

AlbertMohler.com

Ex Libris — An Intelligent Person's Guide to History

Thursday, September 20, 2007

John Vincent takes no prisoners when it comes to battles over history. Professor of History at the University of Bristol, Vincent is also a former fellow of Peterhouse at Cambridge University. He is certainly no stranger to controversy, and he recognizes that the integrity of history as an academic discipline is endangered by the postmodern worldview.

In *An Intelligent Person's Guide to History* [Duckworth Overlook], Vincent argues that history “is about evidence.” As he explains, “It is also about other things: hunches, imagination, interpretation, guesswork. First and foremost, though, comes evidence: no evidence, no history.”

This is where Vincent begins his argument — and it is an *argument*. In fact, his book is a defense of history as an intellectual discipline.

In these postmodern days, history is a particularly contentious enterprise. The tendency of many academics is to attempt to reconstruct (or deconstruct) history in order to find the marginalized stories. In other words, they believe that what is most often called “history” is the story demanded by the powerful.

Vincent does not deny that history is most often about the powerful — he just reminds us all that it is the powerful who, more often than not, leave abundant evidence for historians.

Historians need documents and other forms of evidence. For this reason, history favors those who write and produce a body of material for later historians to utilize. The powerful leave more evidence than the less powerful. Males have left far more evidence than females. “History,” Vincent observes, “is incorrigibly male.”

He suggests that this might not be the case in the future, but it is the case now. This also does not mean that women matter less than men. It might mean, he offers, “that women have better things to do than live their lives on paper.”

□ Likewise, young people are not often the major focus of historical research. Those who die young, leaving little evidence to survive them, are not often featured as historical subjects. Similarly, the affairs of the young (romance in particular) are, he argues, more appropriate as a subject for literature, not history. “History picks up where literature leaves off,” Vincent explains, “and that means with the relatively old.”

Professor Vincent also offers chapters on history and the imagination and history and morality. Added to this are his concerns about the status of history as an intellectual enterprise in both England and the United States. He writes with wit and clarity, and he exposes weak patterns of thought that apply far beyond the discipline of history.

An Intelligent Person's Guide to History reveals why Professor Vincent is such a controversial academic figure in Great Britain — and why he has so many devoted students and admirers.

An excerpt:

History is deeply male. History is essentially non-young. History is about the rich and famous, not the poor. History

favours the articulate, not the silent. History is about winners (including those losers who were eventual winners), not about losers. History is about assessing distortions, not copying out truths. History has to live with, is indeed the child of censorship: the censorship by one culture of its predecessor, the censorship by a great modern bureaucracy of its own overproduction of records, the censorship of astute reticence by those aware that the eye of posterity will watch them. History has much to say about the way the powerful handle power, for power engenders records. History is almost silent (so far) on psychology, but copious on sociology in the sense of social structure (less so, perhaps, on sociology as values). History is hopeless on love, but excellent on hatreds. Such a state of things may not please all, but then it was never meant to please. One-sidedness lies at the heart of historical knowledge.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.