Wortley Hall

War – and Peace

May 2014

Origins of the First World War - 'What if…?'

Notes based on article in *The Guardian* 15th March by Richard J Evans, Professor of Modern History, University of Cambridge and best known for his research on the history of Germany in the C19 and C20, particularly the Third Reich. Further articles and recommended reading if you google 'Richard J Evans'…
All quotes below are from the above article.

1. What, if anything, we were taught about the origins of WW1 at school? A few brief memories and anecdotes…

2. Evans refers to Michael Gove and others wanting to return to a 'kings-and-battles' view of the past… wanting to "shove (this) down schoolchildren's throats, but which historians know is thoroughly outdated…"

3. How would we want the origins and history of WW1 taught in schools? Keeping it short again - just a minute or two each. Then some general discussion on key points

4. "Too much current debate about 1914 and the outbreak of the first world war focuses not on why it happened but how things might have been if Britain hadn't entered it". 'What if..? (or counter-factual speculations) "…this kind of fantasising is now all the rage, and threatens to overwhelm our perceptions of what really happened in the past...".

5. Evans criticises the 2014 TV documentaries by Max Hastings and Niall Ferguson for simplifying history in this way. Any who saw the documentaries may give an example relevant to the argument…

6. "In practice, of course, every historian tries to balance out the elements of chance on the one hand and larger historical forces (economic, cultural, social and international) on the other and come to some kind of explanation that makes sense. The problem with counter-factuals is that they almost always treat individual human actors – generals or politicians, in the main – as completely unfettered by these larger forces, able to make decisions without regard to them in any way. And yet this simply isn't the case... To suppose otherwise is to regress into a 'great man' view of history that the historical profession abandoned decades ago."

7. "Why are we so prone in the early 21st century to approaching history in this way? … Perhaps it's because we're living in a postmodern age where the idea of progress has largely disappeared to be replaced by uncertainty and doubt, and where linear notions of time have become blurred; or because truth and fiction no longer seem such polar opposites as the once did; or because historians now have more licence to be subjective than they used to… It's time to be sceptical about this trend".

8. So, what were the origins and causes of WW1?