Response to Baldwin

RICHARD J. EVANS

My book *Cosmopolitan Islanders* derives from the Inaugural Lecture I delivered in 2008 as Regius Professor of Modern History in Cambridge. The brief of such a lecture is a tricky one – you have to say something about yourself, something about your field, and something about the discipline of History, and you have to appeal both to colleagues and to the wider world. In addition, in both Oxford and Cambridge, the only two universities with Regius Chairs of History, there have been many famous Inaugurals, by historians as varied as J. B. Bury, Hugh Trevor-Roper and, most famous of all, Lord Acton. In some universities, where professors are all-powerful, the Inaugural has served as a means of laying down the law about how the subject should be taught and researched. But in recent times this has been rare, and it has never really been true in Oxford or Cambridge; the one time that an Oxford Regius, the seventeenth-century specialist Sir Charles Firth, tried this, he ran into a huge amount of trouble and was more or less ostracised in the Faculty for the rest of his career.

So what I tried to do in *Cosmopolitan Islanders* was to point to an interesting and barely noticed fact: namely, that while many British historians write about the history of European countries, are translated into the languages of those countries, sell very well there, and have a notable impact on the national historiography, the same is not true in reverse, except in very rare cases. On the face of it, it seems rather odd that historians should work on countries other than their own. So I decided to investigate where this strange habit had come from in the British case, and whether it was long-established or recent. In order to do this, I traced the history of British historians' preoccupation with the European Continent since the eighteenth century. It quickly became apparent that this had been very much a minority pursuit, engaged in for very parochial British reasons, until after the end of the Second World War. At this point, the combined influences of historians in Britain who had been exiled from the Continent in the 1930s, and British historians who had become interested in Continental history through their engagement with Italy, France, Germany or some other European country during the war, impacted on a new generation – my own

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– who came to maturity just as the British university system was undergoing a huge expansion in the 1960s and early 1970s and offering a large number of jobs to aspiring young historians. Thus British historians' interest in the history of Europe, learning the language, living and researching in the country of interest, and engaging with its national historiography, is of relatively recent origin.

The second central element in my investigation was an email questionnaire I sent to all the British historians I could think of who worked mainly or exclusively on the history of the European Continent. I received seventy or so sometimes very lengthy and detailed communications from these colleagues in response to my questions: why did they choose the Continent and not Britain, how did they learn the necessary language or languages (given the fact that command of a foreign language is now unusual among Britons), how was their work regarded in the country they researched on, and how did they see the future of British research into Continental European history? The answers they gave mentioned a variety of reasons for their engagement, but also pointed to the very positive reception their work had received from native historians, even in the case of the French, though this was only a very recent development in their case. At the same time, their own work presented a mixture of engagement and distance, and it was precisely the latter, along with the British literary tradition of writing history, so different from the social-science models predominant on the Continent, that made their work, when it was translated, so influential in France, Spain, Germany and other European countries. Hence the title of the lecture and the book: *Cosmopolitan Islanders*, signifying the fact that while British historians were in some senses cosmopolitan, their cosmopolitanism was very much from the perspective across the English Channel and the North Sea. The fact that 'British' and 'European' history are taught as entirely separate subjects in schools and universities in the UK is a significant pointer to this fact.

These two arguments, based on the questionnaire and on the biographies and works of British historians writing on France, Germany and other European countries since the eighteenth century, formed both the bulk of the book and the core of its argument. In order to round them out, I engaged in a small-scale exercise in historical statistics to try and see if there was a quantitative dimension to my principal arguments. This was only meant, as I pointed out, to be illustrative, and the figures themselves were very 'rough and ready'; there are many uncertainties and the sample is very small. The argument of the book in no way depends on this statistical exercise. Nor was the book intended to be definitive – rather, as an essay based on a lecture, its purpose was to arouse debate. By and large, it has signally failed to do this: it received only a handful of reviews, and it has not sold more than a couple of thousand copies. So Peter Baldwin's lengthy and detailed consideration of the book is very welcome.

Unfortunately, however, though it presents a range of interesting new points, Baldwin's essay directs its critique against arguments I did not put forward, and seriously distorts the nature and thrust of what the book was trying to say. Baldwin reverses the balance and thrust of my evidence when he treats the brief statistical survey in the opening chapter, a survey which occupies fewer than nine pages out of a total of 234 in the book, as the core of the argument. In introducing the

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figures, I say explicitly that they are 'unsystematic' and intended to 'buttress' the impressions conveyed by historians of the varying interests of their colleagues in different countries. The book is not 'padded' (as Baldwin put it, rather rudely I thought) with 'excerpts from colleagues' emails' and 'summaries of modern British historiography'; the emails, responses to my questionnaire and the only way of getting at the views and experiences of British historians, are the most important part of the book, while the earlier chapters present not an account of modern British historiography (there is none in the book) but an investigation into how and why a small number of British historians became interested in Continental history in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and how they approached and understood it: again, this is central to the book's main arguments as I have summarised them above. The book does not stand or fall by the statistics; they are its least important aspect.

What of the statistics themselves? I can only agree with Baldwin when he says that counting is tricky and that my figures do not prove my case – but then, they were never meant to. Providing really robust figures would need a huge research exercise involving a team of researchers and months of work and at the end there would most probably still be many imponderables. However, a few points might be made in defence of my figures. Looking at history faculties alone can be (and has been) questioned: many historians on the Continent work in language faculties or medical or legal schools. But the same is true in the UK: I worked for thirteen years in a modern languages department, along with a dozen or so other historians of France, Italy, Spain, Russia and Scandinavia. And it is extremely unlikely that medical and legal schools on the Continent are full of historians working on other countries. There are research institutes in the UK too, as well as freelance historians not attached to universities who nonetheless produce very good work. Institutions such as the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and, over the years, various research centres funded by the Wellcome Trust, contain a good number of historians of medicine. And as for including historians who are either research assistants or postgraduates, it is unlikely that the distribution of their interests differs markedly from that of permanently employed faculty members. So most probably these factors cancel each other out. And in any case, it seems to me perfectly legitimate to concentrate on mainstream university teaching and research departments when doing the counting. Other points could be made. For example, it is true that all American medievalists have to be cosmopolitans. But there are very few of them. History in American is overwhelmingly of the early modern and modern eras. Readers should look at my statistics themselves and reach their own conclusions.

Baldwin's own statistics are too vague and ill-defined to be worth paying much attention to: most of his points rest on assertions for which he presents no detailed evidence. He does not distinguish between the foreign countries historians work on, though there is a crucial distinction to be made, for example, between interest in countries formerly part of the British or French empire, and countries that were not (the difference accounts for the relatively low interest in foreign countries shown

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by historians of those nations which, like Germany, never had much of an overseas empire). His Austrian figures are quite possibly distorted by the number of historians working on the countries that once formed part of the Habsburg Monarchy (it is impossible to tell, since he does not provide any evidence). Nor do I see the point of his imaginary statistical exercise based on the notion that the 'Anglosphere' has ten times more historians than any one nation on the European Continent, when this manifestly is not the case. My premise was that if so many British historians work on so many different countries, then historians in a country such as Germany might be expected to do the same. But they do not. In the end, too, Baldwin accepts my statistics when it suits him to do so, as in his discussion of which countries are most popular among British and American historians.

Baldwin points to a factor I did not consider when he suggests that 'small old countries, saddled with languages no one speaks, must write their own history since no one else will'. But this assumes that British or American historians only study the countries whose languages they already speak, such as French or Italian, whereas the responses to my questionnaire showed clearly enough that a very large proportion of British historians learned the language only when they had made the decision to study the country where it was spoken (as I did, with German, which I learned at the age of twenty-two). And it is easy enough to name British historians who work on such countries and have had an impact on their historiography: Denis Deletant on Romania, for example, C. A. Macartney on Hungary, Michael Roberts on Sweden, Peter Sawyer (and many more) on Viking-age Denmark, David Kirby on Finland, and so on. Where, however, are the Finnish or Swedish historians who have produced noteworthy work on British history?

Baldwin and I are not in fundamental disagreement on this particular point, perhaps, and he concedes that the major reasons I put forward for the British interest in Continental history in recent decades have some validity. After suggesting that the level of national investment in universities is a more fundamental cause, he withdraws this in the next paragraph by pointing out that there is no correlation between this factor and the provinciality or otherwise of national historiographies. More basic, he suggests, is the role of English as the world's lingua franca. More and more non-Anglophone historians, like scientists all over the world, are publishing in English as well as or even rather than in their native language. This literature joins the books and journals published in Britain and the USA in university libraries across the Continent. This is a very recent development, but Baldwin is undoubtedly right in pointing out that it is happening.

So, he suggests, students in, say, Copenhagen or Groningen or Uppsala are now set reading lists by their professors consisting mostly of work in English. Baldwin is able to cite only one course where this is, he claims, the case – a comparative, transnational course at Copenhagen University on the body and medicine. One doubts whether the same would be true of courses at the same university on Danish history, a topic which, he has just told us, occupies the lion's share of Danish historians' attention and thus also presumably makes up the bulk of their teaching. As Baldwin says, students in Continental countries approach the history of other countries through English.

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But that is because there is so little written on it in their own native language. When he points out that Swedish undergraduates are more likely to study German history by reading books written by British or American historians in English than they are by reading books written by German historians in German (very little of whose work has been translated into English) he is reinforcing my basic arguments.

But while this is a significant factor, it is also a very new one, and it does nothing to explain how or why Anglophone historians have been writing so copiously and so successfully about the history of other countries for nearly half a century now, while the same on the whole has not been the case with German or Italian historians. The demand Baldwin identifies simply was not there fifty years ago. Moreover, students in small countries are under far more pressure to learn English than their counterparts in, say, France, Germany or Italy. A large number of my respondents who work on German history, for example, underlined the fact that to have an influence on academic debate and research in Germany it is essential for your work to be translated into German, or to network with native German historians, in German, to get your arguments conveyed. Moreover, in Germany, most students will still fight shy of reading Kershaw or Overy or Clark in English, and that is one among many reasons why such work is so often translated into German. The same applies elsewhere. English still has a long way to go before it becomes the principal means of communicating historical research in countries outside the Anglosphere.

Baldwin suggests my dichotomy of cosmopolitan British and insular Continentals is too simple; but it is simple only in the distorted way he presents it. As several of my respondents pointed out, the fact that so many British historians are translated into other languages while the same is not true in reverse points to a degree of cosmopolitan openness on the part of the Germans or the Italians and a high level of insular resistance to Continental historians in the UK publishing industry and reading public. We both agree that the French are less open in this respect, though those of my respondents who worked on France detected recent signs of a change in this respect that Baldwin seems not to have noticed.

At the same time, however, cosmopolitanism in the *reception* of the work of historians *from* other countries is not the same as cosmopolitanism in the *writing* of historical works *about* other countries. Nowhere do I suggest that this somehow means other countries are less cosmopolitan than Britain. Translations really do demonstrate receptivity, and I never suggested otherwise. Baldwin's accusation that I did is pure invention. To be sure, it is undeniably true that English-language novels are more translated into other languages than the other way round, and that multi-disciplinary subject areas such as American Studies are flourishing on the Continent. But my concern is not with literature but with history.

And it is simply absurd to suggest that Continental historians are more cosmopolitan because 'it is they who engage with their colleagues abroad by writing in the lingua franca' [i.e., English]. For one thing, very few of them do – the few individual examples Baldwin cites only go to show that there are exceptions to this rule; for another, virtually all British historians who responded to my questionnaire made it clear that they themselves wrote articles and gave lectures in the language

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of the country they studied, otherwise they would not have much influence there; when I go to Germany, of course I lecture in German, just as Norman Davies lectures in Polish in Poland, or Lucy Riall in Italian in Italy.

Writing a whole book in another language is a different proposition, however, and here translation by a professional is the norm. Why then are so many British historians translated into other languages? In my book I argued among other things that there is a tradition in Britain and the USA of scholarly history written in a literary mode, combining readability with learning. Continental historiographies, written in a social-science mode, lack this ability to write academic history with a broad appeal. I pointed out that this may be among other things a consequence of the fact that all publishers in the UK and USA, including university presses, are commercial operations that have to make a profit, whereas it is normal in Continental countries to obtain a subsidy to publish. Dissertations have to be published in Germany, for example, whereas only the most important and the most readable are published in Britain. Thus a huge gulf has opened up in Continental countries between the academic and the popular.

Baldwin clearly belongs in the category of historians who think that this gap is a good thing. His own books are resolutely academic and have no appeal outside the profession. So he thinks that books that do reach out to a wider readership are 'popular' and achieve their success by dumbing down, by including anecdotes, 'spicing up' their prose and 'broadening their appeal'. In fact, of course, those of us who write in this mode do not 'spice up' our prose: Baldwin himself cites a German online magazine review describing my own prose style as 'matter-of-fact, yet gripping and popular'. You can reach out to a wide readership without having to turn your prose purple. As for anecdotes, in my own work, even at its most academic, I have always thought it necessary to bring home the meaning of large historical developments for ordinary people by telling stories about how they impacted on their lives.

Baldwin doubts whether the fact that some historians write for a broader readership is 'beneficial for the discipline'. One could answer this by asking whether it is beneficial for the discipline for historians only to write for each other, or to eschew the communication of academic research to the general public as a form of vulgarity. Historians surely should not leave the public at the mercy of journalists and television presenters when it comes to topics such as Nazi Germany or the French Revolution. There is no necessary contradiction between the 'popular' and the 'scholarly', and the fact that books such as Christopher Clark's *Iron Kingdom* or my own trilogy on Nazi Germany are very widely used in university history courses is testimony to the fact that it is popular to combine the two. For Baldwin to accuse my books of being unscholarly is simply outrageous, and if I thought his opinion on the matter was of any consequence, I would ask him to withdraw this unwarranted slur. As for royalty income, most of us do not have vast private means at our disposal and the relatively modest income we get from royalties on books – very little in comparison to the income scientists can derive from patents – is entirely legitimate at a time when university salaries in the UK have fallen by nearly 50% in comparison to average salaries over the years I have been in the profession.

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Baldwin accepts my point that local political issues are often involved in the decision of whether or not to translate a British historian's work, and that British historians are often seen, rightly or (more probably) wrongly as being more objective and more above the fray than native historians are. I never claimed, however, that their influence was wholly benign. Baldwin cites the example of David Irving, but it is simply wrong to claim that the work of this writer who has been convicted in Germany of Holocaust denial is popular in German translation. It is not. To cite the *number* of an author's books translated into German and available on a website that refuses to release sales figures is meaningless. Amazon, in any country, in fact only accounts for a relatively small proportion of book sales (around 15% in the UK); indeed, it sells more e-books than hard copies, where these are made available by publishers. Most sales in Germany of Ian Kershaw's *Hitler* are made through bookshops, where those of Irving are not available. In addition, Irving's books are not used in university teaching, while Kershaw's books are standard fare.

But of course Baldwin is right to point to the fact that some historians sometimes get translated because a certain body of opinion in the country they study likes what they are saying: this certainly holds true for Norman Davies, though Anglophone historians who question the Armenian genocide, such as Norman Stone or Sean McMeekin, have done so only *after* they found employment in Turkey, and where they work has little relevance in practice to whether or not their books are translated. And there are many books that have been too uncomfortable for translation, at least for many years. Some do get translated and have an impact. Baldwin cites Gunnar Myrdal's study of race relations in the USA as an example of the impact of a translated European-language book on America that has been influential. But of course Myrdal was a sociologist not a historian, and he was writing about the present, not the past. Baldwin cannot cite any historians whose work on America has been translated into English and had a notable influence on Americans' perceptions of their past, not surprisingly, for there are none.

Baldwin accuses British historians of smugness in studying Continental history because it has been more disastrous than British history. Thus events such as Stalin's terror, the French Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, or the Holocaust, may well have attracted more British historians than any others because these are catastrophes that Britain managed to avoid. But it is simply not true, as anyone who reads *Cosmopolitan Islanders* carefully will note, that British historians have focused almost exclusively on 'the French Revolution and the two world wars'. Their interest ranges far more widely and also much further back in time. There is a serious interest in, and influential writings by British historians on what one might call positive aspects of Continental history, such as the Italian *Risorgimento*, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and much more besides. Clark's *Iron Kingdom* was successful in Germany, as Baldwin notes, precisely because it got away from the modern *German* view of Prussia and its history as leading inevitably to the catastrophe of the Third Reich and presented a more balanced assessment. It is precisely the perception of British historians as more balanced, less teleological, that is one of the key factors in ensuring the success of so much of their work on the Continent.

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If you go back far enough in British history, there are plenty of catastrophic events, ranging from the Black Death through the Civil Wars of the seventeenth century to the Highland Clearances, and plenty of atrocities, though these were mostly visited by the British on the inhabitants of other parts of the world, from Ireland to India. These too have found their historians, in considerable numbers. It is true that in the nineteenth century, as I show in *Cosmopolitan Islanders*, British historians wrote about France because they wanted to celebrate the fact that Britain had avoided an event such as the French Revolution, or needed to do so in future, about Italy because they wanted the Italians to become more like the British, and so on. But this is not true of historians writing after 1945. Events such as the Russian Revolution or the Nazi seizure of power are studied in countries outside Russia or Germany not because historians want to congratulate themselves on the fact that their own countries did not experience anything like these events – there is not the slightest evidence in any of their writings (unlike those of their nineteenth-century predecessors) to support this bizarre claim – but because these events raise universal questions of historical causation and action, political belief and moral judgement.

Once more, Baldwin claims that I make a simple black-and-white distinction between British cosmopolitanism and Continental provincialism, whereas one of the main points of the book is to explore the cross-currents and entanglements that exist between the historical profession in different countries. Thus the book discusses at some length the way in which, for example, British historians of Germany such as Ian Kershaw have been strongly influenced by developments in theory and method in Germany itself, notably in his case the social history approach developed by Mommsen and Broszat in the 1970s. One of the lessons one quickly learns in studying the history of another country is not 'there but for the grace of God go I' but the fragility of all democratic institutions and the universality of the possibility of catastrophe. The entire point of my own generation's work on German history was to undermine the crude stereotypes of the 'German character' purveyed by our elders, even by so subtle a historian as Hugh Trevor-Roper, and to put in their place a set of more general variables that were present in British history as well but panned out, because of specific historical circumstances, in a different way in Germany.

There was nothing teleological in the work I did many years ago on the feminist movement in Germany from 1894 to 1933: true, it concluded that there had been shifts in the movement's ideology just before and just after the First World War that gave it a degree of overlap with Nazism when it came, and weakened the movement's capacity for resistance, but it also found that, contrary to widespread myths about historically submissive German middle-class womanhood, there had been a large, lively, vibrant and indeed radical feminist movement in the Imperial period. This in turn helped me and others to get away from the rigid teleologies being imposed on the Empire's history at the time by *German* historians, such as Hans-Ulrich Wehler: a development that culminated in the seminal book of my two British contemporaries, David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History*, a book that, for a whole variety of reasons, could never have been written by a German. Its basic starting-point was not a feeling that British history was uniquely blessed, but a horror

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that Germans should see it as a superior experience from which it was their historical misfortune to have deviated.

Baldwin agrees that foreign historians have the advantage of bringing a fresh perspective to bear on the history of the countries they study. He is right to point to the fact that German historians such as Wehler engaged in international comparison in order to try and explain the disasters of their own country's recent past, but this did not make them cosmopolitan; on the contrary, their interest in other countries was not really serious or deeply founded; it only went so far as to posit a general path to modernity that Germany, which occupied 90 per cent of their actual intellectual efforts, had failed to tread. Their comparative perspective was ultimately solipsistic. At the same time, however, as my book makes clear, Germans, along perhaps with Italians, have been extremely open to the views of foreign historians, not least because of the fact that as defeated nations they were less resistant to the work of others than a self-styled victor nation such as the French were. In the end, Baldwin is forced to agree with the legitimacy of the question my book posed, even if he quibbles all along the way with some of the answers it suggests. 'Where', he asks, 'is the Ian Kershaw of the Germans?' To answer the question of why the standard biography of Hitler was written by an Englishman and not a German was, translated onto a more general scale, the major point of my book.

But there was another point too, one that undermines Baldwin's ill-directed accusation of smugness. The generation of British historians who have had such an interest in, and impact on, the history of other European countries – my own generation – is now reaching retirement. There is no younger generation to follow. This is largely because of the collapse of language learning in British schools – another, very unwelcome by-product of the growing dominance of English as the world language which Baldwin correctly points to in his essay. German history in British universities is largely taught by Germans nowadays; Italian history by Italians; Spanish history by Spaniards. This is not in any way a negative development; what is emerging is a kind of transnational historical style, in which young Continental historians working in Britain take on some of the influences of the British historical tradition, just as earlier on, British historians working on Germany such as Ian Kershaw took on some of the influences of the German historical tradition. Cosmopolitanism is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the crude oppositions suggested by Baldwin, and certainly is not in my book. Teaching and research in European history in British universities is as lively and dynamic as ever, just as it is continuing to change and develop.

Even this, however, is now in danger. The present British government is seriously discussing dropping virtually all teaching of non-British history from schools, and reframing the national history curriculum to focus almost exclusively on 'our island story' in pursuit of a narrow and provincial concept of national identity, which it sees as the purpose of history teaching to foster. In pointing to the cosmopolitan tradition of British historical writing and teaching, however qualified and complex it might have been, I wanted among other things to argue for a different concept of national identity, one that looks outwards, to Europe and the world, one that is tolerant,

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multicultural and open, one that in recent times has made us cosmopolitan islanders and not little Englanders. The debate on this vital subject is only just beginning. I conceived of my lecture, and my book, as a contribution to this discussion: that is why, among other things, it strikes a positive, even celebratory note about British historians who write about Europe, at a time when politicians of all political parties as well as the students of British historiography cited in my book seem to be united in the apparent belief that they do not exist, and all that British historians ever write about, or indeed should write about, is their own country's past.

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