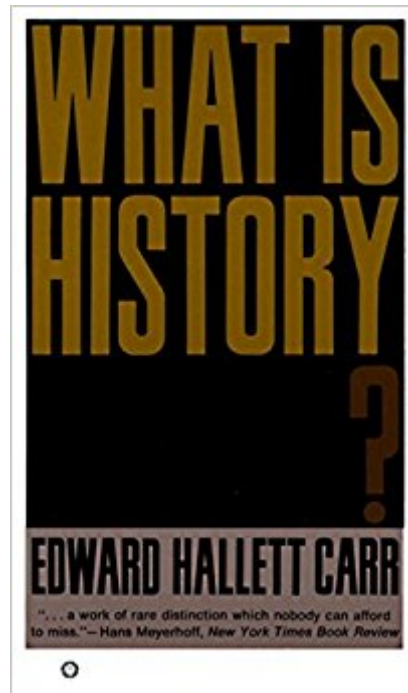




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# What Is History?



## Synopsis

Who is to say how things really were? In formulating a modern answer to the question 'What is History?' Professor Carr shows that the 'facts' of history are simply those which historians have selected for scrutiny. Millions have crossed the Rubicon, but the historians tell us that only Caesar's crossing was significant. All historical facts come to us as a result of interpretative choices by historians influenced by the standards of their age. Yet if absolute objectivity is impossible, the role of the historian need in no way suffer; nor does history lose its fascination. With lucidity, Carr casts a light on the proper function of the historian and the vital importance of history in modern society. "This is an admirably stimulating and intrepid book, a bold excursion into a region of central importance where most contemporary philosophers and historians, unaccountably, either fear or disdain to tread." —Isaiah Berlin, *New Statesman*

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## Customer Reviews

'...[Carr] tackles half a dozen of the most fundamental questions concerning the interpretation of human social experience. He handles each of these with such mastery as we seldom see, and his little book is one of those rare works which one can with assurance predict will be regarded as basic for years to come.' -- David M. Potter, *The Nation*

Edward Hallett Carr was an English diplomat, historian, writer, journalist, and international relations theorist. He opposed empiricism within historiography. He was best known for his fourteen-volume

history of the Soviet Union and his rejection of traditional historical methods and practices. He died in 1982 at the age of ninety.

.This superb old book is a thoughtful attempt to define the study of history and historiography. Carr's basic thesis is that people's opinions change throughout their life times, are maleable, and depend on what is going on in the world at any given moment. The following quote from the book sums up the author's thesis nicely:....."I am fully aware that, if anyone took the trouble to peruse some of the things I wrote before, during, and after the war, he would have no difficulty at all in convicting me of contradictions and inconsistencies at least as glaring as any I have detected in others. Indeed, I am not sure that I should envy any historian who could honestly claim to have lived through the earth-shaking events of the past fifty years without some radical modifications of his outlook. My purpose is merely to show how closely the work of the historian mirrors the society in which he works. It is not merely the events that are in flux. The historian himself is in flux. When you take up a historical work, it is not enough to look for the author's name on the title page: look also for the date of publication or writing--it is sometimes even more revealing. If the philosopher is right in telling us that we cannot step into the same river twice, it is perhaps equally true, and for the same reason, that two books cannot be written by the same historian." (Carr 51-52). The book was written in 1961 but is bright and sparkling and applicable to our own generation's thinking and perceptions. Kim Burdick Stanton, Delaware

A great little book that does much. It was nice to see him take down Collingwood to a certain extent, but he's not afraid to take on the establishment at Cambridge, no matter who he's talking about. At times the lectures take on a bit of stodginess and the generalities start to flow a bit more; when this happens, listeners and readers tend to tune a scholar out because there's no real meat on the table. Carr avoids this for the most part, but not entirely. All in all, an excellent book which I would rate above Collingwood's *The Idea of History*, a great book until one gets to the mid-point and Collingwood desperately searches for ways to exhibit his rather unique theory that a historian has to "re-enact" his subject matter in his mind in order to interpret events. This is just another form of absolutism, and a rather poor one at that.

Though published more than forty years ago, this book has contemporary relevance. A series of lectures given by the author at Cambridge University, it covers topics such as "The Historian and His Facts" and "History as progress." The author rejects the notions of Hegel and Marx that history

automatically has transcendent meaning. On the other hand neither is it a series of random events. He tells us that all history is rinsed through the background filters of those who write it. Therefore "revisionist history" is not an occasional accident produced by over zealous observers, it is the only kind of history available to us. This is a good read, perhaps marred slightly by over generalizations. The group discussion in which I participated was simulating.

It's small; it's to the point; it covers all the major questions about "doing history." In short, "What is History?" is an indispensable primer on the subject of historiography.

Thoughtful. Critical analysis of his field by a major historian. A good read.

An excellent, well-written definition of what history is and what a historians job is.

Great book, fast ship.

Edward Hallet Carr makes a great contribution to meta-history by producing this book. He uses examples from antiquity until his contemporary time to critique the way the craft of history has been undertaken. He offers great examples and a great structure for both the book and his argument. I had to read this for a graduate class but had I known it was as good as it was I would have picked it up well beforehand.

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