and citizenship classes provide a welcome opportunity to spread an understanding of critical historical enquiry. Hence Tosh urges any Education ministers among his readers to entrust the new Citizenship curriculum in all secondary schools to the history teachers. Amen to that, would be the response of most, if not all, professional historians; and it is good for students to know the arguments. The ability to ‘think long’ and to place current events in diachronic context is a cardinal result of the training provided by the discipline. Studying history enhances not only useful workplace skills of information collection, organisation, analysis, and presentation but it also inculcates a critical analysis of the past and how it can be studied.

If Tosh is sanguine about the subject’s social benefits, Jeremy Black’s thunderously entitled *Curse of History* is far more admonitory. In fact, he does

not want people to stop reading his own books on eighteenth-century Britain and Europe. Or those by his fellow historians. His aim instead is to warn that emotive reactions to historical grievances, and in particular to the history of persecution, should not be allowed to usurp the subject's core agenda. Studying the past should not be turned into a celebration of nationalist propaganda, buttressed by an 'invented' and romanticised saga; nor should it be viewed as part of either a political or a religious mission that is immune to criticism. Black reminds his fellow historians of the need for scrupulous care in interpreting events in full context; and he wants historians' readers to apply the same discipline too. However, he fears that the public is not listening. And he worries that the gulf between professional accuracy and popular emotionalism is simply too great to bridge.

The difference in tone between Black and Tosh makes it worthwhile to study the two works together. Both offer a wealth of examples. Black in particular gives a panoramic gallop through the world's array of contested and emotive issues from current and recent history, although sadly his book lacks an index to assist retrieval. And both historians stress how easily complex issues are simplified into myths and how attempts at telling the truth are often resisted. So there are many perils surrounding the professional historians, including some of their own making. These worthies err if they become too partisan; but also err if they remain too aloof from the public debates. The liberal Tosh, however, is hopeful that critical thinking about history will ultimately triumph, whereas the conservative Black is less sanguine. For him, there is a particular tension in that, as a moderate Burkean (p. xiii), he admires the positive power of historical memory to create a collective identity for a nation or community – while simultaneously as a modern-day Cassandra (p. 214) he fears that partisan ideologues often play too great a role in the formation of such identities, basing them upon harmful distortions and old hatreds.

Black is particularly unimpressed by what he sees as the twists and turns in the current Labour government's initially negative and, more recently, utilitarian attitude to historical studies. He appears at this point to be addressing the British Conservative Party, hoping that it will display greater enlightenment when next in power. Yet how precisely could or should a future Cameron government promote the ideal of an 'informed study of history'? Black does not say. Or rather, given his hostility to all forms of political or religious meddling, his implicit message appears to constitute the highly unfashionable advice: *trust the professionals*.

At any rate, it is clear from Black's world-wide survey that the importance of myths, memories, speculations, beliefs, and entrenched grievances, derived from the past, remains as potent as ever within human history. People often forget key dates and are hazy about crucial details. But they have views, which often contend against rival interpretations of the past. Moreover, historians are not coolly above the fray. They too have views and often disagree with one another. The role of the professionals deserves particular attention, as provided by David Cannadine in a set of essays entitled *Making History Now and Then*. He documents the salient growth of the subject as a specialist area of study over the past thirty years. While there were 1,999 professional historians in British Universities in 1980, there are 2,896 in 2008 (the expansion being partly but by no means entirely fuelled by the post-1992 growth of the overall sector). The figures come from an annual survey made by London's Institute of Historical Research, of which Cannadine was for ten years the Director. He thus had a good overview of the expansion, which is further indicated by the near-doubling since 1989 not only of the annual total of new books and articles on British history alone but also of the number of published historians. They work in a growth industry.

Cannadine's ten essays are variegated in topic and quality and wordiness, as often happens with compilations of essays from variegated sources. Of

particular interest for students of historiography are his thoughts upon the shape of the subject over the past hundred years (first delivered as a lecture in 2002). Cannadine stresses that present-day debates fuel historical research, so that professional history is not isolated from the also-burgeoning world of popular history and myth-making. He does not write in the Cassandra-mode of Jeremy Black. But Cannadine too is critical of the present state of affairs. His target is the ever-intensifying state-led chivvying of the academic community, among whose ranks are to be found most professional historians. They are not only distracted from research but find their authority belittled, while their morale and pay are also undermined. Far from being a powerful bourgeois elite who dictate the lessons of history to a receptive public (as some postmodernist critics have claimed), Britain's historians are likened by Cannadine to proletarianised battery-hens, producing at high speed specialist works on specialist fields that have few readers other than the official Research Assessors who regularly grade their outputs. Not only does this cramping and cumbersome process stifle creativity, he argues, but it also reduces the opportunities for public communication, hence reducing critical input into public history.

Needless to say, there is an element of rhetorical overkill in this tirade. Much good research with broad implications is still done and historians have hardly fallen silent in public. Nonetheless, many academics will laugh (or sigh) appreciatively at this condemnation of the grindingly mechanical format of the Research Assessment Exercise, another round of which is taking place right now. Cannadine's conclusion remains poised evenly between hope and anxiety. The immense boom in history writing and debating is to be cheered; but he stresses again that there is no guarantee that it will continue. One remedy, that is implied but not stated, is for the next government to abolish the Research Assessment Exercise and its putative successor. Such an action would immediately save the up-front cost of at least £10-12 million. (That sum was forecast in 2004 by the Higher Education Funding Council's head of internal

audit and is doubtless now an underestimate). Abolition will also save the concealed costs imposed upon the Universities, which have to fund leave for the academics and administrators who actually do the work. But will any government manage to cut the increasingly entrenched auditocracy down to size?

From all this, students of Historiology will understand that they are being initiated into a great but potentially fragile enterprise, that operates in the public domain. A few will continue themselves to become professional historians. For them, these studies confirm the message that it is not enough to undertake research, teaching and administration. Historians must also communicate coherently and cogently with the lay public. This professional responsibility has been insufficiently stressed in the past, partly through fear of being sucked into nationalistic propaganda. But critical historical thinking is ultimately a resource for all, not just for the experts. Hence exercises in wider communication must be added into the historians' busy agendas. (Currently, the official jargon names this process as 'Knowledge transfer', using a patronising phrase that underestimates the fact that knowledge dissemination is an interactive art, not a mechanical passing of the baton).

All this assumes that there is a basis for studying the past with tolerable objectivity, which gets beyond the retelling of traditional myths, the repeating of old grievances, and the insidious lure of propaganda and pre-set ideologies. The task is potentially complicated, since historians may themselves share some of the just-cited predispositions. In *The Historians' Paradox*, Peter Charles Hoffer provides a short textbook that seeks to guide students through the hazards. For him, today's paradox is that historical knowledge is both urgently needed and impossible: 'the more it is required the less reliable it has become' (p. x). However, he does not really believe the impossibility thesis. His clear response is that, while the past cannot be visited, it can indeed be validly

studied. Hoffer's chattiness and anecdotal style will not suit everyone's taste; but his jollity does convey his ultimately optimistic message.

Meanwhile, there is another paradox. Historiology has become a flourishing field but trades without a name. None of these four studies uses the term and, at a guess, none of the four authors feels its lack. Thus while 'historiology' appears in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, defined as 'the knowledge and study of History' (first recorded 1616), the word itself is a 'sleeper'. Nonetheless, the subject exists and has become integral to University-level history, even if it still tends to be taught by circuses of dragooned lecturers, rather than by committed historiologists. Understanding the past is supremely important, since it provides all humans with our collective stock of knowledge and experience. And understanding the intellectual rationale for the study of the past is equally significant. In the light of this, much remains to be done. Politicians should trust the professionals and free academics from suspicious surveillance. Historians should communicate better with the wider public, who in turn should study the issues with more care. All history students, who represent the shock-troops of concerned citizenry, should learn about the past and the rationale for studying the past. No doubt, a sexier name might grab further attention. Nonetheless, powered by the growth industry of history, Historiology rules ...