

Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, *Modern Historiography in the Making. The German Sense of the Past, 1700–1900*, London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney (Bloomsbury Academic) 2022, 200 p., 5 b/w fig., ISBN 978-1-350-27147-0, USD 115,00.

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In *Modern Historiography in the Making: The German Sense of the Past, 1700–1900*, historian Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen aims to challenge the hegemonic narrative of German historical scholarship by reframing the (hi)story of how the discipline was established. Where earlier historians place the advent of German historical writing in the time surrounding the French Revolution, Eskildsen traces the story of modern German historiography back to the Age of Enlightenment. He illustrates how the field was characterised by a belief in intellectual, societal, and moral progress based on Enlightenment thought, and how these ideals reverberated through German universities from the 1600s, laying the groundwork for the development of the discipline. Simultaneously, he emphasises the pragmatic, and often conservative, ideals of the scholars and bureaucrats involved, who saw history »not as a servant of philosophy or ideology, but as an antidote« (2).

Eskildsen rejects the dominant narrative of how German historical scholarship developed primarily as part of a greater shift in the European intellectual landscape from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards and how it portrays the story of the German, and thus European, historical tradition as an enclosed, teleological development. The story of German historical scholarship established by Ernst Troeltsch in the years after World War One focused on the »crisis of historicism« – the development of German history from the »seeds of relativism« sown by Herder's conceptions of *Kultur* and *Zeitgeist* (7–8) up to the dissolution of any belief in history's progressive mission in the early twentieth century. This narrative was further sustained by historians like Friedrich Meinecke, and later in the anglophone world by Georg G. Iggers and Reinhard Koselleck (6–8). German history-writing thus became trapped in the vestiges of idealist philosophy; its function subject to the larger, idea-historical developments of the time.

With *Modern Historiography in the Making*, Eskildsen looks to liberate the genealogy of historical scholarship from the clutches of historicism. He does this by illuminating the history of the practical and theoretical development of historical knowledge-production, starting in the early 1600s. The book thus consists of seven different case studies, each devoted to a different »place of mediation«, arenas in which historians actively engaged with the study of the past: the lecture hall; the field; the princely archive; the



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art cabinet; the study; the state archive; and the seminar. These places of historical knowledge production serve as frameworks for the wider context of the development of historical scholarship in the period from roughly 1700 to 1900, and the historians involved in these processes. In these examples Eskildsen shows the reader how the historical discipline evolved through »different practical solutions to the problems of knowing the past« (13). Eskildsen's story is that of the slow and meticulous developments of theoretical and methodological frameworks within the historical discipline. Every »place of mediation« – and the historians in them – constitutes a step forwards, toward the discipline's ascent as an independent and fundamental discipline of knowledge, and the resulting »age of history« around the turn of the nineteenth century.

While the book's main argument is framed through the »places of mediation« and how they constitute parts of the discipline's development, *Modern Historiography* is really the story of historians engaging in the discipline themselves. Through the seven chapters, the reader is introduced to the chronological study of an incredibly interesting bouquet of historical characters who all contributed to the advancement of the historical research and writing. While some, like Leopold von Ranke, Johann Gottfried Herder, or Christian Thomasius, are household names, most of the historians treated in Eskildsen's work are often unknown or overlooked characters in the pantheon of historiography. Among these are Christian Adolph Klotz, Frederick the Great's hedonistic political advisor, a proponent of antiquarianism and Herder's disciplinary opponent; Johan Peter von Ludewig, who argued for the meticulous use of archives, and founder of the school of imperial history; or Christoph August Heumann, who through his study trips to Holland and the resulting works created new theoretical frameworks in which to understand the political and philosophical importance of history.

Eskildsen puts all these characters into the spotlight, and skillfully presents how they in various different ways contributed to the craft of history. Here the book gives its best work: the colourful and vivid characterisations of these historical actors; their individual contributions to the advancement of historical research and writing, ever in conflict with the hegemonic and dogmatic intellectual landscapes they engage in; and the meticulous, detailed demonstrations of their scholarly enterprise. The author unravels the many ways these actors worked, thought, and reflected about their craft as historians. Not only does *Modern Historiography* give a comprehensive survey of the development of historical knowledge-production, but it also gives a, to be honest, a rather fun look into the lives of historians, and the intellectual landscape in which they engaged. Such insight is usually not present in most other literature on the history of historiography. By presenting the actors as people, situated in their specific contexts, and creating their contributions through their engagement with their contemporary intellectual world, Eskildsen's history of German historiography becomes a vivid and engaging read.



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Modern Historiography in the Making is an ambitious book. It attempts to reframe the history of German historiography, and to free the destiny of historical scholarship from the relativism of historicism; in this endeavour Eskildsen is successful. Both the fundamental argument, as well as the distinct case-studies analysed to this end, present a logical and well-researched whole.

Modern Historiography has many facets: it is a comprehensive piece of historical writing that strikes a fine balance between its attempt at a shift in narrative and the historical legwork of the respective case-studies. As it is a book about the scholarly development of the discipline of history, both in theoretical and practical application, I would recommend it as an interesting read for all historians. Not only does Eskildsen present an intriguing argument and a comprehensive historical analysis; the book is also simply a fantastic study of historical scholars and their contribution to the field of history. As such it constitutes both a reframing of a narrative, and a thorough historical presentation of the theoretical and methodological groundworks of the historical discipline that all historians should be acquainted with, as well as a study of the lives and contributions of (mostly) forgotten, but important historians in the period from 1700 to 1900.



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