



The Social History of Skepticism: Experience and Doubt in Early Modern Culture (The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science)

Brendan Dooley

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Do new information technologies always produce progress and enlightenment? No, at least not according to observers in seventeenth-century Europe. As Brendan Dooley demonstrates in *The Social History of Skepticism*, the transformation of information about present and past politics into a saleable product, whether in the form of commissioned histories or in the form of journalism, turned writers into speculators, information into opinion, and readers into critics. The result was a powerful current of skepticism with extraordinary consequences. Combined with late-seventeenth-century developments in other areas of thought and writing, it produced skepticism about the possibility of gaining any historical knowledge at all.

Joining the history of ideas to the history of journalism and publishing, Dooley sets out to discover when early modern people believed their political informants and when they did not. He examines some of those who got the information first: the manuscript gossip writers of Rome and Venice. He then considers the writers of printed gazettes, who bought their own information or else received it from those in power. He explores historians, both of independent means and employed by governments, and the episodes -- political, social, and cultural -- that caused them to write. He also examines the readers who knew better than what they read and the cultural critics, such as Pierre Bayle, who bemoaned the politicization of truth. The skeptical outcome, he shows, helped bring about a historiographical reform movement that introduced theories and techniques still in use today for discovering the past.

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