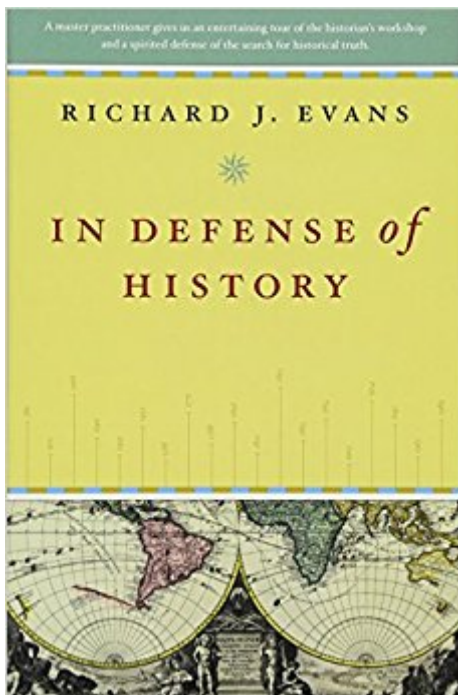


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# In Defense Of History



## 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

## Book Information

Paperback: 288 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; First Paperback Edition edition (January 17, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0393319598

ISBN-13: 978-0393319590

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.9 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces ([View shipping rates and policies](#))

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 25 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #68,899 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #47 in [Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Study & Teaching](#) #59 in [Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Historiography](#)

## Customer Reviews

In the 19th and 20th centuries, historiographers established scientific methods and standards for the historical profession. History's claims to objective knowledge have recently been critiqued by post-foundationalists who argue that facts cannot exist outside of the "prison house" of language. Richard Evans's *In Defense of History* not only defends historians from these fashionable barbs, but shows how the discipline is adapting to this assault on its empiricist base. Like most historians, Evans confronts accusations that history is either dead or mere ideology designed to prop up bourgeois institutions by answering that the past "really happened, and we really can, if we are very

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

Evans (history, Cambridge Univ.) defends traditional history against the onslaught of postmodernist theories, which hold that ultimate historical truth is not only unattainable but does not exist. In the process, he provides the reader with an insightful critique of the evolution of historical methodology, and by implication the historical profession, in the generation since Edward Hallett Carr's classic *What Is History?* (LJ 2/15/62) appeared. Evans's analysis of the link between postmodernist theory and Holocaust denial is particularly insightful. The idea that no historical "theory" is more valid than another, combined with the American notion that both sides of any issue must receive "fair" play, brings Holocaust denial dangerously close to legitimacy. Evans manages to address a number of issues without being polemical. The book is particularly useful for beginning graduate students. Recommended for all libraries. ?Frederic Krome, Jacob Rader Marcus Ctr. of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The book challenges the self-designated left-wing radicalism of postmodernists. And the challenge came from a leftist. Postmodernism is an extreme relativism form of thinking, that opens the door to fascists and racists as well as radicals and progressives by allowing anybody to claim that their view of history, their reading of a document, is as valid as anybody else's, and by making it impossible to refute their arguments on anything but political grounds. Pr. Evans hit the core of the problem that changed the quality of discourse in the educational world. Postmodernism is a form of skepticism combined with self-consciousness. Its adherents believe that no historical narrative can be

considered authoritative, because writers always have political motives, whether they are aware of them or not. In short, they believe that there is no such thing as objectivity. Every claim is suspect, especially if it is generally accepted as true. The motives of every historian must therefore be scrutinized, except those of postmodernists themselves. The educational system of my country, is "prisoner" in this form of historical thinking, a form that teach students "what to think" and not "how to think". Evans book exposes with scientific manner this way of thinking, reminds me the "Alan Sokal" case.

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 it's 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.

An important work for those wishing to broaden their appreciation for the history of history and how ethnic influences and social sciences have affected its telling.

This masterful book is a worthy companion to E.H. Carr's "What Is History." Evans's book is very useful in presenting the several modern takes on the practice of historiography.

Evans is an historian that loves his job. He writes clearly and soberly, giving to the reader an outstanding set of arguments against "post modernism" that challenge the possibility of write history itself. This is a book for historians and general public, with two messages for the researcher: (1) be humble with the past and (2) be rigorous in your task. In the end, there is no old or new history, but good or bad history. Excelsior!

great value

Just what I needed!

This is a good read on post modernism.

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