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**Historians No Longer Own History**

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In 1994 the social historian Raphael Samuel gave television ‘pride of place’ amongst the manifold ‘unofficial sources of historical knowledge’ which historians should attend to in order to conceive of history as a social entity. He argued that in order to understand history as a form of knowledge rooted in the social, scholars had to look at the mainly populist and unusual ways that historical knowledge was constructed, transmitted and perpetuated. Non-academic or non-professional history – what has been defined as ‘public’ history – is a complex, dynamic entity which impacts on the popular understanding of the past at all levels.

Since Samuel wrote those words, a flourishing market for cultural histories, celebrity historians, historical novels, films, TV drama, documentaries, and a number of cultural events from the launching of the History Channel to the David Irving trial have pushed ‘History’ into the mainstream of Anglo-American popular culture in a number of new guises.

The popular historical genres are hugely popular, with an unusually wide profile, range and reach. History has been described variously as the new rock’n’roll, the new gardening or the new cookery. ‘History’ has an unprecedented popularity. The past seems incredibly interesting to us. We are a society fascinated, continually reading, rereading, plotting and conspiring different versions and different timelines.

Our obsession with our past has evolved into a complex phenomenon, with a host of new documentaries, presenters, and concepts. History has bred with TV to give us Reality History. We watch ordinary men undergo the rigours of The Trench or vote for which piece of our national architecture we wish to save in Restoration. Regency House Party introduced historical social information through a combination of Survivor and Big Brother techniques, emphasising the similarity between life then and now through reality reconstruction. The interactive quality of these programmes suggests a move toward popularising the experience and understanding of our national past.

History is living as re-enactment societies report record recruitment, Internet sites bring fans of obscure decades together, and national monuments employ even more actors to introduce an interactive performance of History. Never before have there been so many historical novels, imaginary biographies or heritage thrillers in the bestseller lists. Commercials using historical footage create and perpetuate brands in the popular imagination and are direct ways in which history is experienced as something to be consumed. Even pornography, which still makes up the most substantial share of Internet traffic, is not exempt from the prevalence of the past – there is a large audience for historic erotica and nostalgia pornography.

History has become one of a number of lifestyle leisure activity choices. Museums emphasise the importance of interactive presentation, encouraging empathy and a view of the past as a complex social matrix. There is a huge demand for local history and popular historical books. Genealogy is the obsession of hundreds of thousands across the world. The opening of online databases and web 2.0 has led to the advent of Digital History. Samuel’s ‘pride of place’ for television is being fast challenged with the advent of digital TV, streaming media and specialised niche programming. From the BBC History magazine ‘bringing history to life’, from Simon Schama to David Starkey to Tony Soprano’s championing of the History Channel, television and media versioning of the past is increasingly influential in a packaging of historical fact and a creation of history as leisure activity.

What can often be seen in this upsurge in historical interest is an enfranchising of the population and an emphasis on being involved in history, be it gendered, national, social or cultural. The public are interested in this history because of its human interest. They like the way it explains the experience of their ancestors and the way we can use the past to carry out social experiments.

But professional historians are often not prepared to get involved in this type of history. Historians still attempt to own history – but if they want to be able to trust popular history then they must engage with it. Audiences can pick and choose their historians, their history channels, their historical styles, and are sophisticated and enfranchised enough to do so. People get their history through the popular media more than from academic discourse – and it’s about time we all woke up to that.

My book *Consuming History* is many things – a polemic, a methodological review, a social investigation, an analysis of contemporary culture, a narrative of change and complexity – but most of all it is a wide-ranging and questioning delve into the strange ways that our past is packaged and presented to us. How a society consumes its history is crucial to the understanding of contemporary popular culture, the issues at stake in representation itself, and the various means of self- or social- construction available. Popular and public history inflects our understanding of national, social, cultural, sexual and economic identity. In particular what I think we need to do is to celebrate and attend to the diversity and variety of contemporary history.