

History on trial

Allon Lee

HOLOCAUST revisionist David Irving must really dislike historian Richard J Evans, having dedicated an entire section of his website to the expert witness who helped prove in the British High Court that Irving was a liar and racist who had deliberately falsified history.

The Cambridge University Modern History professor earned Irving's attention after he became a participant in Irving's attempt in April 2000 to sue American academic Dr Deborah Lipstadt and her British publishers for libel.

Irving claimed that Dr Lipstadt's 1993 book *Denying the Holocaust* defamed him by stating that he had deliberately distorted, misquoted and falsified history.

In Australia to attend conferences and promote his book *Lying about Hitler — History, Holocaust and the David Irving Trial*, Professor Evans said he was called to respond to the question whether the claim in Dr Lipstadt's book that Irving falsified history and misused historical documents was justified.

An expert in modern German history, Evans and two research assistants



Professor Richard Evans

produced a 700-page report showing that Irving's use of primary sources in his published writings had been consistently manipulated and distorted, often to elicit the opposite meaning.

The report proved to be a "sledgehammer that cracked a nut", Professor Evans said modestly.

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in the crucible of the witness stand, under the withering cross-examination of Dr Lipstadt's barrister, Richard Rampton QC, who used Professor Evans' findings, Irving's credentials were destroyed.

Although a byproduct of the verdict was a sense that the court had upheld the truth of the Holocaust, that is a misreading of the case, Professor Evans emphasised.

"At issue was whether Irving deliberately distorted and falsified the historical record for his own ends, not whether the Holocaust occurred" — hence the decision by Dr Lipstadt's lawyers to refrain from calling her or Holocaust survivors to testify.

However, the question which Professor Evans was most interested in having answered was how to differentiate between objectivity and a tendentious use of history for political ends.

"In the end, the trial was concerned with how historians interpret and write history, not with what happened 60 years ago."

Affirming that the trial had educational value in the same way that the 1961 Eichmann trial did in Jerusalem, Professor Evans believed Irving thought Penguin Books would settle prior to the trial. But once the trial started, he sought to use it as a platform.

"Had he won, it would have been a serious blow for the recording of history, which is a serious issue. I don't think Penguin had any choice but to defend because the stakes were that high."

The tactic of focusing on Irving had the detrimental effect of creating a perception that it was Irving who was being sued, Professor Evans said. "But it was still the correct approach. He was the issue.

"There were fears that Irving would become a martyr, but I don't think that will happen. We have a brilliant judgment by Justice Gray stating that Irving is a liar."

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Once the verdict was handed down, Professor Evans believed his report would make a fitting subject for publication. But even with the highest court in the land declaring Irving a fraud and forced to declare bankruptcy, his shadow loomed, making publication a tortured road.

Four publishers refused the book, fearing a vexatious and costly lawsuit from Irving and leaving it to independent left-wing publisher Verso, run by Tariq Ali and others, to come to the rescue.

"It was frustrating because even though Penguin won, there was no way they could recoup the two million pounds it cost to defend the lawsuit, making other publishers fearful."

Far from leaving the issue behind, Professor Evans is writing a two-volume history of the Third Reich.

Asked if there were not enough such histories available, he said people would be surprised to learn that only three major books had been published. Determined to write a history that is accessible to lay readers as well as academics, he is adamant that historians have a role to play in the public arena.

Having taken three-and-a-half years of his life — "I thought it would be over after six months" — he acknowledged that the experience had better informed him about the law and the role of history in courtrooms, "which historians do not consider enough".





A section of the cover of Richard Evans' book.