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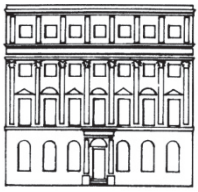

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Andreas Gestrich:
Narrating the Nineteenth Century: New Approaches - Preface
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PREFACE

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The German Historical Institute London regularly holds seminars, and each year one series is given a specific theme, with some of the resulting papers subsequently being published in the *Bulletin*. The theme for summer 2016 was new histories of the nineteenth century written in a national or European framework, chosen because of what we perceive to be a revival of academic and public interest in that period.

In the 1970s and the 1980s the nineteenth century was very fashionable as a subject of historical research and many innovative historiographical approaches originated within this burgeoning field. Prominent examples are the merging of social and cultural history in British Victorian studies or, in sharp methodological contrast, the sociological approaches of the Bielefeld version of societal history (*Gesellschaftsgeschichte*) and Eric Hobsbawm's trilogy on the 'long nineteenth century'. Histories of the working classes and women's or gender history focused on groups and topics hitherto neglected by historians, but also on the way in which historians themselves reconstructed and narrated history. Most of these new perspectives and methods spearheaded a rethink of how we write history and were first discussed in the context of the nineteenth century before they made their way into the historiographies of other periods. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, the pace and innovative power of scholarly treatments of the nineteenth century appeared to be on the wane. Academic interest, along with the dynamic impetus of methodological and historiographical innovation, shifted towards earlier periods at one end of the historical spectrum and to the twentieth century at the other. A marked increase could be observed in studies on National Socialism, the Holocaust, and the Second World War as well as, after 1989, the GDR, or, more recently, the 1970s.

While scholarly interest in nineteenth-century history was fairly low for at least two decades, it now seems to have made a comeback as an important subject of historical research. Some of this renewed interest might originate in the fact that certain aspects of present-day life seem to bear a clear resemblance to phenomena and problems of

the nineteenth century, such as the rise of ethnically oriented nationalisms, the increasingly precarious nature of work and labour relations, and the return of high levels of social inequality. However, it is also worthwhile revisiting the nineteenth century in the light of new historical developments and experiences.

One of the major challenges of writing nineteenth-century history today is certainly globalization, whose growth and impact on the modern world are closely connected to momentous changes which occurred during the nineteenth century. Globalization as a perspective was only marginal to historical research in the 1970s and 1980s, but today it is no longer acceptable to write modern national or European history from merely a European point of view.

In this context, one great achievement of modern historiography relating to the nineteenth century, challenging us to rethink many of our assumptions, is Jürgen Osterhammel's magisterial work *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (German original 2009; English trans. 2014). Probably no-one writing about the period will be able to ignore this book, and it will be interesting to see how it influences the conceptualization and structuring of future national and European histories of the nineteenth century.

To give just two examples of the challenges it poses, Osterhammel first reminds us that, contrary to common perception, the nineteenth century was in fact less a century of nation-states than a century of empires, and that it ended in a world war in which empires rather than nation-states fought each other. Second, he reminds us that, from a global perspective, the nineteenth century should not be viewed, as it often has been, as an 'age of modernity'. Neither industrialization nor any of the other processes commonly associated with the term (for example, secularization) had spread on a global scale by the end of the century. Instead, Osterhammel stresses the global dimension of processes such as growing economic, administrative, and military efficiency, increasing mobility, and intensifying mutual perceptions and transfers across cultures.

To discuss the problems of underlying master narratives and other potential difficulties in organizing histories of the nineteenth century, the GHIL arranged a lecture series in summer 2016 entitled 'Narrating the Nineteenth Century: New Approaches'. We asked two British and two German colleagues who at the time were engaged in writing either a British or a German national history, or a history of Europe in

the nineteenth century, to share their thoughts with us. All four presentations are available as podcasts <https://www.ghil.ac.uk/podcast.html>. In addition, for this issue of the *Bulletin* we have chosen to print abridged versions of the contributions to that lecture series by two eminent historians, Richard J. Evans and David Cannadine. Both were then still working on new histories of the nineteenth century, which have since been published. Juxtaposing some of the ideas driving these two important new works with the authors' organizational approaches to the available materials and literature provides a useful way of examining the exigencies and complexities of writing a modern history of the nineteenth century.

In the first text, Richard Evans reflects on his new book on nineteenth-century Europe, published in 2016 as volume 7 of the new *Penguin History of Europe* under the title *The Pursuit of Power*: *Europe 1815–1914*. Evans takes up some of the challenges posed by Osterhammel and discusses the importance of perspectives and categories of global history for the writing of a new European history. How should a new history of nineteenth-century Europe be periodized? Does it make sense to try to cover the huge variety of subjects that have formed the focus of historical research in recent decades?

In the second text, David Cannadine introduces his account of nineteenth-century Britain, recently published in the *Penguin History of Britain* as *Victorious Century: The United Kingdom 1800–1906*. For Cannadine, the nineteenth century was incontrovertibly a 'British century' in which the UK seemed to dominate the globe, and when, for good or ill, 'British history' took place in many other parts of the world as well. At a time when global history has become so prominent, Cannadine suggests, this seems an appropriate opportunity to revisit nineteenth-century British history, and he chooses an unusual and very specific British timeframe for this, from the Act of Union with Ireland in 1800 to the landslide victory of the Liberals in the 1906 General Election.

Both books make an enormously important contribution to the discipline's attempts to have a fresh look at nineteenth-century national and European history. They will be widely discussed and shape future debates.

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