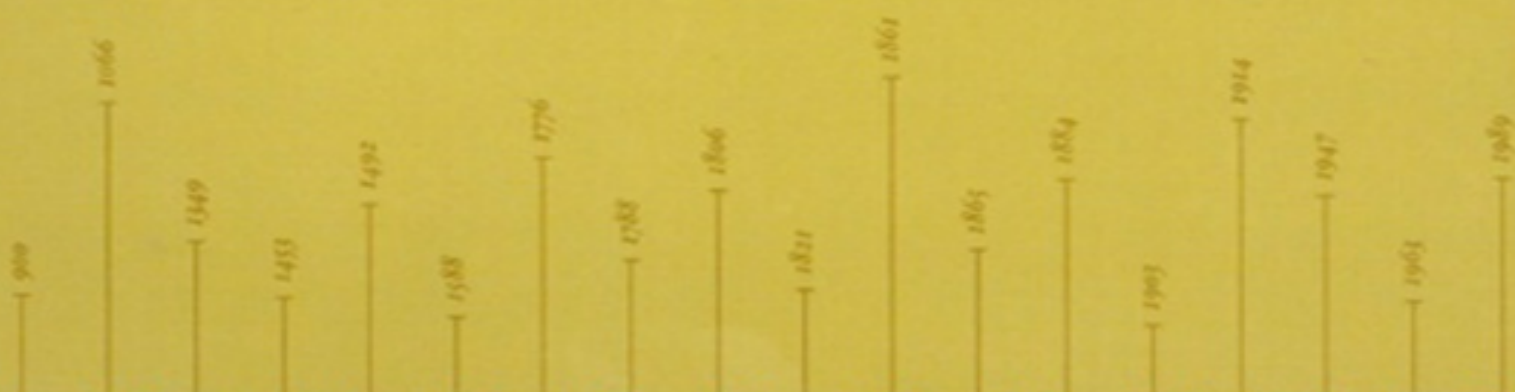


and a spirited defense of the search for historical truth.

RICHARD J. EVANS



IN DEFENSE *of*
HISTORY



**IN
DEFENSE
OF
HISTORY**

Richard J. Evans



W. W. NORTON & COMPANY
NEW YORK · LONDON

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 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

IN

DEFENSE
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INTRODUCTION

I

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 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?* does not talk down to the student in the manner of conventional history primers or introductions to 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 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, 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 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 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 historian observed, “entail the dissolution of history” and “necessarily 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. “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 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 If this is indeed the case, no wonder so many historians are worried about the future of their discipline.

II

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 American intellectual historian Allan Megill indicted the historical profession in 1989 for what he called its “sclerotic self-satisfaction”¹⁷ in the face of the postmodernist challenge, the medievalist Nancy F. Partner, writing in 1995, thought this same attitude was “entirely commendable,” adding:

The theoretical destabilizing of history achieved by language-based modes of criticism has had

no practical effect on academic practice because academics have had nothing to gain and everything to lose by dismantling their special visible code of evidence-grounded reasoning and opening themselves to the inevitable charges of fraud, dishonesty and shoddiness.¹⁸

British historian James Vernon similarly complained in 1994 about his colleagues' "general air of complacency" about postmodernism. "While elsewhere," he noted, "historians are at least discussing the problems of writing social history in the 1990s, indeed the possibility of writing 'history' at all in these post-modern times, the editorial of *Social History*'s fiftieth issue boldly declared that 'social history is emphatically not in crisis.'"¹⁹ "Far from the historian being beleaguered," another British historian, Patrick Joyce, observed in 1991, "the commanding heights of academy history seem secure against the skirmishing bands outside, though some notable walls have fallen, chiefly in the United States." In Britain, Joyce's view is that "rank indifference rather than outright hostility" is the "dominant response."²⁰ Much of "the historical profession at large," he has complained, has tended to "fail to register the intellectual history of their own time, above all the now decades-long challenge to received ways of historical thinking represented by what may loosely be termed post-modernism."²¹ In 1995 he repeated his charge in an article published as a contribution to a controversy on history and postmodernism in the British journal *Social History*. "The *Social History* journal he commented, somewhat ungratefully abusing the publication which has formerly acted as a vehicle for his arguments, "is a good example ... of the poacher turned gamekeeper. The elders of social history remain in station still, supported by a younger generation of scholars largely immune to the intellectual history of our own times."²²

Of course, by "the intellectual history of our own times," what Joyce really meant was his own ideas. The fact that they were being debated in the journal itself amounted to an implicit rebuttal of his complaint. Thanks not least to Joyce's own interventions, the debate in Britain has become steadily more heated and has been gathering pace in an increasing number of scholarly journals. Already by 1993 two American specialists in British history could describe it as "a now all-pervasive academic discourse."²³ In 1995 even the much-maligned editor of *Social History* was forced to admit that as a result of the emergence of postmodernism, the optimism with which he had founded the journal in the late 1970s was now "in shreds."²⁴ By the late 1990s, therefore, there can be little doubt that the debate about history, truth, and objectivity unleashed by postmodernism has become too widespread for all but the most obscurantist to ignore. The critics' complaints of complacency and self-satisfaction among the historical profession now seem to be little more than a rhetorical means of goading those whom they are criticizing into making a reply.

No less a traditionalist than Sir Geoffrey Elton himself charged into the lists not long before he died, to underline the growing sense among historians that the enterprise in which they were engaged was under severe and unprecedented attack. Elton roundly denounced postmodernist ideas on history as "menacing," "destructive," "absurd," and "meaningless." "Total relativism," he declared, was "the ultimate heresy," a "virus" of "frivolous nihilism" that was infecting a disturbing number of young historians, above all in the United States. "In battling against people who would subject historical studies to the dictates of literary critics," he pronounced, "we historians are, in a way, fighting for our lives. Certainly, we are fighting for the lives of innocent young people beset by devilish tempters who claim to offer higher forms of thought and deeper truths and insights—the intellectual equivalent of crack."²⁵ It is not only among conservatives like Elton that alarm bells of this sort have been ringing. The left-liberal historian Lawrence Stone has called upon historians to arm themselves to repel the new intellectual barbarians at the disciplinary gates. If postmodernists gained any more influence, he warned, "history might be on the way to becoming an endangered species."²⁶ On the socialist left, the

radical historian Raphael Samuel, progenitor of *History Workshop*, warned in one of his last publications that “the deconstructive turn in contemporary thought” invited everyone to “see history not as a record of the past, more or less faithful to the facts,” but “as an invention, or fiction, of historians themselves.”²⁷ He made it clear that this was something which he found completely unacceptable. Arthur Marwick, founding professor of history at Britain’s Open University, voiced his fears that history students would find the postmodernists’ “presumptuous and ill-informed criticisms” of history “disorienting” and might “even be persuaded that the history of the historians is worthless.”²⁸ Postmodernist ideas, he declared, were a “menace to serious historical study.”²⁹ Theories which “suggest that historians are in the business of creating—not discovering or interpreting—historical meaning,” added two historians from the University of Pennsylvania, “undermine our authority, the mystique of our enterprise, the very purpose of our work.”³⁰

Where so many historians are issuing such dire warnings couched in such colorful and alarmist language, something important is clearly going on. No one should doubt that the postmodernist challenge to historical study as conceived in different ways by Carr and Elton is a serious one. Some of the intellectual barbarians at the disciplinary gates are loitering there with distinctly hostile intent. “Autumn,” declared the Dutch postmodernist Frank Ankersmit triumphantly in 1990, “has come to Western historiography.”³¹ Similarly, Keith Jenkins, author of two recent postmodernist critiques of history, announced approvingly in a reconsideration of Carr’s work published in 1995: “We have reached the end of modernist versions of what history is.”³² Patrick Joyce has declared that “contemporary history,” meaning history as practiced today, “is itself in fact the offspring of modernity” and therefore part of the intellectual world which postmodernity is now displacing.³³ As Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, two British historians who have tried to moderate in the controversy, have remarked of the two opposing sides, “A theoretical *hauteur* instructs a redoubt of methodological conservatism, and the latter shouts defiantly back. Between the two lies a silence, a barrier that in these tones cannot be crossed.”³⁴

“For progress in understanding the truth and objectivity of history,” a cool Australian observer of the debate has advised, “each side must attend more closely to what the other is saying.”³⁵ Drawing up the disciplinary drawbridge has never been a good idea for historians. For centuries they have profited immeasurably from the invasions of neighboring disciplines, starting with philology, the foundation of the methods of source criticism associated with the name of the great German historian Leopold von Ranke in the nineteenth century, and moving on through economics, sociology, anthropology, statistics, geography, psychology, and other alien forces as time has gone on. Lawrence Stone himself has in the past been one of the main advocates—and practitioners—of the opening up of history to influences from the social sciences. Why not influences from literary criticism and linguistic analysis as well? Historians should approach the invading hordes of semioticians, poststructuralists, New Historicists, Foucauldians, Lacanians, and the rest with more discrimination. Some of them might prove more friendly, or more useful, than they seem at first sight.

Moreover, the questions they raise—about the possibility or impossibility of attaining objective knowledge, the elusive and relative nature of truth, the difficulties involved in distinguishing between fact and fiction—do not merely challenge historians to reexamine the theory and practice of their own discipline but also have wider implications that go far beyond the boundaries of academic and university life. In this sense, the problem of how historians approach the acquisition of knowledge about the past, and whether they can ever wholly succeed in this enterprise, can stand for the much bigger problem of how far society at large can ever attain the kind of objective certainty about the great issues of our time that can serve as a reliable basis for taking vital decisions on our future in the twenty-first century.

IN many ways it makes sense to approach such wider questions by looking at how we acquire knowledge about the past. Many of the problems involved in finding out about contemporary society and politics are very similar. Yet the past presents more difficulties because it is no longer with us. Moreover, the theory and history of history have become a separate branch of learning in itself since Carr and Elton wrote, and in the process it has developed its own concepts and its own jargon, which have made it often rather impenetrable to outsiders. Some have indeed argued that the nature of historical explanation is a topic best left to the philosophers. How we know about the past, what historical causation is, how we define a historical fact, whether there is such a thing as historical truth or objectivity—these are questions that most historians have happily left to one side as unnecessary distractions from their essential work in the archives.³⁶ “Many historians,” one observer has correctly noted, “are by instinctive inclination hostile to philosophical and methodological criticism of their work, often wishing to rely instead on ‘common sense.’”³⁷ Nor have the few historians who have actually ventured to write about their discipline necessarily earned the plaudits of their colleagues. “Historians,” the Oxford specialist on French history Theodore Zeldin has observed, “... are probably no more reliable as guides to their own work than politicians are to their policies.”³⁸ Or, to change the analogy, as his former Oxford colleague Norman Stone has remarked, “it is probably as much a mistake to ask a working historian to discuss this theme as to ask a painter to give his views on aesthetics.”³⁹

Of course, very few historians in practice have possessed the necessary expertise to discuss the theory of history at a level that a trained philosopher would consider acceptable. On the other hand, the level of abstraction at which most studies of historical epistemology operate is so theoretical, so far removed from actual problems experienced by working historians, that the subject in general is of little practical relevance to what historians actually do.⁴⁰ One of the few twentieth-century scholars who were equally at home in the two fields of history and philosophy, R. G. Collingwood, was the author of both the *Oxford History of Roman Britain* and a celebrated philosophical treatise on *The Idea of History*. But there is no indication at all that the two books stood in any relation to each other; they might have been written by two different people. Indeed, one philosopher of history has remarked rather loftily that “philosophers interest themselves in history for their own purposes: the instrumental value, or disvalue, of their investigations to history is wholly accidental.”⁴¹ Thus we have what has often seemed to be a dialogue of the deaf.

Some historians have even disputed the right of nonhistorians to write about the nature of historical knowledge and explanation at all. It should come as no surprise that Sir Geoffrey Elton was among them. Drawing up the disciplinary drawbridge again, he declared roundly: “There is no reason why great historians (or indeed lesser ones) should not have their manner of thinking and operating investigated, but such studies are pointless unless the investigator can demonstrate that he knows at first hand what working on the materials left to us by the past actually means.”⁴² In other words, only historians are qualified to talk about history, a view echoed in only slightly less stentorian tones by others, such as Arthur Marwick. Even the great French historian Fernand Braudel once pronounced that history as a discipline “cannot be understood without practicing it.”⁴³ Yet the influential American writer on the theory of history Hayden White has made the obvious retort that the “insistence that only historians know what historians really do is similar to modern scientists’ objections to being studied by sociologists, ethnographers, philosophers and *historians*” themselves. Historians are therefore denying to other disciplines the right they claim for their own.

White is surely correct to insist that historians—teachers as well as students—have a lot to learn

from what others outside the discipline tell them. Moreover, as Raymond Martin, another commentator on these issues, has remarked, “When it comes to understanding *the past*, historians are the acknowledged experts. But when it comes to understanding *how we understand the past*, there are no experts.”⁴⁵ Historians, the American apostle of quantitative history Robert Fogel has declared somewhat gloomily in the light of all this, have a choice: “Either they ignore the philosophers and go on with what they are doing, but that might mean that they will continue to work without understanding how they are doing it. Or they down tools to listen to the philosophers, but this will most likely mean that tools will stay permanently downed.”⁴⁶ But this counsel of despair is belied by the numerous examples of practicing historians who have managed to do both. Increasing numbers of historians, provoked perhaps by the challenge of postmodernism, are finding it necessary to reflect on the nature of the project they are engaged in. The more this happens, the better. As three American historians have remarked in their recent, jointly authored book on this subject, “It is time we historians took responsibility for explaining what we do, how we do it, and why it is worth doing.”⁴⁷

To be sure, postmodernist critics of history and the historical profession have sometimes dismissed the views of practicing historians as not worth listening to anyway (unless of course they simply accept without criticism the ideas the postmodernists themselves are propounding). “Those who announce the advent of postmodernism,” as Perez Zagorin, an eminent American specialist on seventeenth-century England, has observed, frequently claim that it “cannot be withstood.”⁴⁸ This is true. “Times have moved on,” Patrick Joyce has declared, “and historians simply have to learn to keep up with them.”⁴⁹ Similarly, Keith Jenkins has asserted roundly that “today we live within the general condition of *postmodernity*. We do not have a choice about this. For postmodernity is not an ‘ideology’ or a position we can choose to subscribe to or not; postmodernity is precisely our condition: it is our fate.”⁵⁰ Thus debating whether or not we should accept it is a futile exercise. But of course, “postmodernity” is only a word we use to describe something whose presence in the human condition some have diagnosed but others still dispute. Given the stress laid upon the shifting nature of concepts by postmodernists, and the emphasis given to the indirect, contingent, or even arbitrary or nonexistent correspondence of words to reality, the dogmatic and apodictic tone of Jenkins’s declaration that postmodernity is an indisputable fact of life seems strangely out of place, coming as it does from an exponent of such ideas.

Moreover, just because an intellectual trend seems irresistible is no reason for not resisting it. Let this seem a legacy of my own education in Oxford, that proverbial home of lost causes, let me refer to a case of an intellectual trend that swept all before it rather farther afield. In the 1920s and 1930s German historians overwhelmingly believed in the primacy of foreign policy in shaping a nation’s history and linked this to a political drive to provide historical arguments for revising the Treaty of Versailles and recovering the territories lost by their country at the end of the First World War. The German historical profession blocked the careers of those who thought otherwise and, except for a small handful of its members, collaborated willingly in the Nazi seizure of power and the Nazification of university education. Was this, however, any reason for not resisting them? And did this irresistible trend not damage the quality and reputation of German historical scholarship for a generation? It would of course be going too far to draw a parallel between postmodernism and fascist ideology. The real conclusion to be drawn from this example is surely that arguments and theories, however dominant in the intellectual life of their day, have to be assessed on their own merits, not accepted uncritically simply because they are espoused by the majority. In similar vein, some apologists for postmodernism have a tendency to proclaim that they have already won the argument and that there is no point any longer in historians’ trying to refute them.⁵¹ But the fact is that historians’ replies to at least some postmodernist critiques of history have caused some postmodernist theorists to shift their

ground in crucial respects, just as historians themselves have been forced to shift their ground by postmodernist critiques. What we have, in other words, is no longer a dialogue of the deaf but a genuine debate. Historians themselves have an important contribution to make to this debate. The theory of history is too important a matter to be left to the theoreticians. Practicing historians may not have a God-given monopoly of pronouncing sensibly on such matters, but they surely have as much right to try to think and write about them as anybody else, and the experience of actually having done historical research ought to mean that they have something to contribute which those who have not shared this experience do not.

THE HISTORY OF HISTORY

I

HOWEVER much they might have agreed on the need for accuracy and truthfulness, historians down the ages have held widely differing views on the purposes to which these things were to be put and the way in which the facts they presented were to be explained. In medieval and early modern times, many historians saw their function as chronicling the working out of God's purposes in the world. Things happened, ultimately, because God willed them to happen; human history was the playground of supernatural forces of good and evil. The rationalist historians of the Enlightenment substituted for this a mode of historical explanation which rested on human forces, but they still thought of their work as a species of moral illustration. In the greatest of the Enlightenment histories, for example, Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the actors are moral qualities rather than human beings, and the ultimate lesson is that superstition, fanaticism, and religious belief, all of which were of course anathema to Enlightenment rationalists, were dangerous forces that had brought down one great and benign empire and could well wreak further havoc in the future if they were not eradicated. History was "philosophy teaching by example"; human nature was universal, unchanging and unhistorical.¹

In the Romantic era, historians came to repudiate this kind of thinking. Under the influence of writers like Sir Walter Scott, they came to see the past as exciting because it was different. Under the influence of political theorists like Edmund Burke, they began to argue that it provided the only possible basis for the kind of political stability that had been so rudely shattered by the great French Revolution of 1789. The purpose of history came to be seen not as providing examples for some abstract philosophical doctrine or principle but simply as finding out about the past as something to cherish and preserve, as the only proper foundation for a true understanding and appreciation of the institutions of state and society in the present. The lead in this change of direction was provided by the German historian Leopold von Ranke, a scholar whose exceptionally long life and extraordinary productivity made him into something of a legend. The author of over sixty volumes, including multivolume histories of the popes, of Germany in the time of the Reformation, of the Latin and Germanic nations, he began a history of the world when he was eighty-three years of age and had completed seventeen volumes by the time of his death in 1886 at the age of ninety-one. He was converted to history by the shock of discovering that Scott's novel *Quentin Durward* was historically inaccurate. He determined therefore that he would apply the methods he had learned as a philologist to the study of historical texts in order to make such inaccuracy impossible in the future.

Ranke's contribution to historical scholarship was threefold. First, he helped establish history as a separate discipline, independent from philosophy or literature. "To history," he wrote in the preface to one of his works, "has been assigned the office of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. To such high offices this work does not aspire: it wants only to show what actually happened."² This last phrase is perhaps Ranke's most famous, and it has been widely

misunderstood. The German phrase which Ranke used—“*wie es eigentlich gewesen*”—is better translated as “how it essentially was.” By it, Ranke meant that he wanted to penetrate by a kind of intuitive understanding to the inner being of the past.³

In pursuit of this task, said Ranke, the historian had to recognize that “every epoch is immediate to God”⁴—that is, God in His eternity made no distinction between periods of history; all were the same in His eyes. In other words, the past could not be judged by the standards of the present. It had to be seen in its own terms. This was the second major contribution which Ranke made to historical scholarship: the determination to strip away the veneer of posthumous condescension applied to the past by philosophizing historians such as Voltaire and to reveal it in its original colors; to try to understand the past as the people who lived in it understood it, even while deciphering patterns and interconnections of which they had been largely unaware. One conclusion that followed from this doctrine was that at any given time, including the present, whatever existed had to be accepted as divinely ordained. Ranke was a profoundly conservative figure, who equated the actual and the ideal and regarded the European states of his day as “spiritual substances . . . thoughts of God.”⁵ This distanced him from the Prussian school of German historians, from nationalists such as Treitschke, who condemned his impartiality and regretted his universalism. The fact that he regarded all states, not just Prussia, as supreme examples of God’s purposes *working* themselves out on earth gave him, on the other hand, a reputation for impartiality that greatly helped the spread of his influence abroad.⁶

Third, and perhaps most important, Ranke introduced into the study of modern history the method that had recently been developed by philologists in the study of ancient and medieval literature to determine whether a text, say, of a Shakespeare play or of a medieval legend like the *Nibelungenlied* was true or corrupted by later interpolations, whether it was written by the author it was supposed to have been written by, and which of the available versions was the most reliable. Historians, argued Ranke, had to root out forgeries and falsifications from the record. They had to test documents on the basis of their internal consistency and their consistency with other documents originating at the same period. They had to stick to “primary sources,” eyewitness reports and what Ranke called the “purest most immediate documents” which could be shown to have originated at the time under investigation and avoid reliance on “secondary sources,” such as memoirs or later histories generated after the event. Moreover, they had to investigate and subject to the critical method *all* the sources relating to the events in which they were interested. They should not be content, as, for example, Gibbon had been, to rely on printed documents and chronicles generally available in libraries. They had instead to sally forth, as Ranke did, into the archives, to work their way through the vast unpublished hoards of original manuscripts stored up by the state chancelleries of Europe. Only then, by gathering, criticizing, and verifying all the available sources, could they put themselves in a position to reconstruct the past accurately.

The application of philological techniques to historical sources was a major breakthrough. Ranke’s principles still form the basis for much historical research and teaching today. Advanced, document-based seminars in many contemporary universities, for example, offer a basic training in source criticism; students are examined on extracts from set documents and are expected to comment on them in terms of their internal consistency, their relationship to other documents on the same subject, their reliability, and their usefulness as a source. Questions of authenticity and attribution continue to be vitally important in historical research. Forgeries, as the lamentable case of the “Hitler Diaries” showed more than a decade ago, are still regrettably common; outright falsification and doctoring of the evidence abound in printed collections of documents and other publications relating to subjects such as the origins of the First World War and the Third Reich. They are even more common in medieval history. Technological innovation has added substantially to the Rankean armory; the

“Hitler Diaries” were easily exposed as forgeries by simple testing of the age of the paper on which they were written, which dated from the 1950s; perhaps Hugh Trevor-Roper (Lord Dacre), who originally “authenticated” them for the London *Times* newspaper, should not have rested content with the fact that the name Adolf Hitler was signed at the bottom of every page.⁷ Whatever the means they use, historians still have to engage in the basic Rankean spadework of investigating the provenance of documents, of inquiring about the motives of those who wrote them, the circumstances in which they were written, and the ways in which they relate to other documents on the same subject. The perils which await them should they fail to do this are only too obvious.

All these things have belonged to the basic training of historians since the nineteenth century, and rightly so. However many forgeries and falsifications there have been, they seldom escape undetected for long. Skeptics who point to the fact that all sources are “biased” and conclude from this that historians are bound to be misled by them are as wide of the mark as politicians who imagine that future historians will take their memoirs on trust. Nor is there anything unusual in the fact that a modern discipline places such heavy reliance on principles developed more than a century and a half before: Chemistry, for example, still uses the periodic table of elements, while medical research continues to employ the mid-nineteenth-century device of “Koch’s postulates” to prove that a microorganism is the carrier of a particular disease. These analogies with scientific method point up the fact that when source criticism was introduced into historical study, it, too, was regarded as a “scientific” technique. Its use legitimated history as an independent profession, and those historians in other countries who wanted to establish themselves on a professional basis soon began to flock to Germany to undergo training at the feet of its leading exponents in Göttingen or Berlin.

In the course of this Rankean revolution, the university-based historical seminar in which future members of the profession were trained, wrote Herbert Baxter Adams, had “evolved from a nursery of dogma into a laboratory of scientific truth.”⁸ The French historian Fustel de Coulanges, teaching at Strasbourg University, roundly declared in 1862 that “History is, and should be, a science.”⁹ The understanding of science which these claims implied was basically inductive. Out there, in the documents, lay the facts, waiting to be discovered by historians, just as the stars shone out there in the heavens, waiting to be discovered by astronomers; all historians had to do was apply the proper scientific method, eliminate their own personality from the investigation, and the facts would come to light. The object of research was thus to “fill in the gaps” in knowledge—a rationale that is still given as the basis for the vast majority of Ph.D. theses in history today. As the most widely used primer in the historical method at the time, by the French historians Claude Langlois and Charles Seignobos, remarked, “When all the documents are known, and have gone through the operations which fit them for use, the work of critical scholarship will be finished. In the case of some ancient periods, for which documents are rare, we can now see that in a generation or two it will be time to stop.” Similar beliefs were indeed common in the natural sciences. When the German physicist Max Planck took up his studies in the 1870s, for example, he was warned by his professor that it would be a waste of time, since there was nothing left to discover in the field.¹⁰

But these views rested on a series of misapprehensions. The belief that all the evidence left to posterity by the past *could* actually be surveyed and evaluated was already beginning to look less plausible even before the end of the nineteenth century, as new techniques and discoveries in archaeology began to open up whole new areas of knowledge even about the most distant periods in time. From early on in the twentieth century, too, historians began to look away from the narrow confines of the history and antecedents of the nation-state toward economic history, social history, cultural history, and, subsequently, other new branches of historical inquiry as well. New questions, it seemed, could render previously neglected areas of evidence freshly meaningful. As the passing of

time continued to consign new ages to history, historians also began to realize the almost exponential growth that was taking place in the quantity of source material available to them. Late-nineteenth-century American and European society was not only vastly more populous than before, not only produced many more documents, reflecting both the increase of literacy and the rapidly increasing functions of the state, but also produced new kinds of sources, from mass newspapers to photographs and films. “The history of the Victorian Age will never be written,” declared Lytton Strachey in a fit of ironic despair: “We know too much about it.”¹¹

Not only the idea of the final discovery of all the facts that could be known, but also the notion of truly scientific history, began to seem more than a little shaky by the turn of the century, too. Many of the advocates of a scientific approach to history failed to practice what they preached. A. F. Pollard, founder of the Institute of Historical Research at London University, established to introduce professional scientific training for history postgraduates, made little use of manuscript sources in his own work on Tudor history, preferring instead to use the transcripts and summaries provided in the *Calendars of State Papers*, which of course were shot through with inevitable mistakes and lacunae, seriously reducing the reliability of his writings.¹² Even the great Ranke was open to criticism according to the criteria which he himself did so much to establish. His writing, far from being “colorless,” as some thought, was suffused with metaphor.¹³ His belief that he was writing objective history derived to a great extent from the fact that he based a great deal of his work on the dispatches of Venetian ambassadors to various European states, documents which themselves gave a deliberate impression of neutrality and value-free reporting. As John Pemble has pointed out, “to the next generation Ranke was not Rankean enough.” His Venetian sources were partial, selective, and narrow and he made too little use of other archival material; only in this way, indeed, was he able to write so much. “Flaubert once commented,” as Pemble remarks, “that writing history was like drinking an ocean and pissing a cupful. Ranke it seemed was doing the opposite.”¹⁴

The realization that the founders of scientific history had all too often failed to follow their own precepts did not stop historians before the First World War from proclaiming the virtues of the scientific approach; on the contrary, it merely spurred them to greater efforts. In 1903, in a famous inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History in Cambridge, J. B. Bury declared that

History is a science, no less and no more. . . . History is not a branch of literature. The facts of history, like the facts of geology or astronomy, can supply material for literary art . . . but to clothe the story of human society in a literary dress is no more the part of a historian as a historian, than it is the part of an astronomer to present in an artistic shape the story of the stars.

Bury pointed up the contrast between history as literature and history as science by referring to the example of the man he called the “greatest living historian,” the German Theodor Mommsen. Mommsen’s stature as a historian lay, Bury declared, not in his authorship of a widely read Roman history, which merely gave him a reputation as a “man of letters” (indeed, it won him the Nobel Prize for literature), but in his detailed critical compilation of Roman inscriptions and his specialized studies on Roman law. Here was the realm in which he had applied the scientific method; here was his true claim, therefore, to greatness as a historian. It was this example, Bury implied, that others should follow.¹⁵

ONE member of the audience at that lecture in Cambridge in 1903 was the twenty-six-year-old George Macaulay Trevelyan, who was to be appointed to the Regius chair when Bury died in 1927. Trevelyan took the lecture as a deliberate personal insult to his great-uncle the Whig historian Lord Macaulay, whose *History of England* had been one of the greatest literary sensations of the early Victorian era. He rushed into print with an uncharacteristically savage denunciation, in his essay “Clio: A Muse,” referring in this title to the muse of history in ancient Greek mythology.¹⁶ The “crusade” which Bury and others were waging against the “artistic and emotional treatment of the whole past of mankind,” said Trevelyan, had become so successful that it now threatened “the complete annihilation of the few remaining individuals” who still thought history was an art. If history was merely a “chronicle of bare facts arranged on scientific principles,” then “literature, emotion and speculative thought” would be “banished” from the human race’s contemplation of its own past.¹⁷ In his long career Trevelyan did much to bridge the gap between the historian and the public in such widely popular works as his *English Social History*. Contrary to what many of his detractors have alleged, he was thoroughly professional both in his university career and in his research, which he based, especially in the case of his magnum opus, a magnificent three-volume history of *England under Queen Anne*, on scholarship that was as rigorous as it was extensive.¹⁸ But although he paid due regard to the “scientific” aspects of his subject, he thought that “the idea that the facts of history are of value as part of an exact science confined to specialists is due to a misapplication of the analogy of physical science.” The natural sciences, he thought, were valuable in terms of practical utility and in the deduction of laws of cause and effect, whether or not the general public understood them. But history had no practical value unless it was widely disseminated among the public, and nobody had ever succeeded in deriving general laws of cause and effect from history in such a way that they stood the essential test of such laws in the physical sciences—namely, by enabling people to predict the future. Trevelyan conceded that “the collection of facts, the weighing of evidence as to what events happened, are in some sense scientific; but not so the discovery of the causes and effects of these events.”

In reaching this judgment, of course, he was echoing the original principles of Ranke, who had distinguished in his day between the rigorous principles of source-criticism needed for an accurate representation of events in the past and the intuitive method needed to establish the “interconnectedness” of these events and penetrate to the “essence” of an epoch. It was this latter operation, which Ranke conceived of in Romantic and religious terms, and Trevelyan in literary and aesthetic terms, that made the difference, in the view of both of them, between the chronicler and the historian. History, said Trevelyan, was a mixture of the scientific (research), the imaginative or speculative (interpretation), and the literary (presentation). What the historian required was not “more knowledge of facts,” which in any case would always be incomplete. Nobody was ever going to unravel scientifically the mental processes of twenty million Frenchmen during the Revolution of 1789. Nor could interpretations of this event be arrived at by a mere process of induction. The causes and effects of the Revolution could never be known scientifically like the causes and effects of some chemical reaction, nor could they be grounded on discoverable laws like the law of gravity or the second law of thermodynamics. The historian who would give the best interpretation of the Revolution was the one who, “having discovered and weighed all the important evidence available, has the largest grasp of intellect, the warmest human sympathy, the highest imaginative power.”

Trevelyan was essentially a *nationalist* historian; his major works were histories of England, and his objection to the “scientific” conception of history was grounded not least on the fact that it was German. “Who is the Mother Country to Anglo-Saxon historians?” he asked in his essay. “Some reply ‘Germany,’ but others of us prefer to answer ‘England.’ The methods and limitations of German learning presumably suit the Germans, but are certain to prove a strait waistcoat to English limbs and

faculties. We ought," he declared, "to look to the free, popular, literary traditions of history in our own land." He also lamented the fact that "the historians of to-day were trained by the Germanising hierarchy to regard history not as . . . a 'story,' but as a 'science.'" The Germanizing tendencies of the period, he thought, were authoritarian and hierarchical, and unsuited to the liberal intellectual traditions of his own country.¹⁹

Just as Trevelyan looked to English traditions and circumstances as the source of historical inspiration, so in other European countries, too, historians rejected the universalizing tendencies of both Enlightenment writers such as Voltaire and Gibbon and Romantics such as Ranke. Popular, nationalist history had reached its apogee in Britain with Macaulay, in France with Michelet, in Germany with Treitschke, and it was not without its influence even on the most "scientific" of scholars in the late nineteenth century. Virtually all historians, for example, assumed that the nation-state was the primary object of historical study. The emerging historical profession was dominated by the view that the historian's task lay principally in the study of the origins and development of states and in their relations with one another. Even the most narrow and rigorous of learned articles were usually written within this framework, while huge resources of scientific scholarship were lavished on the publication of vast documentary collections designed to provide the basic materials for national histories, such as the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* and the *Calendars of State Papers*.

The Prussian school of historians, led by such figures as J. G. Droysen, was happy to proclaim that "the German nation has outstripped all others" in its application of the critical method to historical sources, but it was just as critical as Trevelyan was of the notion that this was sufficient to constitute history in itself. "History," declared Droysen, "is the only science enjoying the ambiguous fortune of being required to be at the same time an art." He complained that because the German middle classes had for so long considered "the German method in history pedantic, exclusive, unenjoyable," they all read Macaulay instead, or turned to the great French historian and statesman Thiers, so that "German historical judgment" and even "German political judgment" were "formed and guided . . . by the rhetorical superiority of other nations." The German middle classes did indeed look to the examples of English liberalism and the principles of the French Revolution for much of the nineteenth century. The Prussian school of historians set themselves the task of demonstrating through a mixture of scientific method, historical intuition, and literary skill the superiority of Prussian values and their inevitable triumph in the unification of Germany in 1871. They could claim at least some credit for the drift of middle-class opinion in Germany from a liberal to a more authoritarian form of nationalism in the last three decades leading up to the First World War.²⁰

In the United States the scientific conception of history was challenged from a number of different angles. Some, following the example of the turn to cultural history pioneered by Karl Lamprecht in Germany—and, after a major controversy, decisively rejected by the historical profession in that country—proclaimed a "new history" which would ally itself with the social sciences and look beyond politics and the nation-state to broader aspects of economy, culture, and society. Others, such as Charles Beard and Carl Becker, took this further and turned this methodological radicalism to the explicit political purposes of the Progressive movement, arguing that history's fundamental task was to clear away the encrusted myths and dogmas which prevented America, in their view, from reforming and adapting to the modern industrial age. Beard's famous book *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* created a major scandal by arguing that the Constitution reflected not the enduring democratic values which so many Americans thought it did, but the narrow and outdated economic interests of a small, propertied eighteenth-century elite. Both at the time and subsequently, many more conservative historians charged Beard and his allies with a fateful departure from scholarly standards in the interests of present-day politics, an abandonment of the disinterested search for truth and the study of the past for its own sake which should be the

primary purpose of every serious historian. Yet no one could deny that the Progressive historians conformed to the basic scholarly canons of the post-Rankean age.²¹

Already before 1914, therefore, the ability of the scientific method to deliver a neutral and value-free history was under some doubt. Its credibility was even more severely shaken by the events of 1914–18 and their aftermath. Professional historians in every country rushed into print with elaborate defenses of the war aims of their own governments and denunciations of other Great Powers for having begun the conflict. Substantial collections of documents on the origins of the war were produced with all the usual scholarly paraphernalia and edited by reputable professionals, but on principles of selection that seemed manifestly biased to colleagues in other countries. The rigorous scientific training which they had undergone seemed to have had no effect at all in inculcating a properly neutral and “objective” attitude to the recent past, a view that was underlined as the 1920s progressed by the continuing violent controversies between extremely learned and scholarly historians about the origins of the war.²² Moreover, among British, French, and American historians, the support for the war of the overwhelming majority of the “scientific” German colleagues whose work they so admired came as a further blow.²³ Many historians who had studied in Germany now rushed to denounce German scholarship as pedantic and antidemocratic. “The age of German footnotes,” as one of them declared in 1915, “is on the wane.”²⁴ And for G. M. Trevelyan, the defeat of the Germans also represented the defeat of “German ‘scientific history,’ ” a mirage which had “led the nation that looked to it for political prophesy and guidance” about as far astray as it was possible to go.²⁵

The war also revealed previous, apparently neutral scholarly histories of, for example, Germany or nineteenth-century Europe to have been deeply flawed in their interpretations. Events such as the Russian Revolution, the Treaty of Versailles, the triumph of modernism in art, music, and literature increased this sense of disorientation among historians. Reflective historians of the older generation realized that their faith in objectivity had accompanied their sense of living in an ordered and predictable world. One senior American historian, Clarence Alvord, confessed after the war that he had always “conformed to the canons of my science . . . walked along the straight and narrow road of approved scholarship . . . learned to babble the words of von Ranke . . . prided [myself] on telling the story *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. . . .” This had all been very fine, he said, while the world was a safe place to live in and people had been able to believe in ordered, rational, and inevitable progress. But now, he wrote, “all the spawn of hell roamed at will over the world and made of it a shambles. . . . The pretty edifice of . . . history which had been designed and built by my contemporaries was rent asunder. . . . The meaning we historians had read into events was false, cruelly false.” If unpredictable and uncontrollable forces were shaping the present, it seemed, then the previous belief of historians that they could understand by a simple process of induction the forces that shaped the past now seemed dangerously naive.²⁶

Some historians now despaired of finding any pattern or meaning in the past at all. As the English liberal historian H. A. L. Fisher remarked in the preface to his widely read *History of Europe*, published in 1934,

Men wiser and more learned than I have discerned in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. These harmonies are concealed from me. I can see only one emergency following upon another as wave follows upon wave, only one great fact with respect to which, since it is unique, there can be no generalizations, only one safe rule for the historian: that he should recognize in the development of human destinies the play of the contingent and the unforeseen. . . . The ground gained by one generation may be lost by the next.²⁷

History, in this bewildered view, was just “one damned thing after another,” devoid of meaning, and not capable of interpretation in any wider sense at all.

Such views were reinforced at a more theoretical level by the changing nature of the natural sciences in this period. Einstein’s general theory of relativity (1913), widely popularized after it was confirmed by astronomical observation in 1919, helped create an intellectual climate in which it was thought that the “aspect of things” changed with the position of the observer. The idea of the relativity of observer and fact was applied to history by a number of interwar philosophers as well, in particular by the liberal Italian thinker Benedetto Croce and his English counterpart R. G. Collingwood. In doing so, they were echoing prewar German philosophers such as Wilhelm Dilthey, who had begun to take a skeptical view of the possibility of objective knowledge about the past. They also paralleled the much more far-reaching doubts of cultural pessimists in Germany under the Weimar Republic, for whom Germany’s defeat in the First World War had rendered history largely meaningless. Croce argued that historians were guided in their judgment as to what documents and events were important in the past and what were unimportant, by their present concerns. All history was thus written, consciously or unconsciously, from the perspective of the present; “all history,” in Croce’s famous phrase, “is contemporary history.”²⁸ Collingwood went even further by arguing that “all history is the history of thought” because the documents left to the historian by the past were meaningless unless the historian reconstituted the thought that they expressed. “History,” Collingwood concluded, “is the re-enactment in the historian’s mind of the thought whose history he is studying.”²⁹

If we leave aside for the moment the merits and defects of such arguments, what all this did in broad terms was to blur the distinction commonly made by prewar historians, even those of a literary bent such as G. M. Trevelyan, between fact and interpretation. It was not a case, in their view, of the historian observing, collecting, and verifying the facts and then “interpreting” them. The very act of observing and collecting them was itself governed by the historian’s *a priori* beliefs about the past. Such views gained currency not least because, as E. H. Carr wrote, “after the First World War, the facts seemed to smile on us less propitiously than in the years before 1914, and we were therefore more accessible to a philosophy which sought to diminish their prestige.”³⁰ The crisis-ridden decade of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, with their economic privations, international conflicts, revolutionary upheavals, and, perhaps above all, their revelations, in Italy, Spain, Russia, and Germany, of violence and inhumanity on a scale, and to a degree, previously thought barely possible severely undermined the belief in progress that had sustained the historians of the prewar era. The new scientific discoveries and concepts destroyed the belief that history writing would one day come to an end when everything had been discovered. If “discovery” depended not least on the intentions and assumptions of the historian influenced by the context of his own age, then it became clear that every fresh age would have to research and write the history of all past ages from scratch, all over again.

III

ALL these developments reflected the fact that the chaotic and disturbed interwar period was not, on the whole, a great age of historical scholarship. Economic dislocation in Europe and America meant that historians’ income declined, relatively few new historians were trained, and in the many European countries—the majority, in fact—which fell victim to dictatorships, free historical inquiry ceased. It was only after the Second World War, as economic recovery began, and the mass armies of the 1930s and 1940s were finally demobilized, that a new generation of historians entered the profession. They were immediately confronted with the task of overcoming the skepticism and disorientation of their predecessors in the interwar years. Many historians tried to reassert what they regarded as the

traditional values of historical scholarship, which they thought had been perverted by the political and intellectual pressures and upheavals of the previous few decades. Their mentor and example in England was the Polish-born historian Sir Lewis Namier, whose scholarship was famously painstaking and exact. As one of his pupils noted, he thought that “if history was not to be a catalogue of suppositions, . . . it had to be solidly based on minute facts.” Namier thought that Freud rather than Ranke had established the scientific principles on which the study of the past could be more solidly based than before, and to this extent he was prepared to update the notion of “scientific” history. But the consequences he drew from this belief were far removed from those of the speculative American psychohistorians of recent decades. Namier always eschewed speculation, so he never thought that he could find out enough about an individual in the past to subject his character to psychoanalysis. However, he did think, as a result of his Freudian views, that what drove people to do the things they did were essentially personal motives and forces rather than ideologies or beliefs.

Namier used this approach, combined with formidably thorough and exhaustive research, to devastating effect in his most famous book, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*. The book was launched as a frontal assault on the “Whig interpretation” of British history, which saw eighteenth-century politics in terms of a struggle between the forces of liberty and constitutionalism, led by the Whigs, and absolutism and royal power, represented by the Tories. In the Whig view, the latter cause was eventually taken up by George III and his pet minister, Lord Bute. The new king’s tendencies toward absolutism lost England the American colonies under the premiership of Lord North. Namier looked beyond these ideologies to the personal relationships of the politicians involved. By a minute investigation of these, he suggested that “party” was irrelevant, ideology unimportant; what mattered was the struggle of individuals through patronage and kinship networks for power, money, and influence. Seen in these terms, what led to the political crisis was the disruption to these networks caused by the accession of a new king, not any particular beliefs which he might have held or political principles with which he might have clashed. In this way, Namier’s rapierlike scholarship deflated and destroyed the Whig interpretation of British history by puncturing it at its most vulnerable point.

There was no doubting that this was a major and significant scholarly achievement. When I was an undergraduate in the 1960s, Namier’s *Structure of Politics* was considered by history tutors to have been the greatest work ever penned about English history, and Namier was a god. “Namier,” one historian said, “perhaps, has found the ultimate way of doing history.” “If Namier had his way,” another remarked, “all controversies would cease, and we would know as much historical truth as is humanly possible.” “Fifty years from now,” one of his disciples declared at the beginning of the 1960s, “all history will be done as Sir Lewis does it.” Namier, as even E. H. Carr admitted, was “the greatest British historian to emerge on the academic scene since the First World War.”³¹ Seen from the perspective of the late 1990s, however, these claims appear ludicrously inflated.³² Typically, what British empiricists admired in Namier was the thoroughness of his scholarship; they more or less ignored his Freudianism as an embarrassing but excusable Continental heresy. Many historians since Namier have matched his painstakingly high standards of archival scholarship. They have long since reestablished the centrality of party labels and party ideology to the politics of the majority of the eighteenth century and made the 1760s, Namier’s chosen decade, seem rather exceptional by comparison. Nobody would nowadays maintain that George III’s constitutional practice was the same as that of his predecessors, and assiduous historians have made the inevitable discovery that Namier, in his anxiety to exculpate the king, was highly selective in his use of evidence and not above “pruning” his quotations from the sources to serve his argument.³³ The belief that Namier had found a new method of writing history was misplaced. Already in the 1950s there were those who complained

that he had “taken the mind out of history” in his reduction of political action to the operation of individual self-interest.³⁴ In the hands of his pupils and emulators, and indeed eventually in his own, his method degenerated into mindless prosopography, ending up with a series of narrow and arid studies of eighteenth-century cabinets and producing that great white elephant of twentieth-century British historical scholarship, the huge (and hugely expensive) multivolume *History of Parliament*, a compilation which amounts in the end to little more than a minutely researched biographical dictionary of MPs through the ages, flattering to MPs, which is no doubt why they subsidize it, but of little influence in advancing historical understanding in a larger sense.³⁵

Like H. A. L. Fisher, Namier saw no pattern in history and distrusted ideas and ideologies, an approach which was reassuring to the pragmatism of British intellectuals. He despised and distrusted the masses whose emergence onto the social and political scene in the wake of the postwar Labour government was so threatening to conservative university dons. Insofar as he raised the standards of English historical scholarship with his meticulous, indeed obsessive pursuit of unpublished manuscript materials, he undoubtedly performed a useful service. But English historians were excessively intimidated by this and thought that Namier had replaced Whig myth with true objectivity. He had not. Namier’s work did not attract much attention when it first appeared in 1927. He really came into his own after the war. His views held sway among British historians in the 1950s and 1960s not least because they were well suited to the atmosphere of the Cold War, in which the Communist advocacy of the interests of the masses, belief in the “laws” of history and progress, and enthronement of ideology and belief at the center of the historical process and historical interpretation were thought of by liberals and conservatives as principles to be combated in the interests of the freedom of the individual.³⁶ Soviet historians, it was believed, had betrayed the ideals of factual accuracy, neutrality, and detachment in the same way as Nazi historians had. History had become a means of indoctrination, pressed into the service of the state, and of the spread of Communism. Western history, on the contrary, was now held to represent the virtues of accuracy, objectivity, and truthfulness.

The Cold War reassertion of objectivity which underpinned Namier’s overwhelming influence in Britain in the 1950s and early 1960s also took place in the philosophy of science, where Sir Karl Popper, a philosopher of Viennese origin who dedicated his life to combating the claims of Marxism to be a scientific doctrine, reasserted the objective nature of scientific knowledge in two highly influential works, *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Popper argued that objective knowledge could best be approached through propositions for which one could specify the conditions under which they might be falsified. Theories, such as Marxism, which accounted for everything, and could be adapted to any circumstances, were merely metaphysical; only theories which did not claim to explain everything, yet which resisted attempts to prove them false, were truly scientific. Popper excoriated the Marxist view that history had a discernible direction and was subject to laws; objective knowledge of history, he said, could only be obtained in respect of short- or medium-term developments, where it was clear what evidence was needed to falsify the interpretations put forward. No historical evidence could “disprove” the idea that history was moving through stages toward the goal of a Communist society because every conceivable kind of evidence could be adapted to fit the theory if so desired. On the other hand, the idea that, for example, the First World War was caused by German aggression *could* be falsified (in theory at least) because it was possible to specify the kind of evidence that would be needed to prove or disprove it.³⁷

THIS reassertion of historical objectivity came at a time in the 1950s and 1960s when the historical profession was reestablishing itself, undergoing slow but steady growth, and recapturing the social and financial position it had enjoyed in the late nineteenth century. Not only Britain and the United States but other countries, too, experienced similar developments. In West Germany the growing prosperity brought about by the postwar “economic miracle” allowed historians, like other university professors to regain much of the power and status they had had before the upheavals of Weimar and the anti-intellectual assaults of Nazism. A determination to distance themselves from the outrageous lies and distortions of Nazi historiography gave them a belief in the value of an “objective” approach to history that has never entirely deserted them since. The German historians of the post-1968 generation, the first to have reached professional maturity in the postwar era, eagerly imported the theories and methods of American and, above all, neo-Weberian sociology into their work, in an attempt to escape from the perils of subjectivity which had engulfed the old tradition of liberal nationalist historiography in their country in the 1930s and 1940s. So pervasive was the influence of the social sciences on German historiography that there were proposals to dissolve history as a separate subject in the secondary school curriculum and incorporate it into social studies, citizenship education, political science, and the like, while university undergraduates were now taught, as indeed they still are in Germany, to present their work not in the traditional form of literary essays but after the manner of social scientific research reports instead. The rhetorical style of the social sciences still pervades the work of professional historians in Germany, too, with a passive, anonymous written style dominant, all reference to the author as an individual eliminated, and the word “I” banished even from the preface and acknowledgments of the typical German research monograph or work of historical synthesis. The cult of the individual under Nazism provoked a similar negative reaction among German historians, who on the whole avoided biography and concentrated on writing the history of people in the past as a history of averages, groups, and global trends instead.³⁸

The same decade saw the invasion of the social sciences into history in Britain as well, launched by a famous issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1966, in which a series of young historians heralded the transformation of their discipline by imported theories and methods from anthropology, social theory, and statistics. Beginning with E. H. Carr himself, historians queued up to urge history and the social sciences to move closer together.³⁹ Writing in 1976, Lawrence Stone claimed that the influence of the social sciences was refining the historian’s conceptual apparatus and research strategies, while rigorous quantification was destroying many cherished historical myths. The social sciences were posing new questions for the historian to answer, new hypotheses to test, and transforming the discipline beyond recognition as a result.⁴⁰ In France, too, a “scientific” and “objective” approach to the past gained in prestige and influence in the postwar years. It was exemplified above all with the group of historians associated with the journal *Annales*, who had begun their work before the war but only really gained significant influence after it. By incorporating the methods of economics, sociology, and especially geography and statistics into their approach to the past, the *Annales* historians thought that it would be possible to make history far more objective and scientific than ever before. The traditional methods and objects of inquiry no longer sufficed. History should be the central, synthesizing discipline of the social sciences. It had to quantify. “History that is not quantifiable,” remarked Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, one of the school’s leading exponents, in 1979, “cannot claim to be scientific.” “Tomorrow’s historian,” he added, “will have to be able to programme a computer in order to survive.”⁴¹ Even when the journal changed its subtitle in 1994 to readmit political history, after a good deal of soul-searching, it still defiantly declared itself to represent *Histoire: sciences sociales*.

These beliefs reached their most extreme form, perhaps, in the United States in the late 1960s and

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