

## 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.

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COSMOPOLITAN  
ISLANDERS

*British Historians and the European Continent*

RICHARD J. EVANS



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*To my fellow-students*

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## 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



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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

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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

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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,

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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.

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‘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

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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.

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