What is History?

At one level this diagram is a definition that makes perfect sense in separating the past from history and it highlights the fact that everything that historians do is about the past but it is not the actual past. It is an important distinction that is part of the fascination of history.

However, this definition also raises controversy by suggesting that historians can never hope to recover or re-create the past accurately. At one extreme, there are those who suggest that historians are simply writing about the past and that by adding explanations and organising the chaotic events of the past into tidy narratives, they are almost making up their own stories.

More traditional historians have argued strongly against this extreme view. They point out that all reputable historians are bound by the evidence they find in the sources and their record of the past and any interpretations they propose must be supported by this evidence. Further, the work of all historians is subject to a process of debate and revision which, it is argued, helps to bring it closer and closer to the actual truth of the past. Indeed, while contestability will always be inherent in history, there is also a good deal of agreement about much that has been written about the past. As the historian Richard Evans has suggested in his 1997 book *In Defence of History*, ‘... the past happened, and we really can, if we are very scrupulous and careful and self-critical, find out how it happened and reach some tenable though always less than final conclusions about what it all meant’.
