

The Good Book Guide

HISTORY AND MEMORY by Geoffrey Cubitt. Manchester University Press, 2007. viii + 263 pp. Index. £12.99 pbk

The seventieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe is a good time to review a book about the relationship between history and memory as all involved, especially Mr Putin, have different recollections about its circumstances. Both 'history' and 'memory' have mutable definitions, so pinning down how they relate is hard to do but they intersect because memory has a role in the historical process, is itself an object of historical study, and like history is a body of 'knowledge'. History is supposed to be more about the (objective?) conceptual interpretation of the incomplete historical record than about a remembered experience of the past but remembrance can be equally selective and memories can be false or unfinished. Both are used to establish collective identities.

By focusing on social memory Geoffrey Cubitt shows that memory is organic and has a dynamic relationship with history. The shared memory of one event warps our perceptions of others and shapes our expectations. Think of the powerful grip of Vichy on the French consciousness or even Kosovo, 600 years ago, on the Serbs. The role of images, symbols, personalities and legend is particularly powerful. The George Washington story, for example, is entwined with the foundation myth of



An Orthodox church in history-laden Kosovo

the United States, while in this country the images of the First World War, from muck and bullets to the Cenotaph, shaped generations. Yet, the role of social memory is as much a useful corrective as it is a distortion. Such memories frequently emerge as the 'hidden histories' of the dispossessed and overthrow dominant narratives established by historians.

This is not an easy book. For many students today, who live in a 'continuous now', the main problem posed by memory and history will remain remembering what happened when for tomorrow's test.

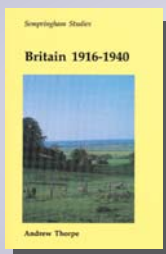
Philip Brindle

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY ON TRIAL: EUROPE SINCE 1989 AND THE ROLE OF THE EXPERT HISTORIAN edited by H. Jones, K. Ostberg, N. Randerad. Manchester University Press, 2007. xii + 199 pp. Index. £50.00 hbk

How do historical arguments and the use of evidence differ from the legal persuasions and examination of witness testimony seen in a court of law? This is the underlying theme of a collection of essays that focus on how historians in recent times have been summoned as expert witnesses to give their judgements on a range of controversies before the judge and jury can give theirs. Some of the judicial disputes and investigations are well known: like the culpability of the Dutch Army for allowing the Srebrenica massacre or the British for Bloody Sunday. Most of the others are less so. Although referred to, a curious omission is Professor Richard Evans's evidence in the trial brought by David Irving that hinged around Holocaust denial. What makes this collection interesting, however, is bigger issues about the public use of history; the political mobilisation of the past and whether it is better to remember or forget. Historians have been dragged into this arena from their ivory towers to choose between guilt and justice, to decide whether to serve a client or Clio. What is clear is that they find it hard to answer any forensic cross-examination with a simple 'yes' or 'no'.

Philip Brindle

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Illustration acknowledgements, Vol 15, No 3, March 2010.

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