

COSMOPOLITAN ISLANDERS

British Historians and the European Continent

RICHARD J. EVANS



CAMBRIDGE

This page intentionally left blank

Cosmopolitan Islanders

Cosmopolitan Islanders is an expanded version of the Inaugural Lecture delivered by Richard J. Evans as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University in 2009. A leading historian of modern Germany himself, he asks why it is that so many prominent British historians have devoted themselves to the study of the European Continent. Books on the history of France, Germany, Italy, Russia and many other European countries, and of Europe more generally, have frequently reached the best-seller lists in Britain. They have also been translated into the languages of the countries they have been written about, and often exerted a considerable influence on the way these nations understand their own history. Yet the same is not true in reverse. On the European Continent, historians research, write and teach mainly about the history of their own country.

Cosmopolitan Islanders traces the evolution of British interest in the history of Continental Europe from the Enlightenment to the twentieth century. It discusses why so many British historians have chosen to study European history rather than work on Britain, how they learned the necessary languages, and what impact their work has had on the countries they study. British historians are still the most cosmopolitan in the world outside the USA, but the long tradition of British writing on European history is now under threat from a number of quarters, and the book ends with some reflections on what needs to be done to ensure its continuation in the future.

RICHARD J. EVANS is Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Gonville and Caius College. A Fellow of the British Academy and the Royal Society of Literature, Professor Evans has also taught at Birkbeck, University of London, where he was Vice-Master, and the University of East Anglia, where he was Professor of European History. His books include *Death in Hamburg*, winner of the Wolfson Literary Award for History and the William H. Welch Medal of the American Association for the History of Medicine; *Rituals of Retribution*, winner of the Fraenkel Prize in Contemporary History; *In Defence of History*; and *The Coming of the Third Reich* and *The Third Reich in Power*, both History finalists in the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prizes. His latest book is *The Third Reich at War*, which completes his trilogy on Nazi Germany. He is currently writing a history of Europe in the nineteenth century.

COSMOPOLITAN ISLANDERS

British Historians and the European Continent

RICHARD J. EVANS



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521199988

© Richard J. Evans 2009

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provision of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published in print format 2009

ISBN-13 978-0-511-57742-0 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-19998-8 Hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-13724-9 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of urls for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

To my fellow-students

CONTENTS

List of figures	[viii]
Preface	[ix]
1 Unequal exchanges	[1]
2 The view across the Channel	[59]
3 Open borders	[102]
4 A sense of adventure	[154]
5 The language problem	[189]
Further reading	[235]
Index	[243]

FIGURES

- 1 Historians working on domestic or foreign topics [13]
- 2 Non-domestic historians working on European or extra-European topics [15]
- 3 Historians working on domestic topics, by period [18]
- 4 Historians working on foreign topics, by period [18]
- 5 Historians working on combined foreign and domestic topics, by period [19]

PREFACE

This short book is a much-expanded version of my Inaugural Lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Cambridge, delivered on 18 May 2009. By custom, an Inaugural Lecture by the holder of this position has sought to say something about the nature and study of history itself, and its place in the wider community, as well as speaking to the newly appointed incumbent's own particular field. I have tried to combine all these various features of the Inaugural Lecture in the present work. It addresses, and indeed celebrates, the long tradition of British scholarship on the history of the European Continent, a tradition of which I am myself a part, and it asks how this tradition has developed, why it has now reached its apogee, and what measures government bodies, schools and universities will need to take if it is going to continue. It cannot hope to match the impact of my predecessor's Inaugural Lecture, Quentin Skinner's *Liberty Before Liberalism*, any more than I can hope to attain in my field the distinction he has achieved in his own, but it does aim to make a modest contribution to the growing literature on the history of History-writing in Britain and, more generally, to the ongoing national conversation about multiculturalism, Europeanism, and British – more specifically English – national identity.

Many previous Regius Professors of Modern History have made their own, often very significant contributions to

the history of the European Continent, from William Smyth, who wrote extensively on the French Revolution, through Sir John Seeley, whose first major historical publication was a large-scale biography of the Prussian reformer Baron vom Stein, and the cosmopolitan Lord Acton, who taught a Special Subject in the History Faculty on the French Revolution and whose lectures on the subject were published after his death. G. M. Trevelyan, though mainly known nowadays for his writings on English history, also published a three-volume life of the Italian nationalist and revolutionary Giuseppe Garibaldi, and J. B. Bury was the author of a history of the Papacy in the nineteenth century, while, nearer to our own day, Owen Chadwick and Patrick Collinson both wrote histories of the Reformation, Geoffrey Elton *Reformation Europe*, and Quentin Skinner *Foundations of Early Modern Political Thought*. So the tradition of writing on Continental European history in Britain embraces a good number of my predecessors as well; some of them at least are discussed later on in this book.

The book is divided into five chapters. In the first, I try to establish the basic contours of present-day British work on European history and explain why it has been so influential. I have also added to the analysis some rough-and-ready statistics about the study of foreign history in universities in France, Germany, Italy, the UK and the USA, to illustrate the extent to which the historical profession in these countries shares, or does not share, a strong and continuing interest in the history of other countries than its own (British historians' interest in Europe has always been focused on a wide variety of countries, but the largest numbers

have focused their attention on France, Germany, Italy and Russia, so I have mostly followed suit and concentrated on them too). The universities surveyed were, in the United Kingdom, Birmingham, Cambridge, Glasgow, King's College London, Leeds, Nottingham, Oxford, University College London, Warwick; in France, the Université Paris-Sorbonne (Paris VI) and the Université Toulouse II (Le Mirail); in Germany the Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Leibniz-Universität Hannover, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg and Universität Potsdam; in Italy the Università di Bologna and Università di Pisa; and in the USA, Brown University, Columbia University, Duke University, Harvard University, Stanford University, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Chicago and Yale University. The members of each History Faculty or Department were listed with specialisms, if provided, and checked against their publications. Altogether, 1,471 historians were examined: 93 French, 336 German, 92 Italian, 472 British and 478 American. Some historians study more than one country or period, so that some of the figures add up to more than 100 per cent.

Chapter 1 also draws on the responses I received from a large, though far from comprehensive, sample of more than sixty British historians who work on aspects of European history in the present day, when I wrote to them asking what impact their books had had in the countries they wrote about. The questionnaire was sent out in December 2008. Obviously the responses are subjective, indeed in some cases they are

quite passionate. They articulate feelings as much as sober self-analysis; this is one reason, indeed, why many of the views they convey make such compelling reading.

The second and third chapters briefly trace the evolution of British interest in the history of Continental Europe from the Enlightenment to the twentieth century, focusing on the surprisingly large number of historians who were drawn into this subject, both well-known, such as G. M. Trevelyan, Sir John Seeley, Lord Acton or, coming closer to the present, A. J. P. Taylor, Richard Cobb and Sir Michael Howard, and less well-known. Chapter 2 takes the story roughly up to the beginning of the First World War, when European History was very much a minority interest in Britain, focusing first, for many decades, almost exclusively on the French Revolution, and later broadening out to cover Italy, Central Europe and the Balkans. The third chapter takes the story through the interwar years, when interest in the Continent was dominated by diplomatic historians who were also in many cases closely involved in government policymaking, and then charts the explosion of interest triggered by the presence of a large body of émigré historians in Britain, and the participation of a whole generation of British historians in the Second World War. These historians were able to train a younger, and very large generation of historians, the 'baby-boomers' born after 1945, in European history; this generation, my own, has produced a large body of work in the field, and is only just now beginning to reach the age of retirement.

Chapter 4 analyses the responses from living British historians of Europe to the question of how and why they decided to devote their career to France, Germany, Italy,

Russia or Spain rather than to Britain. The diversity of experience and motivation is striking, but for all the delight many of them take in emphasizing the role of chance circumstance in their decision, some common patterns are still discernible. Finally, Chapter 5 presents their accounts, again widely varying, of how they managed to learn the language or languages they needed to do their work, and discusses their views on what kind of future the study of European history faces in Britain in an age when language-learning in this country is undergoing rapid and seemingly irreversible decline. It concludes by interrogating the concept of cosmopolitanism that lies at the heart of the book, a concept that turns out to be more ambiguous than might at first sight appear.

The contribution of the community of European History specialists in this country has been far more extensive than I originally anticipated when I sent out the questionnaire. It has in a sense transformed this Inaugural Lecture, or rather the much-extended version of it presented here, from the traditional series of *ex cathedra obiter dicta* into a more collective, more democratic exercise. I am extremely grateful to all of my respondents for taking the time and trouble to write quite lengthy and considered replies to my questionnaire, and for allowing me to quote from their responses. Often their replies were packed with entertaining and revealing detail, anecdote and reflection. Many of them revised or even overturned the initial hypotheses I brought to this subject. My thanks to them all, and my apologies for not being able to include everything they said, or everyone who responded, and for not asking everyone in the field.

A few brief notes on terminology are necessary.

‘European History’ as it is conventionally taught in the UK does not, somewhat oddly to, for example, American eyes, include the history of Britain, and I have adhered to this convention, rather than consistently using a more cumbersome and less familiar term like ‘Continental History’, in this book. History with a capital H is the subject; history with a small h, the past. I have tried to keep the scholarly apparatus of the book to a minimum, so, in keeping with this book’s character as an essay based on a lecture, I have dispensed with footnotes. A guide to further reading at the end of the book indicates the sources I have used, as well as pointing to some of the key works in the field.

As always, I have a number of debts to record. My colleagues in the History Faculty at Cambridge have been generous with their help and advice, and responded with unfailing courtesy to my questions. Andrew Wylie, my agent, has been supportive as usual. Richard Fisher and his team at Cambridge University Press have been encouraging and enthusiastic and done wonders with a manuscript they received only on the second day of March, 2009. Victoria Harris and Hugo Service have helped with the research, the former by generating the graphics in Chapter 1 and the latter by supplying the statistics for them, and both of them, as well as Chris Clark, Bianca Gaudenzi, Mary Laven, Pernille Røge and Astrid Swenson, read through the book at short notice at the copy-editing stage and made many useful critical suggestions. Hester Vaizey kindly read the proofs and saved me from numerous errors. The Workshop on Modern German History at Cambridge, and the graduate students taking the M.Phil. in Modern European History listened to some of my

PREFACE

ideas at earlier stages of their gestation. Christine Corton, with our sons Matthew and Nicholas, helped keep me going during the final frantic rush of completion. I am grateful to them all. Finally, the dedication, an allusion to the invocation with which Lord Acton opened his own Inaugural Lecture more than a century ago, records my deepest debt.

Cambridge
March 2009

Unequal exchanges

I

In his brilliantly written and thought-provoking book *The History Men*, first published in 1983, the seventeenth-century English history specialist and regular reviewer for the *Observer* Sunday newspaper, John Kenyon, told the story of the development of the historical profession in Britain since the early modern period. He focused above all on the many British historians, especially those based in Oxford or Cambridge, who had contributed to building up the teaching and writing of History over the past few centuries, delivering sharp and acute critical judgments on a number of them as he went along. The core of History teaching and research in England was, and should be, Kenyon thought, English history, and particularly English political and constitutional history. Raising his gaze momentarily from Cambridge (from where he had himself gone into exile to Hull some years before, but where his spiritual home evidently remained), he cast a jaundiced eye across to the new universities that had been established in the 1960s and found, to his disapproval, that many of them included extra-European History on their curricula. He roundly dismissed this as faddish and ephemeral: 'hastily cobbled-up courses on Indochina or West Africa faded away as soon as these areas ceased to be of immediate current concern'. Kenyon thought that British historians had made no

notable contribution to this particular field. ‘Nor’, he went on, ‘did the contribution of British historians to European History constitute an important or influential corpus of work.’ So he ignored this too.

Kenyon was not alone in this view. In his book *The English Historical Tradition since 1850*, published in 1990, Christopher Parker similarly assumed that English historians had written overwhelmingly about the history of their own country. A more recent survey, Michael Bentley’s *Modernizing England’s Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism 1870–1970* (2005), also writes as if English historians wrote exclusively about English history. On a broader front, an excellent collection of essays published under the editorship of Stefan Berger, Mark Donovan and Kevin Passmore, *Writing National Histories: Western Europe since 1800* (1999), found historians in Britain, France, Germany and Italy of interest only insofar as they wrote about the history of their own country, focusing on the ways in which they contributed to legitimizing and defending the identity of their own particular nation-state. True, there were, they pointed out, significant transnational and intercultural factors at work in the emergence of the historical profession, most notably the enormous influence exerted on historians of other countries in the nineteenth century by the research methods – lumped together under the general heading of ‘source-criticism’ – and the institutions – such as the research seminar – developed by German historians such as Leopold von Ranke. But when it came to examining what such historians had actually written, it was a different matter. Ranke, for example, wrote histories of England, France, the Papacy, he even wrote a history of

the world, but it was his history of Germany that formed the object of attention in the essay in the collection devoted to him by Patrick Bahners.

The universality of Ranke's focus was perhaps unusual in the nineteenth century; even before his death, German historians of the 'Borussian school' were turning their gaze inwards, to the history of their own country. Yet in fact some historians have always written about countries other than their own. And nowhere is this more striking than in Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century. British historiography spans the globe and is astonishingly broad in its coverage. Contrary to what Kenyon claimed, British historians have made a major and distinguished contribution to the History not only, understandably enough, of the British Empire but also of the many parts of the world that at one time or another belonged to it, from America to Africa, India to Australia. University courses on these areas of the world have proved both successful and durable. Specialists in these fields occupy important Chairs in many different universities.

Just as significant, however, has been the contribution of British historians to writing and teaching the history of the European Continent and the many countries it contains. A moment's thought will reveal a dozen or more prominent historians in Britain writing in the past few decades who have published major books about the modern history of Germany (Ian Kershaw, Richard Overy), Spain (Paul Preston, Raymond Carr, Helen Graham), Italy (Denis Mack Smith, Paul Ginsborg, Lucy Riall), France (Theodore Zeldin, Robert Gildea, Olwen Hufton), Russia (Geoffrey Hosking, Robert Service, Orlando Figes, Catherine Merridale), Poland

(Norman Davies), Greece (Mark Mazower), Romania (Denis Deletant), Sweden (Michael Roberts), Finland (David Kirby), Bulgaria (Richard Crampton), the Netherlands (Jonathan Israel, Simon Schama) and many others while, for many British historians of the medieval and early modern periods, writing about the European Continent is almost second nature. Books on the history of these and other European countries, and of Europe more generally, have frequently reached the best-seller lists in Britain. And these are merely the tip of a considerable iceberg, with substantial numbers of more junior historians writing on the history of various European countries, making their reputations with this work and rising up through the ranks. There are flourishing societies in Britain devoted to Continental history, each with its own academic journal – *German History* for the German History Society, *French History* for its French equivalent. Continental history is taught in the schools, notably at Advanced Level, so much so indeed that a concern is sometimes raised that the school History curriculum is focused too much on Hitler and Stalin and not enough on the past of the United Kingdom. At universities there are lectures on virtually every period of European history, and virtually every part of the Continent.

Does this reflect a broad and long-established tradition of writing on European history, or is it a more recent development? If it is relatively recent, how, when and why has it emerged? What impact have British historians had in the countries they write about? Are British historians unusual in comparison to those based in other countries in writing about countries other than their own? Edward Acton, who teaches Russian History at the University of East Anglia, sees a variety

of traditions, focusing particularly on specific, cataclysmic events, such as the French and Russian Revolutions or the Third Reich. 'Strip them out', he says, '... and I suspect our attention would have been much weaker. Rather than seeing the tradition as reflective of central features of British society, culture and historical sense', he adds, 'I would tend to see it as always a minority pursuit, battling against the studied resistance to explicitly comparative history that so weakens Anglo-Saxon history.' Sir Ian Kershaw, whose two-volume biography of Hitler immediately established itself as the standard work when it was published in 1998–2000, agrees. He sees British historians focusing particularly on 'major episodes such as the European Reformation, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the two World Wars, the rise of Nazism, the Cold War, and so on'. But, in fact, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that this has not been the case in recent decades, when British writing on European history has covered a vast range of periods and subjects. True, there are peaks of interest in topics like the Third Reich, but one can find courses in British universities on medieval France, early modern Italy, eighteenth-century Germany and much more besides. The British interest in, and contribution to, European History is astonishingly broad.

Yet the same is not true in reverse. On the European Continent, historians of Britain, as of other foreign countries, have made little impact, apart from a handful of exceptions; there, historians research, write and teach mainly about the history of their own country. Christopher Duggan, Professor of Italian History at Reading University, thinks that 'the tradition of studying non-British countries does seem one

of the remarkable strengths of British historiography (very few Italian historians, to my knowledge, work on modern non-Italian history)'. British historians have few if any rivals elsewhere in chronicling and interpreting the history of the UK. They have achieved an absolute dominance of their field that is disturbed only by the contributions of some American specialists and one or two Frenchmen, such as Élie Halévy, author of a classic multi-volume survey of English history in the nineteenth century, or François Crouzet, an economic historian who wrote significant work on British industrialization, or François Bédarida, whose social history of modern England brought new questions and approaches to bear from his background in French historical writing. French historians such as these were particularly interested in Britain when it was at the apogee of its economic and international power. They are exceptions. As Robert Anderson, who teaches European History at Edinburgh and has published widely on modern French history, especially the history of education, says: 'There is no galaxy of French historians of Britain, as there is of British and American historians of France.'

One is perhaps more likely to find influential German and Italian historians of Britain located in British History Departments, such as Frank Trentmann at Birkbeck, or Eugenio Biagini at Cambridge, than in universities in their own country. They are few in number. As Boyd Hilton, whose books, culminating in *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People?* (2006, in the New Oxford History of England series), have transformed our understanding of politics, society and religion in England in the first half of the nineteenth century, remarks: 'With the towering exception of Halévy . . . no Continental historian has

had anything like as much impact on British history as (say) Raymond Carr, John Elliott, Richard Cobb, Jonathan Israel, [R. W.] Seton-Watson, Denis Mack Smith, Adrian Lyttelton, et al., et al., et al. . . . have made on the histories of their chosen countries.’ Only in the History of Thought is the situation different, but thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke are in effect universal figures whose writings attract scholars from many countries, just as do those of Niccolò Machiavelli, Immanuel Kant or Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

How can we account for this situation? Partly, thinks Leif Jerram, who teaches German History at Manchester University, this is because the study of History in a number of Continental countries is geared towards producing History teachers in the school system, whereas in the UK it has no specific purpose, but is treated as a general education that can provide a broad outlook on life and a set of transferable skills – in critical thinking, writing, debate and discussion, and much more – that will be useful in a huge variety of professions, from advertising to town planning, banking to journalism. For many decades – indeed, since the mid-Victorian era – Historical education at Oxford and Cambridge was geared, among other things, towards providing graduates who could go into the Foreign Office with knowledge of the history of other countries. ‘Clearly’, he concludes, ‘in Britain “the world out there” has expectations of historians that go far, far beyond the formation of the nation. In France, Spain, China, Italy, “the world out there” does *not* have these expectations.’

As Director of European Exchange Programmes in Manchester University’s History Department, Jerram was approached by the Universidad Autónoma of Barcelona to

see if students from each university could spend a period studying at the other. The Spanish – or more precisely, Catalan – university offered survey courses, above all, on the history of Catalonia, ‘highly descriptive, entirely sequential, seeing them as designed for the formation of the appropriate national citizen’. In Manchester, by contrast, the survey courses addressed a dizzying variety of topics – ‘A Gendered History of the United States’, ‘Late Imperial China’, ‘European Intellectual History’, ‘The Cultural History of War’, ‘The British Empire in the Americas’, ‘Diasporas and Migration in the Twentieth Century’, ‘The History of Commodities in Latin America’, ‘War and Politics in the Age of Richelieu and Mazarin’, ‘Gender and Sexuality in Modern Africa’, ‘Cultures of Death and Bereavement in Victorian Britain’ – ‘there was no comparison’, he concludes: ‘Anglophone societies seem to be fundamentally as interested in the pasts of other cultures as they are in their own.’

Julian Swann, who teaches at Birkbeck, University of London, and has published books on the institutional history of *ancien régime* France, concurs: ‘You can just about do a [History] degree in the UK without doing British history’, he says, but ‘the idea in France would be seen as absurd. Similarly, the French can’t get their heads round the idea that I teach French, Italian, even Russian history, but not British; they just don’t have the same possibilities.’ Institutional structures in British schools and universities that divide History initially into ‘British’ and ‘European’, Swann thinks, have up to now been a major reason why ‘we have turned out so many historians of Continental Europe’. It may seem faintly absurd to anyone who thinks that Britain is actually part of Europe,

but it has for many decades underwritten an international breadth of approach that is lacking from the teaching of History in many other countries.

This breadth of approach has meant that many students from Continental universities have found attractive the idea of studying the history of their own country, and history on a more general, international or comparative basis, at a British university. More than one generation of European students has now enjoyed close contact with British academic life and British intellectual culture through a whole variety of exchange agreements, such as 'Erasmus' and 'Socrates', both sponsored by the European Union. EU rules oblige students from other member states to be treated on the same basis as students from the UK when they study in a British university, a further incentive to undertake an exchange or even a longer-term stay. Patrick Major, who teaches European History at Reading and before that taught it at Warwick, reports: 'I have had endless waves of German visiting students wanting to study their own history here, always with the rationale that they wanted the Anglo-Saxon perspective.' Ignorance of the language in particular prevents a similar trade in the other direction.

The sharp boundary conventionally drawn in British education between Britain and Europe starts to dissolve once one gets back to the Middle Ages. Carl Watkins, Cambridge-based author of *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England*, published in 2007, notes that 'French, German and Italian historians have, if they deal with Britain, been more concerned to consider it in a European setting rather than as a distinct area of study.' This is perhaps understandable

for the Middle Ages, before the nation-state existed and when England was for long stretches of time part of a wider European political entity, whether Viking, or Norman, or Angevin, a feature of European geopolitics that only ended with the English defeat in the Hundred Years' War and was revived sporadically thereafter, most notably after the seizure of the English throne by the Dutch monarch William of Orange in 1688. Thinking about the contribution made to English medieval History by Germans, Watkins notes that German historians, notably Felix Liebermann, did, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, put their skills to work on producing numerous editions of English chronicles and legal texts, perhaps reflecting a widespread German view at the time that the English and Germans were part of a wider 'Anglo-Saxon' community (whether this was defined in racial terms or not was a moot point). Indeed, as another Cambridge medievalist, Rosamond McKitterick, author of a recent biography of Charlemagne, observes, many medievalists 'think that an exclusive attention to early medieval England, or even early medieval Britain, without embracing the Continent as well, is dangerously limited (as well as dull)'.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that very few non-British historians have made any notable contribution to the study of British history in the medieval period, and few, apart from Americans, to its study in the early modern and modern eras. Over the past decades, for example, the German government has invested a good deal of money and effort into the establishment of German Historical Institutes in foreign capitals such as Rome, Paris, London, Warsaw, Moscow or Washington. These act as centres of international historical