To what extent does History belong to the elites of the past?

In order to come to a valid conclusion when considering the extent to which History belongs to the elites of the past, historians must consider the impact of that small, powerful group in terms of three different historical aspects: what evidence has been recorded, who interprets this evidence and who causes History to change. The idea that throughout time, the vast majority of historical sources have been written by the privileged and literate aristocracy, and have subsequently been interpreted by historians who, by and large, have represented a white, male, and wealthy demographic suggests that History does belong to the elites of the past. However, this argument may be counterbalanced by highlighting the impact of vast masses of lower-class peasants and workers who drive change in their sheer numbers. This essay will therefore explore the ways in which these three factors impact the influence of the elite on History.

Because many historians believe that the most valuable and informative historical sources tend to be in writing, and because this writing tends to be composed by the elite classes of society, surely History must belong to the elites of the past. The crippling illiteracy of all but the lay and elite population until recent times meant that it was rare for History to be recorded from a non-elite perspective. For example, when considering the impact of the Norman Conquest on Britain, the most valuable sources include those of chroniclers such as Robert of Gloucester, the 1st Earl of Gloucester or Frutolf of Michelsberg, a member of the ecclesiastical population, who recorded the events of the Conquest with fascinating detail. Because of their disabling lack of education and independence, it is simply much more difficult to study the History of the Norman Conquest from an angle which focuses on the peasant masses. This argument is supported by historian John Vincent who suggests that history must be ‘deeply male’, ‘non-young’ and ‘is about the rich… articulate… winners’¹. Vincent argues this because the evidence on which History is based stems from the study of sources created by the elite rich, white, older men of the past.

¹ John Vincent, An Intelligent Person’s Guide to History
Nevertheless, this view has been somewhat discredited in this Postmodern age. Some historians may argue that the manuscripts of churchmen like Frutolf of Michelsberg, coupled with the enlightening chronicles of the more socially aware elite classes are instrumental in suggesting that History does not necessarily belong to the elites of the past. These chronicles, written by the elite, are rich in evidence which is relevant to the lives of the non-elite. For example, Robert of Gloucester illustrates the linguistic impact of the Conquest on all social classes in his chronicle, saying: ‘For unless a man know French, people regard him little; but the low men hold to English, and to their own speech still.’ Therefore, because even early historians writing only 200 years after the Conquest saw it worthwhile to acknowledge the historical worth of the ‘low men’, historians can exploit this evidence to uncover an understanding of ‘the high price paid by the indigenous population’ and the peasant masses throughout History. Moreover, due to advancements in modern thinking and technology, such as DNA analysis, and new, improved methods of archaeology, the commoners of the past may rely on others to unearth their own history using scientific methods instead of dependance on traditional written historical sources. An example of this can be found in the scientific examination of bodies, some of which date back to 2 BC, preserved in British peat bogs. Archaeologists examining The Lindow Man in 1984, for example, uncovered information about the common Iron Age diet of unleavened bread by analysing the contents of his stomach. The Lindow Man’s injuries offer additional information about the practice of sacrifice by Druids. This wealth of information which can be revealed from the modern study of physical, rather than written sources suggests that History need not belong solely to the elites of the past.

However, this view may be countered in terms of who has interpreted these historical sources. Because until the latter part of the 20th Century, powerful, well respected historians largely comprised an elitist demographic of socially important, high status, white males with a prestigious education, it often seems as though History must belong to the elites of the past. Because historians tended to be elite, their interests, somewhat narcissistically, tended to lie with the elites.

Elizabeth van Houts, History Today

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of the past, meaning that the history of women and of the poor, cultural or ethnic minorities were, by and large, neglected. The bias of the historian towards their own people can be illustrated through the study of Thomas Carlyle. To the modern reader, Carlyle’s work is unacceptable in many cases, often seeming politically and socially offensive. For example, Carlyle’s work *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* exclusively uses examples of ‘Great Men’ throughout history to convey his idea of what a hero must be. Therefore, as a man, Carlyle has neglected the value of women in history. Furthermore, G.M Trevelyan, historian and member of a long line of English gentry ‘loathed… the age of the masses’ partially because it was a time in which his elite class was not entirely relevant. This suggests that because of the egotistical nature of the predominantly elite interpreters of History, History must belong to the elites of the past.

On the other hand, more recent years have seen a rise in the study of social history, partially stemming from the changing nature of the interpreters of History in this modern age. Due to the growing availability of education, History has widened into a study restricted not to society’s elites, but also to a diverse mix of academics from a vast range of social backgrounds. This increased accessibility has led to an increased study not only of the impoverished sections of past societies, but also of gender history and black history, to name just a few of the vast historical factions. Therefore, many historians have been forced to consider ‘whose history gets told.’ For example, E.P. Thompson, pioneer of social history and author of the hugely influential *The Making of the English Working Class*, a work which focuses on the ‘luddite cropper’ and ‘obsolete hand weaver’, wrote his book while working at the Worker’s Educational Association before having received a degree - a distinctly non-elite occupation. Additionally, the increased acceptance of black historians in recent years, for example Henry Louis Gates Jr. and John Hope Franklin, has led to an increased study of the history of black slavery. Therefore, the widened accessibility of History in the modern age has caused interpretation of History to be made available to group of those who are

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3 Richard J. Evans, In Defence of History
4 Brenda Marshall, Teaching the Postmodern
Susannah Finlay

not necessarily elite, leading to an increased study of the non-elite groups of the past, suggesting that nowadays, History does not belong solely to the elites of the past.

Yet in terms of who changes the course of History, surely the elites of the past are more relevant, leading to the belief that History does indeed belong to the elites of the past. This is supported by E.H. Carr’s argument which suggests that the study of History is somewhat limited to the ‘facts’ which historians believe have affected the course of History, or the ‘expansion of reason’

5 Carr used the example of Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon to illustrate this point. Despite masses of ordinary people crossing the Rubicon daily, we view the elite emperor’s passage as a ‘historical fact’ partially because it had vast political impact. We forget the crossing of the commoners and dismiss it as irrelevant because their passage did not have an impact on the political situation of the time. Similarly, 1066 has remained historically important throughout time, not because of the humdrum intricacies of the lives of the peasants during that year, but because of the highly influential invasion of Britain by William the Conquerer, a King and a member of the elite. Furthermore, the impact of the elite as leaders of revolution, a mechanism which often acts as a trigger to pivotal moments in history, causing the course of history to be altered is crucial. With a leadership comprising mainly of various branches of the French royalty including Gaston, Duc d’Orléans, the King’s own Uncle, the Fronde rebellion of 1648 is one example of an aristocratic revolution. Furthermore, modern research by Dr Matthew Rendle has uncovered that the Russian aristocracy played a vital role in the success of the Russian Revolution of 1917. This elite contribution can be partially attributed to the increasing lack of support among the aristocracy for Tsar Nicolas, leading to a collapse from above, leaving him politically isolated and in an weakened position. The elite further aided the revolutionary cause through the movements of upper class organisations, such as The Union of Landowners, which aided the revolution by increasing peasant involvement in the uprising. This vast bolstering of peasant support is illustrated by the membership of 10,000 peasants in the Penza faction of the Union alone

6 Therefore, this provides

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5 E.H. Carr, What Is History?

6 Matthew Rendle, Conservatism and Revolution: The All-Russian Union of Landowners, 1916-1918
evidence for the idea that revolutions, as a crucial influence over historical change, belong largely to the aristocratic leadership, supporting the argument that History does belong to the elites of the past.

However, the idea that the impact of the Russian elites is measured in terms of peasant support counters this idea, suggesting that the impact of the aristocracy is negligible without the support of the lower-class. The relevance of the non-elite in terms of historical change may be further illustrated by studying the course of revolution through time. Marx illustrates this point effectively when examining the Parisian uprising of 1848, spurred by Louis Phillipe’s elitist suppression of the political rights of French workers. The revolt was further encouraged by the harvest failures of 1846-47 which, of course, had the most profound effect on the non-elite members of society. Marx argued that the most effective way for the workings-class to achieve emancipation was through an uprising: ‘revolutions are the locomotives of history’. Therefore, Marx suggests that revolutions are ultimately a non-elite system, fuelled by the vast non-elite masses which have a far greater collective impact that the elites as a small, exclusive minority. This suggests that if revolution, the ultimate historical ‘locomotive’ belongs to the peasant masses, surely history cannot belong solely to the elites of the past.

Overall therefore, it is clear that History does not belong to the elites of the past to an indefinite extent. Though the presence of written, elite sources interpreted by elite historians is perhaps a more conventional or readily available form of evidence, the ability to glean information from a vast range of historical sources, combined with the widening accessibility of History to the interpreters of the past has broadened the historian’s perspective from a narrow, restricted view, fundamentally based on elitist outlook, into a richly diverse wealth of information. The commoners of the past have much to offer us, and this would be a waste and a crime to forget.

7 Karl Marx, The Class Struggles in France, (1848-1850)