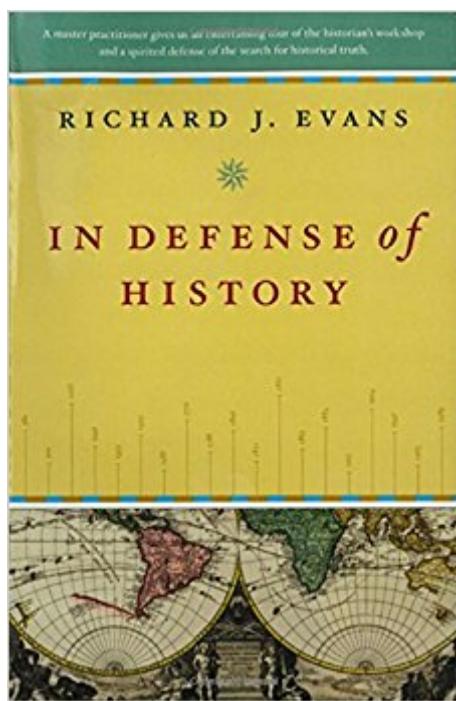


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In Defense Of History



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

There has been an ongoing and vigorous debate in the philosophy of history for the last thirty or so years concerning the ways in which postmodernism should or should not impact the writing of history. In this delightfully polemical book, Richard Evans does not try to engage the writings of the major postmodernists. Do not expect to find counterarguments to the writings of Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard or de Certeau. It is in the writings of thinkers like Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit, Dominick LaCapra, Keith Jenkins, Elizabeth Ermath, Joan Scott, etc. that the major claims of the postmodernists have been made for history in the English speaking world. It is with their writings

that Evans engages in debate. This does not, however, put him in the camp of conservatives like Gertrude Himmelfarb, John Vincent, David Harlan and Keith Windschuttle. Evans is arguing for a middle position- one that emphasizes the recalcitrance of the "facts", i.e., the historical records. Evans denies that all of history is interpretation and that no one interpretation is better than any other. He believes that careful and honest shifting of the historical record will show some or one interpretations to be better grounded in that record than others. On the other hand, he is excited by some of the possibilities for history that have been opened up by those working historians whose work he admires and who are identified with the postmodern camp, e.g., Simon Schama, Theodore Zeldin and Orlando Figes. One of the main points of his critique is that Evans feels that postmodernism removes the possibility of any sort of critical perspective- he reiterates the old point that if there is no grounds to prefer one interpretation over another, if there is no such thing as a fact than there is no reason to prefer the views of the standard histories of the Holocaust over those of a denier, e.g., David Irving. This is not the best of the books I have read recently on historiography. Berkhofer's *Beyond the Great Story* retains that distinction. It does have the advantage of being very well written, very clear in its presentation and quite enjoyably feisty. Evans' style is like that of a good lightweight- constantly circling, jabbing his opponents, sensing a weakness and then throwing the combination. If you think my pugilistic metaphor to be inappropriate, ... for a series of short essays Evans wrote in reply to his many and equally nasty critics. This site is probably the best way to figure out if this book is for you. As for me, I have come to realize that this is a debate without end. Evans did not really settle anything for me. Neither has anyone else I have read lately. He does give you a lot to think about and he points the reader in the direction of a lot of interesting work done by other people.

I came across this book purely by chance as someone with a BA in history (from almost 40 years ago) who remembered much enjoying EH Carr's *What Is History*. Well, although he is prone to repetition, I think Evans writes wonderfully well and most persuasively, matches his views with those of a succession of historians, some well known to me and others not at all. As a jury trial lawyer, I relished the similarities and differences in our two professions--as, for example, Evans's reference to Flaubert who said that a historian drinks an ocean only for the purpose of producing a cupful of piss.

A most enjoyable and stimulating review of the purpose, methods and practice of history. Professor Evans is most adept at exposing fallacies and contradictions in the post-modern critique of history;

while at the same time pointing out how some concepts of postmodernism can bring a breath of fresh air to history. His discussion of sources is excellent. He colorfully reviews individual historians and their methods and thoughts; not holding back where criticism is needed. His analysis of the Paul De Man controversy seemed right on the money. A wonderful overview of the current state of history with emphasis on postmodern attacks, with a staunch and stout defense of the classical, objective center.

"In Defense of History" is a book by the renowned historian of Germany, Richard Evans. In this book he defends the standard contemporary view of history against primarily postmodernism, but also the Marxism of E. H. Carr and the Quantitative History of Robert Fogel. While I find his points valid and agree with him almost entirely (although I do think he is somewhat unfair to Fogel), this is not a very good book. The first problem with the book is that it is poorly organized. It is difficult at times to tell what Evans' points are. The main reason for this is the focus on the thoughts of his opponents. Evans constantly quotes from postmodernists but includes little argument against them. Evans might as well be writing a survey of postmodern theories of history; his criticism is understated and underwhelming. The second problem is that the book is highly repetitive. Reading the second chapter felt like rereading the first; likewise with the third, fourth, etc. Evans could have easily cut the length of this book in half if he had been less wordy. I don't recommend this book. I like Richard Evans' other books, but this one is not worth the time spent reading it. If you are really interested in his defense of history, you might try just reading the first chapter. Other than that, however, will likely just bore you with silly quotations of obscure historians.

This book is a sensible (if meandering) defense of mainstream historiography against the claims of post-modernists. I gave the book four stars instead of five because Evans is defensive to a fault and too respectful of post-modernist hype. Post-modernism is surely one of the drier intellectual fads of the late 20th century. Good historians have always been careful to read documents critically; they have always known that interpretations of source material can be shaped by extra-historiographical considerations. This element of "looseness" is an invitation to rational discussion of the historical record. It is not proof that rational discussion is impossible or that historians are condemned to irreducible subjective bias. Working historians should treat post-modernism the way working scientists do: by ignoring it and going about their business.

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