Keith Jenkins's collection of critical texts dealing with the question of postmodernism in historiography offers a much-needed synthesis of the debate that has been going on for thirty years, and which seems to have gathered momentum in the last decade. The editor appears to be sceptical about every historical "fact" except that of the existence of postmodernity itself, which he defined in a previous book (Jenkins 1995). He intends this one to be a course-book for teachers who are "establishing or modifying a course on 'the nature of history'", to help students lose their "theoretical innocence" and become aware of the problems behind any historian's discourse which claims to get to "the truth of the past". In so doing Jenkins presents arguments both for and against postmodernism in history writing, though admitting his hope that the weight of the readings comes down in favour of it. As in his "Introduction" he wishes "to be open about our closures", he also acknowledges his belief that "history is theoretical 'all the way down'" (1). This may come as a disappointment to those who, like myself, expected to find, rather than samples of a prolonged polemic, a more workable manual for learning and teaching what postmodern history will actually look like, if it is to replace the realist model. The various articles, however, offer many an interesting glimpse of what postmodernist histories might be, and the final section, which compiles contributions to the debate on the representation of the Holocaust, becomes more specific than previous ones by referring to something most people still recognise as an "event" (though postmodernists question this concept).
The contents of the collection are structured, as it were, dialectically. Part I gathers texts for and against postmodern histories; Part II, for and against "the Collapse of the Lower Case" (unlike upper case History, for example, Marxist History, lower case history aims at being non-ideological, and it is the prevailing academic model in the west today); Part III includes "Nuanced or ambiguous others", that is, historians who do not take their ground so easily between postmodernism and upper and lower case histories; finally, Part IV, which aims to present entire articles rather than excerpts, has debates on history and postmodernism from the journals Past and Present, History and Theory and Social History. Given the sheer bulk of bibliography on the matter and the extensive footnotes of all these publications (which forced the editor to excise some of those notes), we should be thankful for this effort to comprise it all within a single volume. However, if one tries to read it from beginning to end (admittedly, perhaps not the kind of linear reading the editor expects), it is easy to grow tired of so much theoretical polemic, and eager to get to the final section, if only because, being about the representation of the Holocaust, it purports to be more concrete.

Another welcome feature is that some articles of the book include summaries of its complex subject. The introduction lists in tabular form the characteristics of what is generally understood by "proper" or traditional history, the first of which is that it is "realist, empiricist, objectivist and documentalist". Postmodernist histories are implicitly defined by the negation or absence of such characteristics. Much later on in the book, in Neville Kirk's article for Social History, the student may find another useful summary contrasting Modernism (and modernist history) with Postmodernism. For example, while Modernism stands for "Elitism, closure, authoritarianism and social engineering (Fordism)", Postmodernism embodies "Popular consumerism, flexibility, choice, openness, opportunity", and so on. But this sort of contrast may be unfair against Modernism and clearly one-sided for the latest trend, giving it all the best tunes. As Kirk's article, and in general the whole of the Reader
suggests, the distinction is a great deal more complicated, and it cannot be reduced to a simple diagram. Each of the challenges of postmodernism demands a separate analysis, such as the one Berkhofer makes (140-51) by presenting a series of tables instead of just one, setting up a framework for the relation between history and its referent (i.e., what used to be called "reality") in order to make "a poetics of history".

Many parts of the book insist that the great challenge to history writing originated in the "linguistic turn" among literary critics, but that historians can no longer ignore it. Indeed, one of the strengths of the Reader is that most of its contributors are historians rather than literary scholars. It also has a fair representation of philosophers and communication theorists, beginning with Lyotard's famous definition of "postmodern as incredulity toward meta-narratives". His brief declaration of principles is followed by Baudrillard's more meaty description of the ways in which history tends to vanish through the modern mass information technology, among other reasons "by dint of the sophistication of events and information". Baudrillard's highly metaphorical explanations are echoed in more particular arguments in other articles, for example when Ankersmit (277-78) alludes to present-day overproduction in history, which makes it impossible for the new historian to work his way to, say, Hobbes, through the huge jungle of excellent interpretations that he should read before getting to the "text itself". This confirms Nietzsche's fear that historiography itself would impede our view of the past. Moreover, the problem of overproduction in history returns a few pages before the end of the book (408-09) when Kellner argues how professional history, with its urge to produce ever different and challenging accounts, will exhaust even a subject such as the Holocaust, until new forms of representation are found besides traditional histories (hovering about is always the risk of sinister interpretations denying that the Holocaust ever took place). Many such problems are explored in the various articles of the collection, which tend to expose the issues from different angles, rather than offer any clear-cut solution to how best to interpret the past.
Some of the excerpts are from classics of the subject. For instance, Barthes on "The discourse of History" or Foucault on Nietzsche, whose history as genealogy seems to be among the first and also the latest offerings of what a postmodern "wirklich Historie" should be (126). But this genealogical approach to history-writing, which might be a model for postmodern histories, is only mentioned in passing. For a practical suggestion of, say, how genealogy might be adopted by TV news, the reader had better turn to another book (e.g., Fiske 1991). In fact Jenkins' Reader has little to show in the way of postmodern history. Nevertheless, it includes many excellent analyses and discussions of the subject, such as those by Lawrence Stone and Gabrielle M. Spiegel, to mention two authors who (deservedly) have two contributions each to this collection. Both are remarkable for the clarity of their points. Spiegel's "History, historicism and the social logic of the text in the Middle Ages" traces the issue of postmodernism versus history back to the "semitic challenge" of both pre- and poststructuralisms which viewed language not as a (mimetic) reflection of the world but as constitutive (generative) of it, and then through the rise of cultural history (Clifford Geertz) and then back to Raymond Williams' materialism, finally to state her own middle ground, claiming that it will be necessary to elaborate "a theoretical position capable of satisfying the demands of both literary criticism and history as separate yet interdependent disciplinary domains" (197-98). In her view the latter will require to keep the now much disputed dualism of text and context (challenged especially by Hayden White), but also to recognize how "texts both mirror and generate social realities" (198). Like the rest of the pieces, this remains theoretical through and through, and once more the reader has to turn to another shelf and find Spiegel's volume on medieval French historiography (1993) in order to find how well she substantiates her claims in practice. Moreover, what she practises is not all that different from the New Historicism of Lee Patterson (whom she quotes in her article, see 184) or Stephen Greenblatt. The New Historicists have been writing a half-breed of historiography and literary criticism which, in my opinion, is perhaps one of the
possible forms of postmodernist history. Yet they are
given no credit in this Reader.

Spiegel's article is greatly commended by Stone, who
points to what I see as a central problem when he states
that "it is impossible to think of a major historical
work written from a thoroughly postmodernist perspective
and using postmodernist language and vocabulary" (257).
The book refers to quite a few theoretical solutions,
like Berkhofer's plea for a demystification of "normal
history" and its Great Stories, which, he claims, "frees
the historian to tell many different kinds of 'stories'
from various viewpoints, with many voices, emplotted
diversely, according to many principles of synthesis"
(152). But when we turn to another shelf in our library
as we did with Spiegel to find Berkhofer's own major
study (1995), which Jenkins recommends for further
reading in the Introduction (28), we will find little
beyond theory, critique, and ample footnotes in it.
Maybe, as suggested in some of the articles in favour of
the fall of the lower case, nobody has written a major
postmodernist "history" because postmodernism simply
denies the possibility of doing it. Accounts of the past
will have to be written under names other than "history", "sources", "events", "facts", etc. But
reading Jenkins' Reader makes one doubt whether we have
seen any such purely postmodernist writing-about-the-
past yet. The last section gives only one clear example
of a postmodernist account of the Holocaust, Art
Spiegelman's Maus: A Survivor's Tale, which Kellner
describes as "a comic strip account of a man's
confrontation with his father and his father's
experience of the Holocaust and Auschwitz" (401). Still
some would call this autobiographical fiction rather
than anything to replace or continue traditional
historical works on the Holocaust.

In sum, The Postmodern History Reader performs its
function as an accessible collection of polemical texts.
But the title promises more. The term "postmodern", one
of whose earliest uses is by Arnold Toynbee as Young
reminds us (75), may have been around for long enough to
yield some results. We seem to be repeating the trope of
Irony that, according to White (1973), dominated
historiography nearly a century ago, after Nietzsche's
age. It is time the critique of history produced
something to help us come to terms with our past. Historians have actually begun to write from apparently postmodernist perspectives, and we might need another "Postmodern History Reader" to acknowledge this. Take, for instance, Fernández-Armesto's Millennium with its multi-cultural scope, unconventional perspectives, and deliberate subjective positioning (for example when he confesses 'I was an anti-American boy', Fernández-Armesto 1995: 394), and compare it to a traditional eurocentric objectivist world history, for example, H.G. Wells's Outline of History (1920), and you will notice how much postmodernism has been affecting the writing of history. Fernández-Armesto still plays the old game of historical prophecy when he announces the end of Atlantic hegemony, replaced by the Pacific as the greatest global economic area; but he is self-consciously aware that his predictions would probably fail, and he now seems to have been right about his own failure as a prophet: the Pacific challenge to the West is not as likely today, due to the Japanese recession, as it was in the early 1990s. In Truth: A History and Guide for the Perplexed (1997), by the same author, his analysis of truth-finding techniques overlapping in different cultures at different times looks so much like a postmodernist approach that he has to disclaim it by assuring "at once that this should not be mistaken for a relativist or post-modern project; on the contrary, the history of truth reconstructed here is remarkable for its continuities and its universal resonance" (Fernández-Armesto 1997: 5). I believe "continuities and resonance" (even if we cannot claim universal value for them) will still be needed in order to make sense of our past, despite Keith Jenkins's attempt to tip the balance of the debate in favour of the fall of history in the lower case. It may not suffice to argue, as Jenkins does, that it is difficult to say what postmodern histories actually look like because they are "histories of the future ... which have not yet been" (28). That would keep the writing of postmodern history deferred ad infinitum, and infinitely deconstructed. It is time to take up the task, and it has probably been taken up already by some historians and literary critics, for example those of the New Historicism, in so far as postmodernism can ever be translated into writing non-fiction about the past. Yet The Postmodern History
Reader fails to honour its offer of readings in postmodern history. What it offers instead is postmodern (and anti-postmodern) criticism of history-writing.

WORKS CITED


