

Discussion Document

These extracts from both Elton and Carr ought to illustrate their essential argument and disagreements, with Elton focusing on the rational, scientific and objective approach to history as a discipline and Carr who at least accepts (if not values) subjective approaches to evidence.

The study of history is an intellectual pursuit, an activity of the reasoning mind, and, as one should expect, its main service lies in its essence. Like all sciences, history, to be worthy to itself and beyond itself, must concentrate on one thing: the search for truth. Its real value as a social activity lies in the training it provides, the standards it sets, in this singularly human concern. Reason distinguishes man from the rest of creation, and the study of history justifies itself in so far as it assists reason to work and improve itself. Like all rational activities, the study of history, regarded as an autonomous enterprise, contributes to the improvement of man, and it does so by seeking the truth within the confines of its particular province, which happens to be the rational reconstruction of the past. . . . The quality of an historian's work must . . . be judged purely by intellectual standards; the same is true of his contribution to society. . . . It is not the problems they study or the lessons they teach that distinguish the historical sheep from the goats, but only the manner of their study, the precision of their minds, and the degree to which they approximate to the ultimate standards of intellectual honesty and intellectual penetration. *Omnia Veritas* [Truth Conquers All].

Geoffrey Elton (1967) *The Practice of History*, Oxford, Blackwell, pp. 49–50.

Let us take a look at the process by which a mere fact about the past is transformed into a fact of history. At Stalybridge Wakes in 1850, a vendor of ginger-bread, as the result of some petty dispute, was deliberately kicked to death by an angry mob. Is this a fact of history? A year ago I should have said 'no'. It was recorded by an eye-witness in some little known memoirs; but I had never seen it judged worthy mention by any historian. A year ago Dr. Kitson Clark [the historian George Kitson Clark, 1900–1975] cited it in his Ford lectures in Oxford. Does this make it into a historical fact? Not, I think, yet. Its present status, I suggest, is that it has been proposed for membership of the select club of historical facts. It now awaits a seconder and sponsors. It may be that in the course of the next few years we shall see this fact appearing first in footnotes, then in the text, of articles and books about nineteenth century England, and that in twenty or thirty years' time it may well be

established historical fact. Alternatively, nobody may take it up, in which case it will release into a limbo of unhistorical facts about the past from which Dr. Kitson Clark has gallantly attempted to rescue it.

E. H. Carr (1961), *What is History?*, London, Penguin, pp. 6–7.