



BOARD OF STUDIES  
NEW SOUTH WALES

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HIGHER SCHOOL CERTIFICATE  
EXAMINATION

WRITING BOOKLET

Examination

History Extension

Section	Part	Question Number
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Date

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History is an interpretation of facts and events as written down by a historian. Thus, historians 'own' their histories in the same way that a scientist 'owns' a discovery or experiment: it is their interpretation of facts to draw a conclusion. This is not to necessarily say that history is a science; indeed this debate continues to this day. It is to say that history is, as Foner suggests, a 'reasonable approximation of the past' based on the historian's own context: purpose(s), audience(s) and motivation(s). The works of British historian E.H. Carr, particularly in his historiographical piece 'What is History?' (1961) presents a pivotal outlook on the role of facts as tools in a historian's arsenal and gave rise to many modern outlooks on historiography. Likewise, the post-modern wave of 'intellectual barbarians', in the words of Richard J. Evans that undermine historical study (in Evans' mind) are explored in his work 'In Defence of History' (1999). The question of 'who owns history' cannot definitely be answered of course; the 'eccentricities of the English language' (Carr) will always give rise to debates ('what does 'own' mean?') however, by studying the works of Evans, Carr, Foner and a multitude of other historians who have contributed in some way to history, at least an 'approximation' can be determined.

As with all other debates, this debate can be

subdivided into many others. One key debate that has raged over decades is the purpose of history and the historian; is it to show, as Empiricist von Ranke believed, 'wie eigentlich gewesen' (what actually happened) or, as Foner asserts, to have a 'public function' as Charles Francis Adams stated? Carr immediately takes issue with Ranke's statement: "Three generations of... historians have marched into battle intoning 'wie eigentlich gewesen'... as with other intonations, to avoid the burdensome task of thinking for themselves." His belief that the historian serves a dual purpose, to benefit the public and themselves stem from his work in the Foreign Office; Evans notes that he was not initially trained as a historian, but his work in International Relations gave him a unique perspective. Thus, the purpose of history, or purposes, are to create ~~the~~ facts of the past known to the public. This has also been hotly contested by the 'harte core' academia; AJP Taylor's work as a 'populist' historian, appearing on television even, shocked the academic community, but it ties in exactly with Foner's perception, as well as Carr's perspective that 'there can be no individual without society'; this can be seen by the increasing popularity of widespread public exposure to history funding in academic institutions: the role of money in the construction of history cannot be ignored. Thus, as Foner perceptively noted, 'everyone and no-one' owns history. It is there for the public, just

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as it is for the individual historian.

The construction of history has varied from Herodotean times, but the process remains similar: collecting facts and interpreting them. It is this process that, in R. Evans' eyes, that has separated history from other disciplines. Evans notes that it was von Ranke (Evans too was an Empiricist) who had a large 'threefold' impact on history: creating history as a discipline separate from philosophy and literature, recognising that 'every epoch is immediate before God' (meaning you cannot judge the past to the standard of the present) and most importantly using philological methods of verification to check sources. These form a central pivot point in how history has been constructed; from Herodotus' fantastic stories of flying snakes, with little perceived research (Herodotus did in fact go about the necessary methods for ~~also~~ verifying facts, this was just ignored by his critics) to the modern 'social science' that history has become. This also corroborates Foner's statement that history is constantly being rewritten; but, he notes that 'there are commonly accepted professional standards'. These are facts, and the verification of them. Post-modernist historians such as Hayden White propose that facts in history are merely the events driving a good story: he classes history as literature, written with 'emplotments' and tropes to create meaning out of the 'pell-mell' narrative order of events that reflect the

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'observations of a small child' (Marc Bloch, 'The Historian's Craft', on early analysts). Carr also agrees with Foner's statement that there is often more than ~~one~~ ~~way~~ legitimate way of recounting past events' in his statement that: "The awkward thing about history is that bias is necessary... the best historian is the historian with the best bias, not the non-existent historian with no bias." Furthermore, his concept of 'historical facts' (what ~~is~~ makes facts historical?) as 'fish on a fishmonger's slab' proposes that individual historians do tend to 'own' history, as they choose how to 'serve' the facts; Bloch, and many other post war historians agree: 'The most difficult task of the historian is choosing his documents...' (Bloch). The fact is, as Foner's understanding of multiple perspectives on a single 'history' suggests, that historians do, to some extent, 'own' their histories because as Carr states, they select their facts. While Evans disagrees, choosing that history is universal, it cannot be denied that the historian's treatment of the past gives them ownership over their ~~own~~ history, as White suggests, they become essentially authors.

One final, key debate is essentially: 'What is history?' History is an academic discipline; not the 'series of myths and inventions' that certain post-modernists would argue. But it is also separate from the past. There are many distinctions in the connotations of words; Foucault's studies into the

power of words in institutions such as hospitals and prisons indicate that academic institutions have unwittingly given the word history certain ramifications and connotations; these vary from country to country, and should ideally not deal specifically with 'morally correct' histories as suggested in Foner's first paragraph. So in this sense, as historians are guided by their own subconscious connotations of history, they are in a way owned by history. ~~History is~~ 'There is only one type of history...' Bloch declared, 'universal history.' This is corroborated by other historians such as Evans in his defence against 'ordes of invading semioticians, Post-Structuralists, Foucauldians...' in his idea that history serves one purpose, that it is not exactly a science but it is a universal discipline. Carr however, believes 'there is no such thing as objective history.' History has been influenced by science; the radical new theories on quantum physics gave rise to the idea that historic truth is 'a reasonable approximation' through Heisenberg's concepts on ~~an~~ Uncertainty; furthermore, Bloch and Braudel, Annales historians, note the importance of cross-disciplinary studies in history, citing geography as an important factor in the study of Bruges. (However, history is not a science because it is objective; scientists do not 'own' science, they serve it. Historians are a mix; they both own history and are owned by it; history and their understanding of it dictate their writings.

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In the words of Richard J. Evans, 'It is right that post-modernists should question the methods' of historians. It is, as Foner suggests, the role of historians to "constant[ly] search for new perspectives as the lifeblood of historical understanding." Thus history must constantly be reevaluated as a discipline. That historians 'own' history is the subject of debate that covers how history has been constructed, and the purposes of history down to what history is. There is no definitive answer, as history can only be an approximation; thus, through the study of the key historians who have shaped this debate over time, the conclusion can be drawn that historians own history in the sense that scientists own discoveries; they own only the portion they have presented; overall, history still owns the historians.

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