

Introduction

This book has two purposes. One is to answer some difficult questions relating to some important events in the fourteenth century of a covert or conspiratorial nature, and to explore their implications. The other is to consider whether a philosophy of history that is sensitive to doubt and the theoretical work of postmodernists and critical theorists can, through a process of rigorous analysis, produce instances of historical certainty. In other words, can any of our answers to the 'difficult questions' ever be more than a matter of opinion?

As most readers will be aware, the background to the first of these themes is my sequence of biographies of medieval individuals. Four volumes have appeared to date, dealing with the lives of Sir Roger Mortimer, Edward III and Henry IV, and that of Henry V in the year 1415. When appraising key political leaders in a new way, it is inevitable that previously unasked questions will arise. In answering these it has sometimes been sufficient to supply an appendix in the relevant volume explaining the reason for discounting the traditional explanation. However, in a few cases, the radical nature of a piece of revisionism has required an article to be drawn up for the peer-reviewed press. Each of these articles in turn has provoked me to think about historical methodology and to consider whether the traditional approach to determining historical 'facts' is reliable. This has a particular relevance in the wake of postmodernism, for it may be said that many historians (especially medievalists) have failed to answer many of the criticisms of postmodernism and critical theory, and have continued writing history in spite of the intellectual developments of the rest of the world, increasingly addressing only a small peer group of scholarly colleagues. The end result is that history has begun

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to diverge from the intellectual mainstream of society, through refusing to answer its critics. As will be seen in this book, there is still a feeling among some historians that criticisms of their authority – that is to say, the historian's right to give an opinion on the past – must be answered by emphasizing that very authority and co-opting other professionals to reinforce it, not examining it to show the actual basis on which it is founded. Therefore the first theme of this book (the specific questions) have led naturally to the second (the theoretical stance).

The first scholarly essay that I published on a medieval theme was 'The death of Edward II', which appeared in *EHR* in December 2005. This pioneered an information-based approach to the past, which has subsequently proved invaluable in other contexts. It has the potential to answer fundamental questions about the nature of history that previously have proved difficult. Importantly, it works at both a theoretical and a practical level. Not only can we apply it to a large number of specific questions, it also leads to a broader philosophical question: if an information-based argument can be employed to show that Edward II was not killed in Berkeley Castle in 1327 and Richard II was certainly murdered in Pontefract Castle in 1400, can the same information-based methods be used to justify historical research in general? In short, through the process of achieving a point of certainty *historically*, can we achieve a point of certainty for history itself?

For many academics, this question is best ignored. Many people take the view that history has received its 'defence' in Richard J. Evans's thought-provoking book, *In Defence of History*, and the less historians inspect his arguments for cracks the better. However, I do not find any theoretical line in that book that allows a historian to prove aspects of the past, and especially not in a controversial context. Pro-history arguments still rely on emphasizing professional historians' expertise, judgement and authority, and the general reliability of the evidence. Such arguments work on the assumption that

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although a historian might be wrong in a few details here and there (because a tiny proportion of his or her source material was fraudulent, incomplete or inexact), most of the time, the evidence is reliable. But for the specialist in medieval intrigue, such generalizations are weak. We cannot simply work on the assumption that most of the evidence is correct – especially when it is patently obvious that most of it is no longer extant, and even more so when the traditional interpretation gives rise to many inconsistencies. Hence the need for the information-based approach that underpins much of this book.

Using information-based methods, it is possible to go much further than any earlier ‘defence’ of history allows: to determine how the composition of a text contained in a historical document related (and still relates) to past reality, and how one can, in certain limited circumstances, develop fixed points that limit the infinite set of possible re-descriptions of the past. This is the Holy Grail of historical methodology – not least because it does away with the need for the historian’s judgement and answers the critics of the historian’s authority by *showing* the reasons for that authority, not just claiming it. Very simply, by treating information about the past in the same way that one treats information about contemporary society, information-science processes may be employed in both developing and testing a historical hypothesis.

As I wrote in the acknowledgements page in my book *1415*, being an experimental historian is never easy. History is perhaps the most conservative of all professions, and a radical historian is generally branded a maverick by the mainstream. Proposing new historical methods and coming to radical conclusions is almost guaranteed to make enemies, especially from those who have a vested interest in maintaining the orthodoxy of traditional interpretations of the past. However, it is to be hoped that innovation and new techniques can be accommodated within the profession as well as within society at large, and that the acceptability of original historical

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interpretations is dependent on the thoroughness of the research and logic of the arguments, not the traditions and vested interests which the researcher is deemed to be challenging. While the non-information-based arguments advanced in this book may be questioned, either to be absorbed within historical orthodoxy or disproved, the information-based ones should prove more durable. If I am wrong, the implication is that we cannot be certain about any specific aspect of the past – and the only accurate or provable history we can write is a general story of changing social conditions derived from a series of statistical averages that eliminate the individual and the isolated historical event altogether. However, if my confidence in the certainties made possible by this approach is well founded, there is no reason why historians should not put forward specific political narratives that defy theoretical criticism, resist historical contradiction and have lasting significance for society.

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