



Q&A

Dr Harriet Lyon
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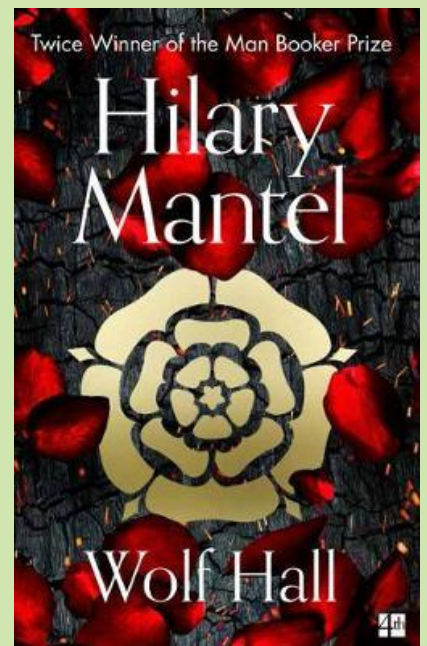
What area of research do you focus on and why?

Most of my research concerns the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and especially the Reformation – an utterly transformative period when England (like some other European countries) broke with the Catholic Church and founded a new Protestant Church. It is difficult to do justice to the seismic nature of this change. It affected not only what people believed and how they worshipped; it also had profound socio-economic consequences and significantly altered the patterns and rhythms of everyday life. This period has some very colourful characters (Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, Oliver Cromwell – to name just a few), but I am just as interested in what ‘ordinary’ people were doing and thinking. Most of my work revolves around the question of how people perceived and remembered their own past, and how those memories shaped how they thought about the present and future. As historians, we have the benefit of hindsight – we know how things turned out – but I find it fascinating to put myself in the shoes of people for whom the future remained uncertain.

What book in your field should everyone read?

There is no one way to do history and no single best book to read! Recently, I have enjoyed Miranda Kaufman’s *Black Tudors: The Untold Story* (2017), Peter Marshall’s *Heretics and Believers: A History of the English Reformation* (2017), and Judith Pollmann’s *Memory in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800* (2017). These are very different books, but in their own ways they show people in the past grappling with the contingencies of history and with the uncertainties of their world. Hilary Mantel’s Tudor novels (beginning with *Wolf Hall* (2009)) also show this magnificently. In many ways I think the line is blurred between history and historical fiction, because both require a great deal of imagination and empathy, but the two genres articulate these in slightly different ways. Mantel herself discusses the boundaries between history and fiction in her wonderful Reith Lectures, ‘Resurrection: The Art and Craft’, which are available online:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08tcbrp>.





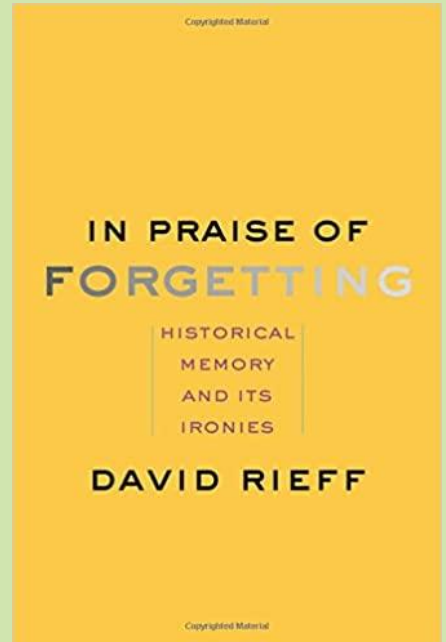
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What book are you currently reading?

David Rieff's book *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies* (2016). I am interested in the relationship between history, memory, and commemoration, and although Rieff is not a historian of the same period as me, his provocative book is providing a lot of food for thought. Using a range of examples (including the Irish Troubles, colonial Australia, the Holocaust, and 9/11), Rieff argues that the commemoration of divisive historical events can sometimes be damaging to society and that it might in fact be more moral for us to forget the problematic past. This is an interesting and controversial idea, which has acquired fresh resonance for me in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in the US a few weeks ago.



What is the best museum you have ever been to?

I grew up in Cambridge and so I might be biased (!), but I am never bored in the Fitzwilliam Museum. When I was younger, I was obsessed with Ancient Egypt and spent a lot of time staring at the stunning sarcophagus lid of Ramesses III in the Egyptian gallery. These days I am more likely to be found wandering around the substantial collection of medieval and Renaissance art. I have also recently enjoyed seeing exhibitions curated by some of my brilliant Cambridge colleagues – 'Feast and Fast: The Art of Food in Europe, 1500-1800' and 'Madonnas and Miracles: The Holy Home in Renaissance Italy'. Videos and photographs from both exhibitions can be found on the Museum's website (www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk). There is something magic about encountering objects from the past – both distant and not so distant.

We hope to welcome you to CamVC soon!



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