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The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past

By Keith Windschuttle



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A huge success in hardcover, *The Killing of History* argues that history today is in the clutches of literary and social theorists who have little respect for or training in the discipline. He believes that they deny the existence of truth and substitute radically chic theorizing for real knowledge about the past. The result is revolutionary and unprecedented: contemporary historians are increasingly obscuring the facts on which truth about the past is built. In *The Killing of History*, Windschuttle offers a devastating expose of these developments. This fascinating narrative leads us into a series of case histories that demonstrate how radical theory has attempted to replace the learning of traditional history with its own political agenda.



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Australian scholar Keith Windschuttle is one of the fieriest participants in the debate about the practice of history. In *The Killing of History* he decries the growth of so-called cultural studies in place of the old-fashioned facts-and-chronologies approach. Windschuttle's passion sometimes carries him a bit too far, but he lands many solid punches, such as when he takes on the heavily published French scholar Michel de Certeau, who has called writing a tool of the power elite. "For someone who thinks writing is a form of oppression," Windschuttle twits, "he has done a lot of writing." Elsewhere Windschuttle attacks efforts to explain away such matters as human sacrifice among the Aztecs, saying that to accept such behavior is akin to "accepting the cultures of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia as equal but different."

From Library Journal

Australian author and lecturer in history, social science, and media, Windschuttle presents an articulate, acerbic, sustained but balanced attack on postmodernist theory and its influence on the practice of history. After a survey of the major tenets of postmodern theory with its radical relativism, the author examines a series of case studies where the practice has been applied, such as Cortes's conquest of Mexico, movie versions of Mutiny on the Bounty, and the Hawaiian system of signs in the interpretation of Captain Cook's existence. He also includes a long chapter on Foucault. Showing the inconsistencies, errors, contradictions, and illogic that resulted from the postmodernist approach, he ultimately argues that the relativism and rejection of empirical research by such theorists produces a tribalism that disarms the marginalized groups it proposes to liberate. While oriented toward Australian intellectual circles, this book is readily accessible and deserves a wide audience. —Thomas L. Cooksey, Armstrong State Coll., Savannah, Ga.
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From Kirkus Reviews

A historian's counterattack against fashionably radical Theory, which originated in comparative literature and cultural studies departments and invaded the study of history. After lecturing in history and sociology at several Australian colleges and universities, Windschuttle has found that old-fashioned empiricism, objectivity, and humanism don't mix with new-fangled structuralism and postmodernism, or with European philosophy, e.g., works by Nietzsche, Heidegger, L. vi-Strauss, Foucault, and Derrida. With an eye to Alan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* (and Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals*), he has put together his own screed against the "new" history, which denies the possibility of historical truth, from New Historicism and Postcolonialism to semiotics and hermeneutics, with some examples of misinterpretations of Australian history, Columbus, Cortes, and captains Bligh and Cook. An avowed empiricist, Windschuttle passionately and methodically defends history as a true science rather than a branch of literary criticism or revolutionary sociology. But his writing is not as accessible or pointed as he might hope. His common-sense arguments against cultural relativism and radical skepticism frequently grade into the commonplace, the stuff of college seminar debates over Karl Popper's principle of falsifiability vs. Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shift. *The Killing of History* is best when debating the facts of history rather than theoretical differences. Citing works by fellow ordinary historians like Ganath Obeyesekere on Hawaii and Inga Clendinnen on the Aztecs, Windschuttle glosses over how Tzvetan Todorov misreads Montezuma's mindset, how Paul Carter mangles Australian history, and how Marshall Sahlins turns Captain Cook's death in Hawaii into a structuralist fantasy of ceremonial sacrifices. An academic jeremiad against theory over practice, out to separate history as written by Gibbon or E.P. Thomson from historiography repackaged by littérateurs. -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

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From reader reviews:

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