How did psychoanalysis attain its prominent cultural position? How did it eclipse rival psychologies and psychotherapies, such that it became natural to bracket Freud with Copernicus and Darwin? Why did Freud ‘triumph’ to such a degree that we hardly remember his rivals? This book reconstructs the early controversies around psychoanalysis, and shows that rather than demonstrating its superiority, Freud and his followers rescripted history. This legend-making was not an incidental addition to psychoanalytic theory but formed its core. Letting the primary material speak for itself, this history demonstrates the extraordinary apparatus by which this would-be science of psychoanalysis installed itself in contemporary societies. Beyond psychoanalysis, it opens up the history of the constitution of the modern psychological sciences and psychotherapies, how they furnished the ideas which we have of ourselves, and how these became solidified into indisputable ‘facts’.

MIKKEL BORCH-JACOBSEN is Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Washington. He is the author of highly influential books on the theory and history of psychoanalysis, and co-author of the best-selling Le livre noir de la psychanalyse (The Black Book of Psychoanalysis).

SONU SHAMDASANI is Philomen Professor of Jung History at the Centre for the History of Psychological Disciplines at University College London, and is widely regarded as the leading Jung historian at work today. His numerous books have been translated into many languages, and his most recent edited work, C. G. Jung's The Red Book. Liber Novus (2009), was awarded the Heritage Award from the New York Book Show for the best book in the last twenty-five years.

Books by both authors have been recipients of the Gradiva Award from the National Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis.
The Freud Files: An Inquiry into the History of Psychoanalysis

Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen
and
Sonu Shamdasani
For Charlotte and Maggie
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Acknowledgements

This book began in 1993 as an inquiry into Freud historians and their work. We had become aware of the upheavals that had affected Freud studies since the 1970s, which were completely transforming how one understood psychoanalysis and its origins. Intrigued by the new histories of the Freudian movement, we decided to interview the key players to gather their testimonies in a collective volume. These interviews were transcribed and annotated (we reproduce a few excerpts in the following), but the volume itself remained unfinished, for in the meantime our investigation had changed. Quite quickly, it became apparent that it was not possible to situate ourselves with the neutrality and ironic detachment that we had initially adopted. The stakes were too high, and too much remained to be researched and verified before one could attempt to pass judgment on the endless controversies around psychoanalysis. Instead of describing them from the outside, we became drawn in, and here put forward our own contribution to the history of the Freudian movement.

This book is the product of this engagement, but also an attempt to regain, through historical reflection, some of the distance that we at first maintained towards our object of study. We wanted to study the history of the history of psychoanalysis and to understand better the basic issues of this fascinating and conflictual field – fascinating because of the conflict. We wanted, in the end, to draw consequences from historical criticism for the understanding of this strange movement. For any reckoning with the status of psychology, psychiatry and psychotherapy in today’s societies at some point requires coming to terms with Freud and his legacy.

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