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The King is Dead: The Last Will and Testament of Henry VIII
A Visitor's Companion to Tudor England
1536: The Year That Changed Henry VIII

WHAT IS HISTORY, NOW?

How the past and present speak to each other

EDITED BY HELEN CARR
AND SUZANNAH LIPSCOMB

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became a key text for generations of history students and historians thereafter. Carr's work was so popular it was republished as a Penguin Classic in 2018. I am a historian who has been influenced by Carr's key text but his influence on me perhaps goes a little further, for E.H. Carr was my great-grandfather.

My memories of history and the learning of history were enhanced by the omnipresent familial legacy of E.H. Carr, nicknamed 'the Prof' but known affectionately as 'Ted'. He died six years before I was born, but his energy has lived on within our family and encouraged my insatiable interest in history, prompting an imagined dialogue with my great-grandfather, one of our greatest and most influential historians and thinkers. I am fortunate enough to observe the work he has carefully and thoughtfully created take its place on the grand stage of History, and I share with his son (my grandfather) John the hope that it will 'stimulate further study and understanding of the future way forward in the world'. This collection of voices is inspired by *What is History?* and serves as a tribute to Carr's timeless work but it is also an olive branch to those who have felt pushed out or marginalised from history and the way we talk about it. *What is History, Now?* argues loudly that history belongs to us all and by making space for all histories, we can perhaps begin to understand a much deeper, broader past.

Helen Carr
Cambridge, March 2021

Prologue: Ways in

Helen Carr and Suzannah Lipscomb

Mary Queen of Scots was beheaded on 8 February 1587 at Fotheringhay Castle in Northamptonshire. She laid her head upon a block and, after a couple of awkward and bloody attempts, her head was struck from her body. This macabre fact about Mary Queen of Scots is the first history fact I, Helen, remember from probably the age of four or five as I ambled about the ruins of Fotheringhay Castle on a day out with my father. For some reason, it gripped me. Apparently I forced him to return to Fotheringhay regularly to ascertain the exact location of the beheading (the centre of the Great Hall, for those who want to know).

Saturdays in my childhood were mostly spent like this. These adventures – trips to castles, houses, churches, cathedrals, monuments, ancient stones – were how I became fascinated with the past. I sought out history elsewhere. In nature: wondering how old is the oldest tree and was it around at the same time as Henry VIII? In movies: I watched *Braveheart* far too young and thought it was magical. And in landscape and myth: I grew up nearby the Avebury Stones, the little sister of Stonehenge.

Here, I dreamed about Merlin and wondered where Excalibur was now.

This type of history excited me far more than the history that was offered at school, which I found strangely disappointing. School history didn't fit with my version of history. My history was more than facts and dates; it was the *feeling* of the past, the myth, the magic, the stuff we didn't know. All of this was my way into history.

For reasons of adoption or possibly short memories, the histories that came down to me, Suzannah, as a child were all on one side of my family. Tracing the patrimonial line takes the family back to Richard Lipscomb, baptised in Portsmouth at the parish church in September 1668, who later drowned in the harbour, having possibly fallen off the pier when drunk. (Late last year, a distant Lipscomb relative sent me a portrait of him. Wearing a white wig over a shaved head – you can detect the faintest shadow of his natural hairline – and dressed in a modest, matching coat and waistcoat of brown wool over a linen shirt with cravat or frills made of very fine, transparent lawn, he looks likely to have been a moderately wealthy merchant – someone rich enough to have his portrait painted, but not by a painter who could do hands.) I have a well-used wooden chopping board, with ears of wheat and the initials 'J.T. Lipscomb A.D. 1851' in relief carving around the rim, which must have belonged to his grandson, John Thomas Lipscomb. Then there's a line of Fredericks, including poor Rev. Frederick Bell Lipscomb who, at the age of forty-six, had been paying a visit to a fellow clergyman in a neighbouring village and was returning home on his bicycle 'when,' a local newspaper tells me, 'a pony, then being harnessed in the stable of

a public house,' suddenly rushed into the road and collided with him. Frederick Bell was violently thrown to the ground and never regained consciousness. He left a widow and five children. One of those was my great-grandfather, who, like many of his era, spent most of his distinguished career in India, as a doctor in the Royal Army Medical Corps. He was one of the first medics into the liberated concentration camp at Belsen. He died eight years before I was born, and I am writing this at his desk.

These family histories were one reason why the past seemed so alluring to me growing up. I didn't realise until much later that the pursuit of genealogy invariably means losing track of the women; as far as family trees are concerned, they birth sons and die. But the fables about these almost tangible relatives gave me an odd, indefinable thrill. They made the past seem both remote and, quite literally, familiar. This was my way into history.

As we write, history is hot stuff. It is the focus of hot-off-the-press news, the subject of heated debate – or, at least, so we're led to believe – and some people express fears that it's being stolen. But how hot are we on what history actually is?

In March 2021, the *Daily Telegraph* ran a piece with the headline, '"Soviet" universities are fictionalising history'. It reported that Universities Minister Michelle Donelan had said, 'The so-called decolonisation of the curriculum is, in effect, censoring history. As a history student, I'm a vehement protector and champion of safeguarding our history. It otherwise becomes fiction, if you start editing it, taking bits out that we view as stains.' She went on, 'most of the narrative that is coming out . . . is about removing elements of history, about whitewashing it, and pretending it never happened, which I just think is naive, and

almost irresponsible.' She compared such behaviour to practices in China and the Soviet Union.

The idea of removing the troubling bits from history is itself very troubling; that universities might be fictionalising or censoring history should alarm anyone. But is that what is happening? 'Decolonising the curriculum' involves considering histories of race, empire and slavery; not perpetuating imperialist attitudes; and attending to historical experiences beyond those of the (usually) white colonisers. It is about diversifying the voices included in 'history' rather than censoring them, about examining the 'stains' on history rather than taking bits out. As Priyamvada Gopal writes, it is instead about putting 'the "offensive" bits BACK IN'. In other words, it means almost exactly the opposite of what Donelan seems to think it means. But it is Donelan's insistence that what she said was 'as a history student' and a 'champion of safeguarding our history' that requires our special attention. It suggests we need to think more about what history is.

In the early 2020s in the UK, what history is has felt confused. In June 2020, when a statue of slave trader Edward Colston was pulled down in Bristol and a movement gathered once again to dethrone imperialist Cecil Rhodes from his place outside Oriel College, Oxford, the prime minister tweeted 'We cannot now try to edit or censor our past.' This was also the attitude of Oliver Dowden, secretary of state for culture, when he wrote to the Museum of the Home in Hackney, London, that month. The museum had recently changed its name from that of slave trader Robert Geffrye and was holding a public consultation on relocating a statue of Geffrye from above the entrance. Dowden cautioned the museum's trustees, 'We cannot pretend to have a different history.' Two months later, the culture secretary

interposed himself again, writing to inform organisations such as the Imperial War Museum, Historic Royal Palaces and the British Museum that 'the government does not support the removal of statues' (in fact, the government is, at the time of writing, seeking to pass legislation that would make damaging a statue or monument punishable by up to ten years in gaol, double the minimum sentence for rape). 'Removing difficult and contentious parts' of the historic environment, he warned, 'risks harming our understanding of our collective past.' Both the prime minister and the culture secretary were echoing art historian and former director of the V&A, Sir Roy Strong, who in 2016 had responded to an earlier iteration of the Rhodes Must Fall protests by stating, 'Once you start rewriting history on that scale, there won't be a statue or a historic house standing . . . The past is the past. You can't rewrite history.'

Concerns about rewriting history seem also to have been at the forefront of Charles Moore's mind when, in September 2020, he reacted to news that the National Trust had published a report on the colonial connections of its properties, including links to the transatlantic slave trade. In the *Spectator*, Moore called it a 'shameful manifesto'. He was not commenting on the shamefulness of past behaviour, rather he was concerned that this critique of the past would make the British feel ashamed: that a critical examination of the past would taint the present. Yet, the reverse is true: it is when we persist in viewing the tainted past uncritically that we continue to sully the present.

Donelan, Johnson, Dowden, Strong and Moore think that removing statues of slave traders and colonisers and reconsidering the history that is taught in universities or presented in heritage sites constitutes a 'rewriting' of history. This they consider, in

the words of *1066 And All That*, a Bad Thing – a kind of erasure of the past. But this is surely to go through the looking glass. Advocating an end to commemorating those who authorised and benefitted from the colonisation, oppression and enslavement of other humans, while encouraging us to pay attention to the stories of those who were colonised, oppressed and enslaved is the very antithesis of erasing the past: it's about refusing to accept a censored version of history that glorifies certain people and erases others. Neither is rewriting history necessarily the bogeyman they fear it to be. Rewriting history, as Charlotte Lydia Riley argues eloquently in this book, is the definition of what historians do and have always done. (Robert Gildea, emeritus professor of modern history at the University of Oxford, argues that those who state, 'You can't rewrite history,' simply mean 'You mustn't rewrite the history we have already written.') History can, of course, be rewritten to advance a political narrative or to expunge parts of history – but it can also be rewritten to direct our gaze to troubling bits of history that have, until now, been hidden. In this latter form, it is the equivalent of wisely changing one's mind when faced with new evidence or a new perspective. And, in fact, if we're looking for examples of the more pernicious rewriting of history, we need look no further than the erection of many statues themselves. Of monuments to slaveholders and Confederate leaders put up long after the American Civil War and during the era of the segregating Jim Crow laws, historian Julian Hayter remarks that they 'were designed to tell a story. They were designed to rewrite history, to essentially justify the rise of racial apartheid and segregation.' By contrast, he says, taking them down is a way of correcting this rewriting – of rewriting the rewriting, if you will. Which is to say,

as one of our contributors, Alex von Tunzelmann, argues in her book, *Fallen Idols*,

> Statues . . . are not really about history at all, but are about how we see ourselves reflected in history: pride versus shame, good versus bad, heroes versus villains. Statues are not a record of history but of historical memory. They reflected what somebody at some point thought we should think.

Our memory of history and what we choose to acknowledge about the past matters because, *pace* Sir Roy Strong, the past, to quote William Faulkner, is not past. Which stories we tell about history, who we celebrate and the ideas and values they embody determine the world we live in today.

What this whole debate makes clear is that we need to think long and hard about what history is now, and what it means to write it, and rewrite it. And it turns out that in working out how to do that, we can take some pointers from history itself: from E.H. Carr writing sixty years ago.

The central idea in *What is History?* came to Carr while he was still an undergraduate in Classics at Cambridge. He realised that Herodotus's account of the Persian Wars in the fifth century BC was shaped by his attitude to the Peloponnesian War (431 BC), which was being fought as Herodotus wrote. Carr called this a 'fascinating revelation . . . it gave me my first understanding of what history was about'. For Carr, Herodotus demonstrated that historians do not draw on objective facts, but their experience of them; 'our picture of Greece in the fifth century BC is defective not primarily because so many of the bits have been lost, but

because it is, by and large, the picture formed by a tiny group of people in the city of Athens.' This argument formed the backbone of *What is History?*

Accepting that historians cannot help but be subjective, however, was not the concrete way of doing history. Nineteenth-century historians approached the past as if they were Olympian gods: they believed they could write objective history, a dispassionate, linear timeline of accepted events, as made famous by the scholar Leopold von Ranke in the 1830s, who wanted 'simply to show how it really was'. This approach was, according to Carr, a 'preposterous fallacy'. Carr explained that while we can formulate a subjective understanding of the past, we simply cannot know it, exactly as it was, from the facts presented to us.

'What is a historical fact? This is a crucial question into which we must look a little more closely.' So Carr begins his interrogation of facts by analysing how the 'fact' is prepared and presented by the historian who studies it. He does so by dividing facts into two categories: facts of the past and facts of the present. A fact of the past, such as 'the Battle of Hastings was fought in 1066', is indisputable but basic. A fact of the present is a fact an historian has chosen to be a fact. In an analogy you'll see oft-repeated in this book, Carr wrote: 'by and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation.' The truth was and still is that facts can be changed or manipulated to benefit those relaying them. 'Alternative facts' are not a new phenomenon. During Carr's lifetime, both the Stalinist regime and the British government destroyed documents, altered evidence and distorted history. It is this misrepresentation and misuse of fact, deliberate or accidental, that Carr also interrogates in

What is History? He encourages any student of history, above all things, to be discerning.

However, Carr did not always wave the flag of subjectivity. During the Cold War in the early 1950s the global political atmosphere was particularly partisan, pushing him to embrace objectivity as he sought a 'rational liberal outlook on the world'. Carr's attempt at liberalism had no place in the Cold War era and his refusal to 'pick a side' prompted accusations that he was an apologist for Stalin. According to George Orwell, he even held Soviet sympathies, having praised the USSR for their successes. Carr's decision to end his *History of Soviet Russia* at 1929, before Stalin exercised his major atrocities, also invited suspicion and criticism. His biographer, Jonathan Haslam, even believes that the Trevelyan Lectures would have been very different had they been delivered by Carr a decade earlier. With the world no longer in a position of immense nuclear anxiety, Carr no longer felt the need to protect liberalism and, according to Haslam, he 'felt free to attack it and did so with vigour'.

Despite Carr's political contentions in the 1950s, *What is History?* does not reflect his politics a decade later. It should therefore be judged on its own merits, as it is throughout this volume. History, Carr said, is a process that needs consistent interrogation and reinterpretation, for there is 'a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his [or her] facts'. This book continues that process.

It is not the first to revisit *What is History?* In 1985, the magazine *History Today* ran a series of articles from leading historians on different branches of history, and the problems involved in studying, researching and writing these. A selection edited by Juliet Gardiner was published by Macmillan as *What is History*

Today? The chapters were called things like 'What is military history?', 'What is the history of science?', 'What is Third World history?', 'What is diplomatic history?' Under each topic, four or five historians provided a short version of an answer. Aside from the editor and the five women who contributed to the chapter 'What is women's history?', only one other female historian appears, alongside sixty-three male historians. There was only one non-white contributor.

In 2002, David Cannadine published *What is History Now?* with Palgrave Macmillan. In it, ten distinguished academic historians (including Richard J. Evans, Linda Colley, Felipe Fernández-Armesto and Miri Rubin, who also contributes to this book) each responded to questions in the format: 'What is social history now?' 'What is political history now?' and 'What is intellectual history now?' Reviews described it as 'a must-have text for today's history students' and 'invaluable to graduate students and scholars', and that was its intended audience. But we think the conversation is bigger than the academy. It isn't just about those, like us, who have had the luxury of studying history. There is much too much at stake for that.

Sixty years on from *What is History?* E.H. Carr's questions about how we investigate and interrogate the past remain. Sixty years on, it is crucial as well as timely to reinvestigate, reinterrogate and reinterpret our understanding of the past. Not the past of the select few, but the past of the many, in order to demonstrate, share – shout from the rooftops – that history belongs to us all.

The two of us each have, at home, a ruler of rulers: a list of monarchs of Britain from AD 43 to 1952 on a 30cm rule. It's the sort of thing one buys for a history lover. But, in fact, it elides 'British'

with 'English' – it doesn't provide a list of the monarchs of Scotland – and it omits the contested queens Matilda and Jane. It's a good example of how history, as a discipline, can seem to offer us access to a straight and comprehensive inventory of empirical, objective, historical facts, when the past was actually far more convoluted, contentious and confusing. As the essays in this collection show, we now know that not only does the writing of history always involve selection and interpretation, but what was included in the archives from which historians can derive their facts was also subject to selection. The evidence we have is partial, and the archive has its own silences and erasures. As Dame Hilary Mantel explained it in her 2017 BBC Reith Lectures,

> history is not the past – it is the method we have evolved of organising our ignorance of the past. It's the record of what's left on the record . . . It's what's left in the sieve when the centuries have run through it . . .

But what if time ground down the people of the past to such fine dust that we catch nothing of them in history's sieve? Trying to write the history of people whose stories did not make it into the archives presents huge challenges for historians. How does one write about silence?

The problem of silences in the archives is especially pressing if we recognise that history is not only constructed in the present – our understanding of it also constructs the sort of present we live in. We live with the legacies of the past. Carr recognised that history was an 'unending dialogue between the past and the present'. Histories of racism and sexism, for example, determine what survived in the archives and what stories they can tell. Archives testify

to the nature of power in the past, and if we want the nature of who has power in the present to be more equitably distributed than it has historically been, then we need to understand the process by which certain peoples have been excluded from history. Seeking to tell their stories is a way of seeking redress – not for the dead, who remain dead, but in the interests of the living. An old-fashioned Olympian view of history would have thought that determining the questions we ask of the past by the realities of the present was to risk anachronism and partisanship, but Carr demonstrated to us that, consciously or unconsciously, we always ask questions from the point of view of the present. Some of those who have written for this book research the histories of women, histories of Black and Indigenous people, histories of those with disabilities, histories of those who are queer – because we think all those people matter in the present.

There are many ways into history, none are right or wrong, better or worse.

Some people enjoy history by reading novels, imagining a world of windswept historical hunks and damsels in distress – this romantic trope has indeed been perpetuated by some wonderful fiction and fiction is an important part of enjoying history. Mantel's *Wolf Hall* has demonstrated the power of fiction in telling the story of the past. 'Freedom!': the simple word from Mel Gibson covered in blue woad is a household one that instantly speaks of the fight for Scottish independence in the late thirteenth century. Yes, *Braveheart* was full of anachronisms, but it was also passionate and exciting. For some, it was a way in. Watching *Gladiator* or visiting the Colosseum is no more or less valid a way into ancient history than reading Edward Gibbon's six-volume *History of the*

Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: the former could actually lead to the latter should an interest be piqued. Yet, some people feel that history is not for everyone, or not for them; they find it 'boring' or 'they just could not get on with all those dates'. This is understandable. Many feel their way into history has been this 'ruler history' – as if history must always be austere, straight, hard, and scholarly. One colour, one gender. This book intends to prove the opposite: that history can be flexible, malleable, colourful and without bias – that history is, above all, interpretation. This is why this volume hosts a multiplicity of voices. Shortly before his death, Carr had prepared material for a second edition of *What is History?* In it he hoped that the study of history could create 'an optimistic, at . . . any rate a saner and more balanced outlook on the future'. This book attempts to provide a balanced outlook by offering a collective one. We have deliberately included a range of diverse voices: both academic and non-academic; people at different stages of their career, leading scholars and also new voices, discussing history in a variety of forms.

This book is for everyone intrigued and perturbed by the recent debates about how and whose history should be commemorated; everyone who feels alienated from the stories that have been told – and equally fascinated by those that have been omitted from history; and everyone who wants to educate themselves about the past.

In the last sixty years there has been an upsurge in the public interest in history. Through movies, television, fiction and the media, history has become popularised and consumed as recreation. In the last years, history has dominated the print media, podcasts, talk shows, news headlines, programmes and personal conversations. People have asked: can history be erased? How

do we talk about the past? Can we impose our values on those who lived hundreds – even thousands – of years before us? In answer to these ubiquitous questions and following the enormous global upheaval of COVID-19, we believe that it is time to return to the 'dialogue' and to Carr's question: what is history, now?

The essays in this volume explore some of the ways in which people approach the past – through films, literature and their own family histories. Contributors examine different approaches to the study of history – the history of religion, racism, the environment, emotions, and mythologies of the past – and the different ways one can tell history – narratively, immersively, and through the 'stuff' of the past. They address marginalised histories that were not part of the mainstream narrative in 1961: the history of women, Black history, queer histories, the history of people with disabilities and Indigenous histories, and they also consider the revision or 'rewriting' of history, including the question of how we write the history of empire today, why our histories must be global, and why that means paying particular heed to Asia.

This book is designed to offer a way in, proving that history is for everybody and inviting you, the reader, to enter and share in the many ways in which history can be enjoyed and interpreted. It is for everyone who is questioning how to look at the past, how to think about the present, and how to act in the future.

Chapter 1

Why global history matters

Peter Frankopan

Historians do not agree about what 'global history' means. For some, it means widening the geographic lens through which the past is normally examined. Traditionally, studying history at school and at university has meant beginning with the Greeks and the Romans, moving swiftly to the Middle Ages before taking in the Tudors, the Civil War, French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars before reaching the First and the Second World Wars. In recent years, that has started to change, with a welcome initiative to also think about parts of the world that are not in Europe, and which were not impacted by the centuries of European colonisation.

In that sense, 'global history' can be like a blank canvas that enables historians to think and write about parts of the world that have been too long ignored by the mainstream of historical scholarship – whose focus has been heavily dominated by the history of 'the West'. Looking at the histories of the peoples of the Pacific, for example, at the Indigenous cultures of the Americas before (or after) 1492, or at pre-colonial Africa, fits into this broad description and is individually and collectively important