
Diarmaid MacCulloch

The Reverend Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch Kt FBA is Professor of the History of the Church, University of Oxford. A video of extracts from this interview can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/prosperingwisely/macculloch

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What was the initial spark that made you want to study history?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

I can't remember a time when I didn't study history. My father was an amateur historian, and we talked history as other people talk football. It was there in the blood. I told stories to myself. I told stories of history. I made up histories when I was a boy. So what else could I do? And so I went to university to read history. I stayed on and researched history. The joy of finding things that other people did not know about has stayed with me. There is nothing more exciting, if you are historically minded, than looking into an original document and seeing things in it that someone else has not seen.

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What is it that historians contribute to our sense of the past?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

Historians aren't people who just list events. Any fool can do that and create a timeline. Historians are people who combine chronology – the order of the past – with interpretation. We are always interpreting. Every age interprets, and says, 'This is what this timeline means; this is what its shape is.' That is hugely important, and it changes from century to century, from decade to decade, from generation to generation.

All the time you have to be wary of the complacent timeline. Take the story of the British Empire, for instance. Is it a proud story, or is it a shameful story? Well, of course, it is going to be in the middle; it is going to be a bit of both. But to tell it as a proud story has great implications for national identity and national policy. To tell it as a shameful story is also going to have profound implications. But neither is quite right. As historians, we have to do the job of nuancing and complicating, but also giving credit where credit is due and putting shame where shame is due.

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Does the study of history then become just about the interpretations reached by the historians of different generations?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

You might despair about history and say it is a hall of mirrors: you have a historian telling a story in one generation and it becomes part of the story in the next. But that is just a counsel of despair. You have to think of the alternative. If you leave history in the hands of the stupid or the malicious, what sorts of stories are they going to tell?



You just have to tell the story well, which may mean making it complicated, but you have also got a duty to tell it clearly in a way that is exciting and even entertaining. There is a goddess the Greeks gave to history called Clio. She started life as a dancer, a goddess of song. You can imagine the goddess of history dancing around and entertaining and doing the dance of the seven veils. That is what historians should do. We are not put there to be boring. We are put there to be honest. That may mean telling a slightly more complicated story than people want to hear, but that is just life.

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So much of our sense of history is deeply embedded in our culture. Shakespeare has told us who is a good king, who is a bad king. How does the historian deal with that?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

That is a tremendously interesting question. How do we get away from the myths that we are all stuck in? My method is to try to heap the facts up and see what shapes come out of them. In that way, you may tell a story in an entirely different way.

The obvious example, which has excited people recently, is Richard III. When all the nonsense has been talked about Richard III, ultimately we find someone who was a pretty bad king, and we have to say that. He was a king who murdered children. Even at the time, murdering children was not a good thing. We just have to accept that fact. There is a sort of amateur history that delights in being perverse, and doing 'what if...?' 'What if we say that everything bad about Richard III was all made up by the Tudors?' That's not good history; that's a sort of hobby. The art of history is to balance one side and the other.

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Are there different types of historian?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

You need the moles burrowing away in the archives because their work feeds the greater picture. Those who can soar above the landscape like eagles and see the broader picture, need that landscape to have been laid out for them and explored by the moles. You can transfer from being a mole to being an eagle. It really does matter to have the detailed work. You can't make the vast generalisations that I made in 1,000 pages on the history of Christianity¹ without the tiny, detailed articles in learned journals, amazingly obscure. Each will illuminate a particular point.

Another way of looking at it would be a railway network. Yes, of course you need the intercity lines, but below that you need the sleepy junctions, you need the branch lines, you need the capillaries and the body to feed the arteries and the veins, otherwise the whole thing does not function. It is unglamorous to work on the power structures of Elizabethan Suffolk.² But it is the only way of getting the historical picture right, and so that is why it needs to be done.

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How important is a sense of place in your work?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

I have always been interested in history about place. I think it is so important to walk across a landscape and see how long it takes to walk from one place to another. I have found, going abroad on great television trips, that to spend an hour in a place illuminates it. We are living in an age when a lot of people are not where they came from. It is an intensely mobile age, so we need a sense of place even more. We need to understand the places we have got to, as well as the places we have left, compare them and gain a sort of balance and sanity from that.

That is why local history is immensely popular now. I remember some years ago, a friend of mine advertised a meeting on the local history of a new housing estate in a suburb of Bristol. They expected about a dozen people to turn up. Fifty people turned up; the room was crammed, because they wanted to find and establish an identity. Place is about identity. That can often go wrong. It can be a poisonous thing, because place becomes about excluding people who are not there. But if we can understand a place, we might get a balanced sense of how we should relate to it, and how we might love it without hating other people as well.

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Does history help us avoid the mistakes of the past?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

History's main purpose is to stop us telling mistaken stories on which we then act. History is full of examples of very bad history leading to very bad actions. The obvious one, which is no less true for being obvious, is the Third Reich, which was built on an entirely false view of history.

In an evil, totalitarian dictatorship like that, all history is poisoned.

But the same is true for any democracy. Particularly in democracy, telling the story right is really very important, because so many people are involved in making decisions, even if it is just a vote at an election. They need to have the right sort of story in their minds. It is not going to be a complicated story, because most people do not want a complicated story. But it must not be the wrong sort of simplified story; it must not be a malicious story. For instance, it must not marginalise a particular racial or social group. Generally, what historians do is to complicate things. But the art of being a historian is also to tell complicated things in understandable, clear, simple ways.

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Yet we still make mistakes. So is history a futile study?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

No. History is not a futile study, even though all of us always make mistakes. You can say it is an act of faith. It is the sort of act that says, 'Yes, all societies are imperfect and all individuals are imperfect, but we can try to do better.' Telling the story of the past correctly, or as near to correct as we can ever get, is part of that act of faith.

We can stop making terrible mistakes in the present if we have at least seen what the mistakes of the past are, and avoid them. It is often said that history is played twice – that famous remark of Marx that, first, history is tragedy, then it is played out as farce. In other words, what Marx saw is that history is never the same twice, even if it looks a bit the same. What historians can do is show you something about the past and point out the similarities – not the identical nature of present events, but the similarities – and stop the patterns of behaviour that made that wrong turn happen.

Q

If historians are producing new stories, disturbing our sense of what the past is, do we need to recognise the rather edgy nature of scholarship?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

The essence of what we historians do is to disagree with other historians. We are always revising the previous story. It is a very destructive profession. We are a rather subversive bunch, and very often we have to dismantle cherished myths. And that's rather difficult, because historians are paid by the government and by the public, and very often they don't want their stories disrupted.

History's main purpose is to stop us telling mistaken stories on which we then act. History is full of examples of very bad history leading to very bad actions.

¹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (2009).

² Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Suffolk and the Tudors* (1986).



Diarmaid MacCulloch's 2012 BBC television series 'How God made the English' challenged our assumptions about what it means to be English. Here he discusses with Professor Miri Rubin how the English persecuted Jews in the Middle Ages.

Recently, I did a television series on what it is to be English.³ One of the things we chose was the notion that Englishness is tolerance – the English are a tolerant race. We devoted a programme to showing that the English have been one of the most *intolerant* peoples in history. That is a very important lesson for us to learn. As a nation, we must not be complacent about our past. We must see how difficult it has been to become a tolerant nation. It's only historians who can show us that. It seems to me that it's actually a service to the nation to be a bit annoying. That is what the profession is about.

Q
Why do the humanities and social sciences deserve public funding?

Diarmaid MacCulloch
The answer is they are the means of keeping our society sane. The sciences can tell us wonderful things about how to heal illness, how to cure particular sorts of malaise. But it is the humanities, it is the social sciences that talk about the malaise in society, and explain the mysterious ways in which human beings behave to each other – which are not susceptible of being put into formulae or mathematical assemblages. They are that mysterious thing, human nature. That's what we deal with. If you don't have a healthy humanities and social sciences sector, your country will go mad. There are no two ways about it.

Q
Can you give an example of where that has happened?

Diarmaid MacCulloch
Think of a country that went mad: Germany in the 1930s. It created a whole set of policies around the premise that there was a set of beings who were sub-human: Jews, Slavs. It created a society in which whatever you did to such people did not matter because they were not human. That was based on an entirely false reading of history. Quite apart from whatever moral issues you might have with it, it was not true, as well as being cruel, stupid, mean-

minded and very wasteful of human talent. To marginalise people is very often to marginalise talent and skill. No society can afford to do that. The most successful societies in the long term are the most inclusive, the most plural. That is what the humanities constantly need to say to power.

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But if the message falls on deaf ears, you have the same results.

Diarmaid MacCulloch
There are limits to what any sane view of life can do. If those who are in power are insane, what can you do? I think that is an insoluble question. But we humanities people do our best. What else can we do? We stop the even madder getting into power and doing even madder things on the basis of stories which we, as people in the humanities and social sciences, can say are not true. Whatever the truth *is*, that is a rather more complicated thing to say. But we can say some things are *not* true, and that is a hugely important thing to say.

Q
When we interviewed Lord Stern, he said there was currently 'a crisis of confidence, a crisis of understanding'. How can the humanities and social sciences help?

Diarmaid MacCulloch
We live in interesting times. Many sorts of authority are being questioned. It seems to me entirely healthy that that should happen. It is an opportunity, when authority is being questioned, to show what a good sort of authority might be. A good sort of authority is usually a well-informed authority. It is also an honest and open form of authority. The humanities and social sciences have a good record on encouraging openness. That might be our contribution to the social progress that this society must make.

I am very optimistic about our society. I love its irreverence. I love its shapelessness. I grew up in constricted 1950s England, and the transformation has been exhilarating. Yet it is, of course, also dangerous. It needs conversation. It needs constant attention to what sorts of structures we can create in this open society.

Q
Can you provide an example of when your work has been influential outside the academic sphere?

Diarmaid MacCulloch
One of my proudest achievements was to complicate the debate in the House of Lords on equal marriage. That related to a lot of work I had done on the history of the Church. What I was hearing from the traditionalists in the debate in the Lords was that there was a thing called 'traditional marriage', which was under threat. One of my television producers, a voting member of the House of Lords, used the script that we had created on Christian history to show how complicated the history of marriage

³ *How God made the English* (BBC, 2012).

actually is.⁴ You can't make an easy distinction between a thing called 'traditional marriage' and a dangerous change that is happening now. Marriage has been a continually changing thing.

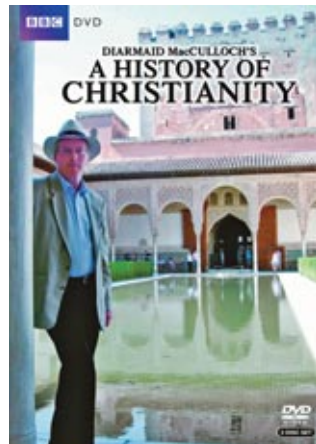
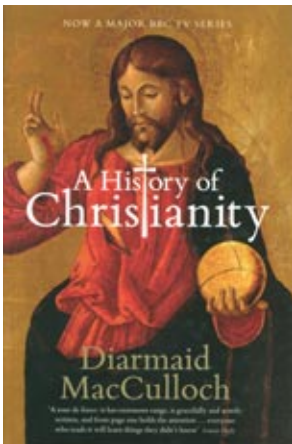
So, directly, a story becomes a part of present-day policy. It shapes the way society is going to be. That seems to me hugely important, and I'm really proud of my part – that little nudge – in the debate on that matter.

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Do you see yourself making more contributions to informing policy?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

I do see writing history as a moral task. I always have. Obviously, if you are writing about some detailed local history topic, that is not so obvious. But when you come to write about as big a topic as the history of the Church, inevitably you make statements about morality. I see traditional Christianity as having made some very poor statements about morality. It condoned slavery for 1,700 years of its existence. It is trying to forget that, but it should not. It is likely that it made equally stupid, dangerous and immoral statements about sexuality, and I am very conscious of that. I make no bones about saying it is a moral task to get the story right in order to influence policy attitudes in the future.



Diarmaid MacCulloch's 2009 'A History of Christianity' was both a BBC television series and a book. The research behind the book subsequently fed into the House of Lords debate on equal marriage in June 2013.

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As someone who has studied the history of the Christian Church, how do you see its current role and influence?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

It is interesting watching what is happening in Europe, which is now the least religiously practising part of the world. Most parts of the world are getting more religious, rather than less. Europe is not.

It is interesting to be a historian and see what is

happening to the remaining Church. The Church is becoming less strident because it no longer has political power. It is listening slightly more – I am being optimistic here, but I hear it listening more – and it is co-operating more with areas of society that previously it dominated and now cannot. It has a much more respectful attitude to the arts and to literature. It is learning things.

Christianity is a very young religion. It has only been around for 2,000 years. That is absolutely nothing in terms of human experience. I begin to hear the western Church understand that now, and see that is it possible to learn wisdom from the world around it. That is a very heartening thing to watch.

Q

Would your work have been considered heretical a few hundred years ago?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

I am very aware that I have been in a very dangerous area of history – the history of religion – which, three or four centuries ago, might have got me into very serious trouble, if not death. Well, I am not there, and I now have the space to talk quite freely, even within the Church, about its history, and stop it making stupid statements about what one can dogmatically believe and what one cannot. It is a very exciting thing to be that sort of historian, and it is a great privilege to have been accidentally born at the right time.

Q

I love your phrase – you are 'a candid friend'.

Diarmaid MacCulloch

Yes. I have always tried to describe myself in recent years as a candid friend of the Church. It means that you understand it from within, you have experienced it, yet you are not going to let it get away with things. There is no reason why lazy, smug, complacent thinking should dominate the way it presents its message. In the end, it is better and a more friendly thing to be candid, than to be complicit in stupidity.

Q

As a 21st century historian, you have embraced the non-traditional ways of discussing history. What are the pros and cons of that?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

Historians must embrace whatever media of communication there are. Radio, television and now the net are all part of it. You have to realise their limitations. I always think of the standard of a one hour Oxford University lecture. That is two hours on the radio, and three hours on the television, because each is a simplifying medium. There are things you can't do on television that you can do on radio. Notoriously, the pictures are better on radio. But even that means simplification.

⁴ See the contribution of Viscount Colville of Culross in the House of Lords debate on the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill, held on 4 June

2013 (*Hansard*, columns 1078-1080). The television series is *Sex and the West* (BBC, 2014).

The ideal way of absorbing history is still the book – sitting there quietly with a text. It may be on a screen, but it is still the book. That gives you the chance to sit back and consider. The next best thing is radio or a podcast – that sort of level. And the next best thing after that is television. None of them are bad, but they are all different and some of them have more limitations than others.

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Is there an art in communicating with the public?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

Journalists will get in touch and say, ‘What do you think about this? Can you tell me the story of this in two sentences, please?’ That is an art that we all need to try to develop as academics. The trouble about being an academic is that we tend to try to complicate things, because that is what we have to do for our students. When we go to the public, it is the opposite job. We have to simplify, without losing track of the reality of what we are talking about. It is a difficult art, but it is the challenge we have been offered by the position we are in.

Q

Historians are not the only people writing stories about history. Historical fiction is amazingly successful. Is that a challenge?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

I am an enthusiast for good historical novels. I grew up, as a boy, with the then already old-fashioned novels of G.A. Henty, and, of a later generation, Rosemary Sutcliff. I know from that just how exciting it is to combine fiction with history.

In the present day we have one of the best historical novelists ever, Hilary Mantel, who just happens to have illuminated a subject that fascinates me – Thomas Cromwell. I think she has got him exactly right. It is wonderful, seeing a man who has been vilified over the years as a thug, suddenly appreciated as a thoughtful, detached human being. When I read *Wolf Hall*, the first of

her novels, I wrote to her – we did not know each other – and I said, ‘Look, you know this is a great novel. It has just won the Booker. But what I want to tell you is that this is the Tudor England I recognise, and I gasped at some of the detail you knew.’

That, of course, is the best sort of historical novel history. There are bad ones, but there are bad historians too. There are bad examples of the genre in any form of literature. But at their best, what historical novels can do is what Hilary Mantel has done, which is to provide explanations of things that historians dare not try to create. I will not give away the ending of her second novel, but it seems to me an utterly convincing way of explaining the very confused events of the fall of Queen Anne Boleyn. That is so exciting. I cannot do it, but novelists can. All right, we are not the same animals, but we are allies, and long may that alliance continue.

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Hopefully she was buying your books to find those small details.

Diarmaid MacCulloch

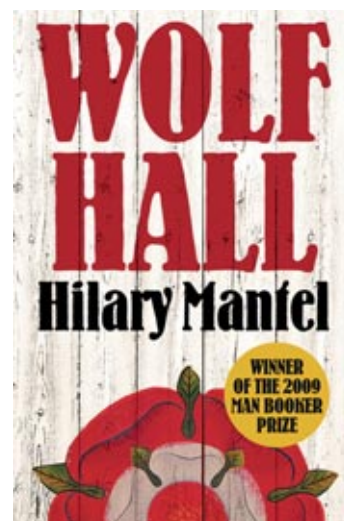
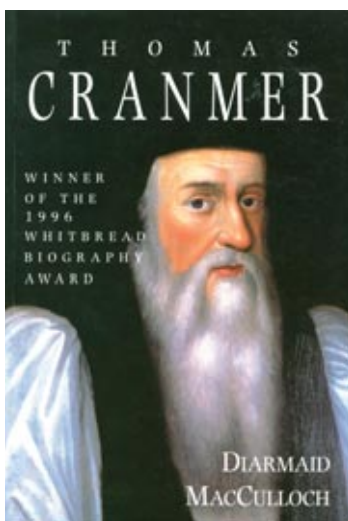
She did read my books, I’m glad to say. Other Tudor detective novelists have done as well. If they read it right, hurrah! But we are doing different jobs. We are entertaining and informing, but we are doing the job of entertaining and informing in different ways.

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What are you working on next?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

I have got steadily more ambitious as the years have gone by. I started at PhD level writing about Elizabethan Suffolk – very worthy, but a tiny little bit of history. It has got slightly bigger as the years have gone by. It became Tudor England. Then it became Reformation Europe. Then it became the world, when I wrote a book on the history of Christianity.⁵ After that, where do you go? Douglas Adams has done the universe.



The interplay between historical scholarship and historical fiction. Having already written a biography of Thomas Cranmer, Diarmaid MacCulloch is now working on a biography of his contemporary and friend Thomas Cromwell – the subject of Hilary Mantel’s prize-winning novel, which drew on historical research

⁵ Diarmaid MacCulloch’s books include: *Suffolk and the Tudors* (1986); *The Later Reformation in England, 1547-1603* (1990); *Reformation: Europe’s*

House Divided, 1490-1700 (2003); *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (2009).

So what I have done is to retreat. I have gone back to Tudor England, and my next book will be a biography of Thomas Cromwell. Twenty years ago, I wrote a biography of his great friend and colleague, Thomas Cranmer.⁶ The fascination of what I am doing now is to see how my view of Tudor England has changed in the process. I think it will be a larger view, because I now know what was happening in Krakow and Bucharest at the same time. That makes the story of Tudor England very different. It was something I was beginning to realise as I wrote on Cranmer, but now I see it for Cromwell. I hope that will make it a very different sort of biography.

Q
What did election to the Fellowship of the British Academy mean to you?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

I was delighted to be elected to the Fellowship of the British Academy. It is recognition of what you have done. That is an affirmation. When you are feeling a bit down, you can say, 'Well, at least they elected me to the British Academy.'

It's also more than that. You can do things when you are in the Academy. We have an extraordinary assemblage of talent. What we are now doing is trying to open up that talent, and give something back to the public, to provide events that are cutting-edge about what we are doing, about research, and to debate great issues. We had a debate on equal marriage a year ago, just at the time the Government was looking for submissions on equal marriage.⁷ So we can contribute to what is on the public's mind at any one stage. That seems to me to be an essential duty of those who have the great privilege of being in the Academy.

⁶ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (1996).

⁷ The British Academy held a panel discussion on 'Gay marriage: prospects and realities' on 29 May 2012.