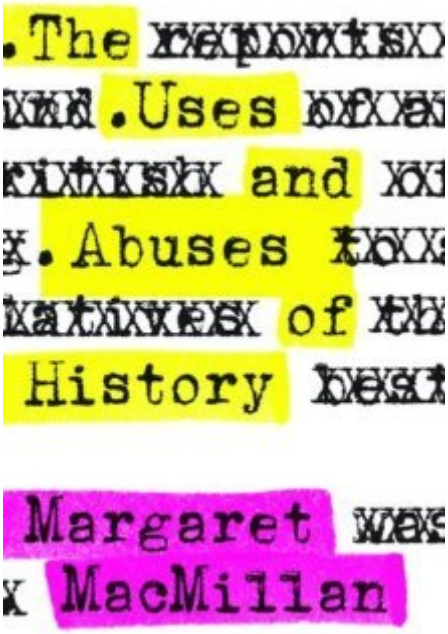

The Uses and Abuses of History

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History is useful when it is used properly: to understand why we and those we must deal with think and react in certain ways. It can offer examples to inform our decisions and guesses about the consequences of our actions. But we should be wary of looking to history for dogmatic lessons.We should distrust those who abuse history when they call on it to justify unreasonable claims to land, for example, or restitution. MacMillan illustrates how dangerous history can be in the hands of nationalistic or religious or ethnic leaders who use it to foster a sense of grievance and a desire for revenge.

The Uses and Abuses of History Details

Date	:	Published April 15th 2008 by Viking
ISBN	:	9780670066803
Author	:	Margaret MacMillan
Format	:	Hardcover 208 pages
Genre	:	History, Nonfiction, Politics, Historical, Cultural, Canada

From Reader Review The Uses and Abuses of History for online ebook

Nick Davies says

This is an interesting read, not without fault, but (despite the first half raising more queries from me as a reader than it offered answers) overall I found it more deserving of merit than deserving of criticism.

MacMillan aims to define the role of history, and seeking and publicising historical knowledge gained through research, and also to explore examples of the pitfalls of misuse of historical fact/opinion by leaders and followers alike. There are plenty of examples of so-called abuses of 'history' by politicians and people seeking to promote a point of view, there are also many well-made points which would hopefully challenge the misconceptions of many a reader. The second half of the book is especially good, as it deals more with the use of history to justify nationalism and conflict, and also touches on examples of controversies when history is presented to members of the public with the complication of modern eyes viewing history with a benefit of hindsight and a deficit of the context in which actions were taken.

However, I had fundamental issues with the book (esp. the first few chapters) relating to the nature of historical research. Perhaps because my background is in 'pure' sciences, I could not escape the uncertainty that the author was just relating a series of standpoints reached via historians seeking to come up with new interpretations on events from limited data and inherently flawed resources, as opposed to stating indisputable truths - a balance between 'fact' and 'interpretation' is a difficult one. By listing a large number of examples (sometimes in too little detail for my liking) where history has been misrepresented or misinterpreted by politicians, members of the public and even other historical researchers, I was left with a sense that the interpretation of history is inherently and unresolvedly flawed. Only given impossible access to all resources on an event, and with the benefit of hindsight only possible some time afterwards, could a historian (or, to avoid bias, a large consensus of historians) provide a 'true' history of that event. I was hence left with some of my questions doomed to remain unresolved.

Jim Coughenour says

Reading this book was like sipping a cup of tepid cocoa. I picked it up with high expectations – MacMillan is the much-heralded author of *Paris 1919* – and was almost immediately disappointed by a style crafted to offend and interest no one. In the spiky sub-genre of the "uses and abuses of history," this book is all soft round edges. Here's a typical sentence: "History has so often produced conflicts, but it can also help in bringing about reconciliations." (p. 136) I'm tempted to say that the book's most useful feature is its suggestions for "further reading." Perhaps *Dangerous Games* is best recommended as an exceptionally safe annotated bibliography.

By way of contrast, I'd offer a couple historians not mentioned in her book from either side of the political spectrum: John Lukacs and Robert Fisk. To read Lukacs on Hitler, Stalin or Churchill, or Fisk on the mendacity of Euro-American involvement in the Middle East is to be challenged and braced by authors who take history very seriously indeed. Fisk opens *The Age of the Warrior* with a blistering attack on historians who minimize or deny the Armenian genocide – a bit of ancient history that still burns like acid. Reading MacMillan you'd only have a dim idea that anything essential was at stake: "It is absolutely true that a dreadful thing was done to the Armenian subjects of the Ottoman Turks during World War I." Her facts are

correct; but her tone makes it sound as if murdering a half-million or more people is a regrettable lapse in manners. This sweet-tempered survey may convince us that history isn't bunk, but it sure is boring.

Emily says

Great book for just a quick overview on the public usage and misusage of history! I want to hit everyone in politics over the head with this book and make them read it so they will stop using history incorrectly to justify their disgusting decisions.

John David says

Whatever our relationship to history - whether we were forced to read it in school, if we voluntarily read it today, or if we honestly and considerately reconcile ourselves to its importance – we almost never try to understand the influence of historiography. After all, without graphon there would be no historia. MacMillan's book is mostly concerned with introducing the casual reader to what could roughly be construed as historiographical concerns: Who owns the past? How do we shape this past in ways that make ourselves more abiding or marginal parts of it? And perhaps most important, when we abuse it either purposefully or accidentally, who suffers and how?

Despite the relatively liberal (understood in the contemporary, American sense) tone of much of the commentary, she strikes a conservative one in suggesting that history has unfortunately found itself into the hands of amateurs, and also that history has been dethroned by academic mish-mash pursuits that go by names like "cultural studies" and "African studies," claiming that these are more specialized forms of victimhood than they are properly historical. MacMillan seems to be operating under the fallacy that if it weren't for the pernicious tentacles of rank neophytes, the precious reserve of History would remain, like a virgin, un-deflowered – which is wonderfully ironic given the subject in question here.

Even setting aside the relative merits or demerits of certain trends in social science, no one can honestly look at the body of history written by professional historians and claim that their work is free of abuse, extensive deployment of both genetic and naturalistic fallacies, self-serving conclusions, and other epiphenomena of sloppy thinking. The kind of formal, scholarly history that she favors in the book is very much studded with all of these. Being an academic and an historian herself, I suppose it is natural to want to defend your profession as one of the last ramparts against the barbarian hordes and the great unwashed masses of writers publishing for a popular audience.

The book more has a more substantial problem, though. I think for most serious readers of the subject – I can't imagine someone casually interested in history picking up a book with this title – the depth of the examples doesn't really provide any lasting or fruitful insights. In the chapter called "History and Identity," which explores the many ways in which we make sense of ourselves through the refraction of historical experience (or, to borrow her phrase, "enforcing an imagined community," a phrase she borrowed in turn from Benedict Anderson), MacMillan mentions: the legacy of lynching in the United States, the rise of the deaf rights movement, the nineteenth-century Italian nationalist Mazzini, Karl Marx, the history of Vimy Ridge (an important place-name in the creation of Canadian cultural identity), French-Canadian nationalism, events of Tiananmen Square – and more. Because of the jumpiness in subject matter, MacMillan never really

gets to explore anything but the patina of the problematic relationship between history and identity.

Had she chosen one of two of the above, she would have been able to fully flesh out an interesting and insightful argument. As it stands, there are no new ideas that are going to open the eyes of most readers. It could be, however, a very useful introduction into the world of how history is seen by theorists of the subject as not just a list of objective facts, events, and places, but rather a complex accretion disk of memory, wishful thinking, and that is ultimately the artistic reconstruction of minds who themselves are always inextricably caught within the nets of that history.

For a much more challenging take by a writer not at all afraid to bring to bear the more intimidating tools of literary and historiographical criticism to his arguments, I would recommend the recently decreased Hayden White, whose “Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe” is nothing short of canon-worthy, but very demanding. White’s books of essays “The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Interpretation,” “Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism” and “The Fiction of the Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957-2007” are usually just as difficult, but are delivered in more easily digested pieces. While some of these might take the reader a bit further afield than they’re accustomed, the richness and relevance of White’s conclusions are always thought-provoking and germane to any social science, not just history.

Anna Pearce says

“History is about remembering the past but it is also about what we choose to forget….Some of the most difficult and protracted wars in societies around the world have been over what is being omitted or downplayed in the telling of their history – and what should be kept in. When people talk, as they frequently do, about the need for “proper” history, what they really mean is the history they want and like. School textbooks, university courses, movies, books, war memorials, art galleries, and museums have all from time to time been caught up in debates that say as much or more about the present and its concerns as they do about ostensible subject of history.” (pg 127)

MacMillan uses a variety of examples to demonstrate how history has been used to support wars, land claims, and memorials, as well as argue against the same. She argues that this is, in part, caused by the influx of amateur historians, while professional historians argue that they shouldn’t be expected to write fascinating history because the public does not have similar expectations of scientists.

Generally, I agree with MacMillan. However, I found she used far too many examples – if one wasn’t convinced by the third, I suspect one will not be convinced by the fourth or fifth. As well, this work began as a series of lectures, and I think that accounts for repeated use and explanation of the same phrasing, such as mentioning more than once that Churchill had quipped that the Balkans had more history than they could swallow.

I do want to recommend this book because the variety of examples are far-reaching – not only American abuses of history, but Canadian, German, British, Chinese, Japanese, French, Turkish, Greek—it is a lengthy list. I suspect that everyone will read something they find offensive to have challenged (as I did). There is a lot of focus on war and how leaders have twisted history to support wars, especially in later chapters, so this may be of interest to people who are interested in anti-war activism.

On the other hand, I found the repetition irritating. I think Lies my Teacher Told Me makes the same

argument, but in a more engaging (and American-centric, as it is a critique of how American schools teach history) way. I felt that too many of the examples were about war, and the last chapter, “History as Guide and Friend,” focused entirely on war. I would have appreciated more examples to do with things like land claims, residential schools, and reparation payments.

Overall, I found this book interesting. I will keep it for later reference. But I do not suspect I will reread it in its entirety.

Eric_W says

This book is especially timely given the proposed changes to history textbooks by the Texas Commission on Education that would increase the visibility of Newt Gingrinch and Phyllis Schlafly at the expense of Thurgood Marshall. (This problem is not new. Frances Fitzgerald wrote a terrific book several years ago about the problem of textbooks in America Revised.)

Nations use history as a way to inspire nationalistic feeling. They do so by selectively inculcating "lessons" gleaned from the past to illustrate some political agenda. No one was better at this than George (I wanna be King) W Bush and Dick (I really am one) Cheney. Both often cited the experience of WW II as justification for their actions in Iraq. They confused the experience of *defeated* peoples, e.g. Germany and Japan whose societies were rebuilt from the bottom up whether they liked it or not (they could be "treated with arbitrary ruthlessness,") with that of *liberated* nations (Greece, Yugoslavia, Belgium and Italy which were allowed, with mixed success and often considerable violence and conflict, to rebuild their own societies the way they thought they wanted.) "George W. Bush liked to compare the challenge he faced from America's foes with that which Winston Churchill confronted seventy years ago. Vice President Dick Cheney once said that global terrorism represents the gravest threat Western civilization has ever faced. Such assertions exposed the awesome magnitude of both men's ignorance." But it's all nations who engage in such dis-ingenuousness. She cites examples from Israel, Hindus in India, China, Ireland, Britain, and even Canada.

Americans (see History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past) are not the only ones who suffer from an overdeveloped sense of righteousness when it comes to their actions in wartime. Apparently, a firestorm of protest broke out in Canada in 1992 following the CBC documentary *The Valour and the Horror* which discussed the effectiveness and morality of strategic bombing. Some 20,000 Canadian airmen had participated and about 50% died. Veterans organizations were outraged that the issue could be framed in anything other than "black and white, good and evil." MacMillan was asked to testify and said, "History should not be written to make the present generation feel good but to remind us that human affairs are complicated." "The idea that those who actually took part in great events or lived through particular times have a superior understanding to those who come later is a deeply held yet wrong-headed one," as Charles Pellegrino is learning to his chagrin. National myths are too cherished to be troubled by facts. I doubt if southerners will ever discontinue viewing the Civil War as anything other than the War of Northern Aggression.

China, Japan, Israel, Russia, all have whitewashed views of their more sordid actions. Macmillan describes Hindu disregard for Muslim contributions to Indian history. And we are all familiar with Mormon attempts to rewrite their forbearer's actions in a more favorable light. MacMillan rightly notes that those present at an event do not necessarily have an accurate view of what happened and the recent travails of author Charles Pelligrino who is being pilloried for relying too much on the fictitious memory of an airman who apparently

wasn't even where he said he was should make all of us a little wary of anecdotal accounts. (The Last Train from Hiroshima: The Survivors Look Back - see http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/05/mov...)

"Historians, however are not scientists, and if they do not make what they are doing intelligible to the public, then others will rush in to fill the void. Political and other leaders too often get away with misusing or abusing history for their own ends because the rest of us do not know enough to challenge them. " Susan Jacoby tells the story of visiting a bar in New York the evening of 9/11. One fellow says to another that the WTC attack was like Pearl Harbor. "What was Pearl Harbor?" the other asked. "It was when the Vietnamese dropped some bombs in a harbor and started the Vietnam War," was the reply. MacMillan argues that such woeful ignorance has much more serious repercussions than just a display of stupidity. The Bush administration was using an attack by a few idealists and fundamentalists to justify a war against a state and a continuing -- some might argue infinite --war against a tactic and idea.

Sometimes, institutional memory fails us and the example she cites was totally unfamiliar to me. In 1979, rumors circulated that the Soviets had begun stationing troops in Cuba. Tensions increased and people recalled the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Kennedy had secretly agreed not to invade Cuba if the missiles were withdrawn and now it appeared the Soviets were violently an agreement not to station troops there again. The intelligence services were asked to investigate and sure enough, there were Russkies in Cuba. What the intelligence services had forgotten was that Kennedy had backed down on his initial demand that the Soviets remove all Russian troops from the island. Tensions and rhetoric increased in volume and disaster was averted on by Dobrynin's shuttle diplomacy between the two countries assuring the Russians that it was an honest mistake and that the U.S. had simply forgotten the earlier agreement. Cyrus Vance wrote that the incident as "Appalling. Awareness of the Soviet ground force units had faded from the institutional memories of the intelligence agencies."

In another example of institutional myopia, T.X. Hames, a Marine colonel wrote a book analyzing counter-insurgency tactics learned from the Vietnam War, an episode the military preferred to leave forgotten. Unable to find a publisher, because no one was interested, his book The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century was finally released in 2004 when the United States was having to relearn the difficult lessons of insurgency in Iraq.

The last few decades have seen a rise in the need of nations to apologize for actions committed by governments during wartime that, in retrospect, appear to be unfeeling and/or discriminatory. Should we pay reparations to the ancestors of slaves or Native American tribes. Is it necessary to review decisions made in the context of the time? Japanese and Germans were interned or had property confiscated even they they might have been generations removed from their "homeland." Given that people at the time did not know that the Axis Powers would lose, was the paranoia justified? If we don't have accurate historical review, can we avoid making the same mistakes in the future?

For several of my comments I am indebted to an excellent review of Macmillan's fascinating book written by Max Hastings, ironically one of those "amateur" historians, in the March 11, 2010 New York Review of Books. (It's worth the $3 and can be read here http://www.nybooks.com/articles/artic...)

Lyn Elliott says

This excellent little book is drawn from a lecture series and has the liveliness and easy flow one would expect as a result. It is certainly not a work of high theory on the nature of history or the way history should

be written, rather a plea to be both wary of using it as a basis for territorial expansion, for instance, and to be aware of histories and cultures before we, for instance, embark rashly on invasion of another's territory. It is sensible, practical, uses many examples from the twentieth and twenty first centuries and should be compulsory reading for all politicians, army generals and government policy makers. Students too.

Meg - A Bookish Affair says

This book fell sort of flat for me. It's been said that 'history is written by the victors' and MacMillan, a noted historian, believes this is true (as do I). MacMillan's premise is that what we understand to be our history is really subjective. Yes, there are facts in history but there is always story and that is the part that becomes subjective. What facts are left in? What facts are left out? What's glossed over? What's emphasized? I think this is something that historians struggle with a lot.

I was expecting something a little more in depth. Each chapter is dedicated to a different way that history can be used. It's chock full of examples but with very little explanation of the implications of how the particular history told. I really wish that it would have gone more into more of how history is told differently depending on who is telling it. Recently there's been a couple news stories about school history books in various areas that have either included or un-included things based on the area that the books were for. It would have been interested to hear more about that.

This is a good overview but if you're looking for something with more explanation and food for thought

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Bill Kerwin says

This is an interesting collection of lectures that discuss the way in which the knowledge of history--or the lack of it--may affect our ways of acting in the present. I particularly liked McMillan's explanation of why eyewitnesses have no particular advantage--let alone a precedence--in historical interpretation, and her exploration of the importance of particular parochial versions of history in the forming of nations and the fomenting of nationalistic attitudes.

Each of her arguments is illuminated by interesting historical anecdotes. My favorite: how the Carter administration in 1979 became indignant over the placing of Soviet troops in Cuba, not realizing that these troops had never been withdrawn after the missile crisis in 1962 and had remained in Cuba all that time.

Riku Sayuj says

Humility is one of the most useful lessons that the past can provide the present.

As John Carey, the distinguished British man of letters, puts it, “One of history’s most useful tasks is to bring home to us how keenly, honestly and painfully, past generations pursued aims that now seem to us wrong or disgraceful.”

If the study of history does nothing more than teach us humility and scepticism, then it has done something useful. We must continue to examine our own assumptions and those of others and ask, where's the evidence? Or, is there another explanation? We should be wary of grand claims in history's name or those who claim to have uncovered the truth once and for all. In the end, my only advice is use it, enjoy it, but always handle history with care.

MacMillan does not try to do much, and what she attempts to do is done pretty monotonously. A decent evening read, for a book based on a lecture.

Nehal Singh says

The author drives the point home in a lot of the examples provided - history is used by those in power to control the narrative and as consequence, the masses. I would have loved to read a more in-depth perusal of a few case studies, as the book is more of a factual summary with some context. Too easy to skim, I re-read many pages so that I could digest the information - people, countries and dates thrown around in no actual chronological sense but rather by the themes of individual chapters, that focussed on the broad concepts behind the study of history itself. An important book that made me question my own biases, but would've loved to see it played out in more depth.

Henry Shih says

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???ON THE ONE HEAD – ON THE OTHER HAND?????????

Sesana says

Mislead by the cover copy. Reading the book jacket would lead you to believe that this will be a sort of history of who has misquoted and misused history, and how and to what purposes. There is a bit of that, a very little bit. But it's really more of a lengthy essay on the very general whys and hows of what makes people try to use history to their own ends. There are examples, sure, but not nearly as many as I had thought there would be. It's still very well-written, and interesting, and I thought the reasoning was pretty solid. Still, the book that I thought I was going to read would have been far more interesting.

Matt says

MacMillan writes what can best be called a soapbox on history and its common misconceptions, from her perspective as a 'professional' historian and academic. Some readers may label the book as the historian's manifesto against the ongoing bastardisation of the subject and how its abuse can (obviously) completely

change the future. MacMillan examines the various means by which history can be used as a tool and how those uses can, and commonly are, used to push a specific view. While the adage states that history is controlled by the victors, MacMillan makes mention that history can also be skewed by those in positions of power to shape a future based on a past that has never taken place. Some, like the Community Chinese, refuse to acknowledge any history other than that which they sanction. Others, like Bush 43, will pluck shattered pieces of history together to suit them and create an ill-fitting puzzle to support their antics. Throughout the tome, she examines some of the ways that history has caused battles between those who LIVED it and those who EXPLAINED it for others. Can neither be wrong, when they disagree? History, that seemingly neutral social science, can be as controversial as it is useful for the general public, though anyone who does not use an objective and analytical brain when reading it will fall down the rabbit hole and presume they are well-informed. Just as the NRA spits out their rubbish about the Second Amendment, there will be those who say that history does not shape people, people shape people. Alas, as MacMillan tries to posit throughout, history in the wrong hands will do much more harm than good, though a single voice in the wilderness cannot stop it all. A must-read for those who enjoy taking a step back and thinking from another perspective. A true MacMillan gem, not to be overlooked.

MacMillan is one of the key historians I have read in my adult life; her work quite varied, but always thorough. That she is Canadian and brings the Canadian flavour to this tome is simply an added bonus. As she does (where she can) often, MacMillan pulls from her previous publications to offer key examples. While I am nowhere near done her entire collection, it was nice to see this bridging, especially for a history buff such as myself. While she is not normally preachy, this book makes the case that preachy is needed, otherwise the premise is completely lost. In doing so, as a great academic will do, she supports her ideas with concrete examples and seeks to analyse them to ensure the reader clearly understands the concept. History is one of the most dangerous of the social sciences and should not be taken lightly. True, there is bias in her perspective, but also a great deal of experience that the reader should heed.

Kudos, Dr. MacMillan, for offering up this wonderful piece of work. It gives all those who read it a better understanding of the weapon history can be, and should be required reading for many before they pull it from their quiver.

Paul Bryant says

Well, 170 pages full of good examples of the fact that history is very FRAUGHT - you can't say a thing without someone being mortally offended. Just like most family get-togethers! MM says that "professional historians have largely been abandoning the field to amateurs" - that's a bold thing to say. Does she name these phonies? No. She says that the professionals have been dragged into inscrutable theorising, in the same way the semioticians and the post-modernists dragged English literature into the coded darkness of structuralism back in the swingin' 80s. "Historians long to sound like their peers in social sciences" - poor kids. (Cheer up Cinders, you shall go to the post-modernist ball!) So anyway because of this introspection some bad boys have run off with history and broken some windows with it, and picked locks with it, and frightened the horses in general. And they won't give it back. They stand there on the other side of the road and make sweeping generalisations and racist assumptions and they gather round them smaller boys and tell them nationalist myths.

As an example of this, consider the exhibit in Canada's national War Museum. There was a plaque describing the Allied carpet-bombing campaign of 1942 in which German cities and towns were targeted. The plaque said "The value and morality of the strategic bombing offensive against Germany remains

bitterly contested." This was translated by the Canadian press like this : "Hey, guys, especially you veterans, did you know that the War Museum is going round saying that the bombing campaign was immoral and ineffective?" So, Airforce veterans were rounded up for comment. They were mortally offended. Historians received emails which said "The veterans have done more for our country and way of life than you ever will. Since they were there, and you were not, it stands to reason they should have the final say as to whether this plaque is fair or not."
MM remarks plaintively :

The idea that those who actually took part in great events or lived through particular times have a superior understanding to those who come later is a deeply-held yet wrong-headed one.

Absolutely.
Every nation has its myths and dynamite won't dispel them. Britain believes its Empire benevolently bestowed the pacific values of democracy and enlightenment to the benighted areas of the globe, that the natives hosanna'd our arrival and wept at our departure. Americans believe their nation was conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. (It might be so dedicated now but I can't see that it was back then.) Israelis appear to believe that the Palestinians voluntarily fled to Jordan and Lebanon in 1948. It's unfair to mention these examples because everyone's at it. Who owns history? The newspapers, and the shoutier types of politicians, would be my guess. Certainly not the historians, who have this horrible tedious habit of pointing out that it was never as simple as what you thought, it was always much more complicated, compromised and disagreeable. They're never going to get thanked for that.
