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# REPUBLICANS OF LETTERS, MEMORY POLITICIANS, GLOBAL COLONIALISTS: HISTORIANS IN RECENT HISTORIES OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

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**ABSTRACT.** *Writing the history of historiography is a tricky business. There is no unbiased way of doing it, and it can serve different goals that at best complement and at worst contradict each other. The genre can seem both suitable to promote one's own academic agenda and to reflect upon one's own ideological constraints, epistemological presumptions, and social aspirations. This article analyses the motivations and methods of recent authors in the field, and it does so principally by focusing on the roles they attribute to historians past and present. To enable comparisons, the article includes works with a national, European and global framework, on early modern and late modern historiography, by intellectual, cultural and post-colonialist historians. A general conclusion will be that while most publications use the genre to pursue academic interests with epistemic arguments, only few try to exploit its potential for critical self-reflexion. As a consequence, they tend to be of limited credibility and originality when it comes to describing historiography's functions and historians' roles. This article does not treat their lack of critical commitment as an isolated phenomenon in a historiographical sub-field, but as a symptom of a larger problem within academic scholarship today. There are, however, exceptions to the rule, and this article will also try to work out their particular strengths.*

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In the early days of book reviewing, critics were busy looking for a solution to a problem that the new genre brought with it: how to expose published errors without soiling their authors' name. Pierre Bayle, one of the foremost participants in this discussion, proposed to deal with reviewed works according to the 'class' their authors occupied within the 'Republic of Letters'. In 1692, when he announced his project of a dictionary, intended as a dumping ground for published blunders, he recommended a gentle treatment of 'poor authors whom one would have quickly stripped to the shirt' and called for an uncompromising exposure of the errors committed by 'the greatest and most famous authors'. Bayle's reasoning was twofold. Faults and mistakes by renowned men of letters, he argued, were 'infinitely more contagious than those of ordinary writers'; at the same time, these famous authors had such

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'great resources of reputation and sources of glory so abundant that a hundred wreckages could not incommode them'.<sup>1</sup> Thus, blunt criticism should be seen as a 'sign of the high opinion' the critic held of an author.

It would be an exaggeration to say that Bayle's advice has left a big imprint on the history of book reviewing, especially in academia. The modern academic culture may have preserved more of the unwritten code of noble honour than of the written laws of the 'Republic of Letters', and so academic reviewers tend to treat each other gently and reserve their stripping energy for intellectuals working outside the ivory tower. Wrecking a renowned professor a hundred times (and see him resurface again) is usually not considered a healthy process, not for the criticized and even less for the critic. This may be one reason why academic book reviewing is not counted among the most exciting of literary genres. It does not, however, have to be so. All authors discussed in this review article belong to the 'class' of established academic scholars. They are professors; they look back on decades of personal research; they call several monographs their own. The youngest are in their fifties, the oldest is in his nineties. If we follow Bayle's rules, they can afford a candid appraisal of their publications. But can the reviewer? I believe he can, on one condition: he should first lay himself bare.

To put this less metaphorically, Bayle left out one decisive factor of scholarly criticism when he assumed that established authors needed particular critical scrutiny: namely, the degree of self-exposure of the critic. If a critic hides behind a rhetorical curtain of impartiality in pronouncing judgement, the communication is as asymmetrical as can be. Criticism, under such circumstances, cannot even come close to Bayle's ideal of a purely truth-driven exercise in wiping out errors, even if it is brought forward in the most sober of tones. The imbalance of power is too large, and the victim is too defenceless, whatever their standing may be. The best antidote is a critic's acknowledgement of their biases and dependencies to underscore the relative nature of their arguments. This is what I will do in the following paragraphs.

I belong to a younger generation of historians than the authors under review, and my reputational armour is thinner than theirs. My academic coming of age was already characterized by what is called 'the crisis of the humanities', which to many in the field just seemed to be a crisis of official support. From my junior position, I was under the impression that this crisis was partly self-inflicted by a professorial class that had grown up in the humanities-friendly climate of the Cold War, which tended to cultivate a self-sufficiency mistaken for autonomy, preferred mutual cossetting to mutual criticizing, and, when the going got tough, either switched to nostalgic mode or to servile imitation of the sciences or to both. The unresolved problem of my position is that I feel opposed to this class culture while simultaneously working to become part of it, based on the unrealistic hope that acquiring the role of an 'established outsider' would

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bayle, *Projet et fragmens d'un dictionnaire critique* (Rotterdam, 1692), unpag.

enable me to criticize the current academic culture more effectively. Probably, it will just allow me to have it both ways by being an outsider to insiders and an insider to outsiders. In any event, readers may be warned of a generational bias influencing my judgement of the authors under review.

There are two more biases to declare. The first concerns Cantabrigian over-representation. The majority of books discussed here are either written by Cambridge scholars or published by Cambridge University Press. One reason for this is that I am writing for a Cambridge journal to which many local scholars send in their works, and another reason is that I myself was a research fellow at Cambridge when I agreed to write this article, which may have influenced my choice of books. I was careful, though, not to include works by patrons of mine or other local people to whom I owe a great deal of gratitude. And I was careful, too, not to judge anybody I know personally by favourable (or unfavourable) terms. Only the readers will be able to decide if I was successful in doing so.

The last bias is of particular significance with regard to my criticism of global histories of historiography: it is my own specialization in early modern French, German, and British history. My interest in this particular region at this particular time is based on the conviction that they were, for better and worse, momentous in shaping the world we live in now. This conviction may partly explain the ideological reservations I have against those post-colonialist scholars who attempt to delegitimize European culture morally by provincializing Europe historically.

My selection of books was partly made with regard to a question directly connected with my remarks on academic reviewing and the state of the humanities. The question is: how was and is the writing of historiography characterized by the public role and self-perception of history writers? This question will be asked both with respect to the books' contents and to the books' authors and will thus enable some reflections on historiography and historians both past and present.

## I

'Study the historian before you begin to study the facts' is probably the most quoted (and misquoted) sentence from E. H. Carr's 1961 classic *What is history?*<sup>2</sup> Today, Carr's clarification of what it meant to 'study the historian' unintentionally confirms the validity of his own phrase, for it now looks in keeping with Carr's historical role as an established outsider and notorious agent provocateur in the British Cold War culture. In Carr's eyes, the study of the historian mainly consisted of identifying his (there was no scholarly 'her' on his radar) political convictions and analysing the degree to which these convictions were determined by the political circumstances of his time. Consequently, Carr classified modern historians first and foremost as either

<sup>2</sup> E. H. Carr, *What is history?* (Houndsmills, 2001), p. 17.

liberals or conservatives or communists. At the same time, he insisted that quality needed a degree of eccentricity. Cross-breeding zoological metaphors, he maintained that a historian without bees buzzing ‘in his bonnet’ had to be a ‘dull dog’.<sup>3</sup> One could regard this as an inverted self-portrait of the upper-middle-class diplomat-cum-don with communist sympathies.

Carr’s book was the fruit of his Trevelyan lectures at Cambridge University given in 1961. When, forty-four years later, Anthony Grafton had the honour of delivering another sequence of these lectures, he chose the title *What was history?*<sup>4</sup> The change of tense is programmatic. Grafton aims to answer Carr’s question from the perspective of early modern historians and, on top of that, to historicize some of Carr’s leading arguments. Early in the volume, he credits two of his heroes, Jean Le Clerc (1657–1736) and Jacob Perizonius (1651–1715), for not needing ‘Carr to explain to them the principles . . . that “you cannot fully understand or appreciate the work of the historian unless you have first grasped the standpoint from which he himself approached it”’ (p. 20). Further on in the book, Grafton confirms the validity and denies the originality of Carr’s ‘homely analogy, that the best historians were an eccentric breed’; his examples of ‘method and madness’ in the early modern *artes historicae* include the deconstructivist antiquarian Francesco Patrizi (1529–79), the imaginative genealogist Reiner Reineck (1541–95), and the historiographical iconoclast Jean Bodin (1530–96). The reference to Carr thus comes with some reservation about the relevance of his work.

On the whole, though, Grafton’s engagement with Carr is limited as his book is not directed against a certain theory of history, but, at least in its first part, against a certain history of historiography which has been most popular in Germany. Its proponents believe that historical scholarship, as we know it today, was created in the early nineteenth century by German historians, who systematically introduced archival studies, textual criticism, and a relativistic approach to the past. Grafton picks out Ulrich Muhlack, who maintained that while the purpose of early modern historiography had been to give lessons on life (*historia magistra vitae*), modern Rankean history aimed at reconstructing the past as it actually was (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*) (p. 32).<sup>5</sup>

Grafton provides ample material to question this juxtaposition, especially in his discussion of Le Clerc and Perizonius. Le Clerc had already detached the study of history from the art of rhetoric by defining it as a critical examination of sources which, if proven credible, had to be presented to the reader in plain prose (p. 11). For the same reason, he rejected fictional speeches accredited

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Grafton, *What was history? The art of history in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Ulrich Muhlack, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Humanismus und in der Aufklärung: Die Vorgeschichte des Historismus* (Munich, 1991). Unfortunately, the footnotes are not very precise in Grafton’s current book, which is why I was unable to verify the precise passage by Muhlack that Grafton is referring to.

to real figures in historical writing. His repositioning of the historian from the field of political instruction to that of scholarly criticism was inspired by similar ideas to Bayle on promoting literary reviews: the understanding of scholarship as an autonomous search for truth, conducted within the independent 'Republic of Letters', and the belief in philological evidence as a means to reduce the amount – and aggressiveness – of scholarly controversies.

It was not without irony that Le Clerc's critical stance sparked a fierce debate with Perizonius, who was indignant at the harsh censure of the Roman historian Quintus Curtius Rufus, whom Le Clerc found guilty of inaccurate geography, false chronology, and fake oratory. Perizonius acted as a conservative revolutionary. He deemed it (in his own words) 'completely idiotic' to 'pass judgement on ancient matters from the standpoint of their own time and its customs' (p. 17). This is a condemnation of anachronism in all but name. Perizonius also explained secularly what Leopold von Ranke would express religiously 150 years later: 'Each people, and each period in the history of a given people, has its own customs'. Ranke condensed this into 'every epoch is immediate to God'.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, the transformative function of Ranke and his followers is mostly reduced to the exploitation and adoration of the archive as the place where an unmediated past awaited the historian. Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen recently spoke of 'Ranke's archival turn', and here, for once, the fashionable word 'turn' may be appropriate.<sup>7</sup> Archival studies were not newly introduced by German historicists, but rather newly charged as an indispensable condition for history's accuracy and historians' credibility.

Le Clerc and Perizonius appear at the beginning of the book, but their dispute marks the end of Grafton's main narrative. From the second chapter onwards, he presents the history of the *artes historicae* in a literary portrait series of authors from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Particular attention is given to the French antiquarian and jurist François Baudouin (1520–73), whose works indicate, among other things, the intertwined relationship between historical and legal studies, in both method and content. Baudouin compared ancient texts to legal testimonies and defined a rule that created a hierarchy of priorities concerning historians and histories: 'one should believe witnesses, not witnessings' (p. 97). Contrary to Carr, though, Baudouin believed in an unbiased reconstruction of the past through the attribution of credibility to the right authors (Cicero, for instance). The legal imagery thus had profound implications for his perception of history.

Based on Baudouin's works, Grafton gives an ornate definition of the *ars historica* as 'an intellectual crossroads laid out on coordinates drawn from both the humanistic and the legal traditions' and describes its function as 'giving multiple methods and practices a place to meet, as antiquarianism intersected

<sup>6</sup> Leopold von Ranke, *Über die Epochen der Neueren Geschichte* (1854; Munich, 1971), pp. 5, 60.

<sup>7</sup> Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, 'Leopold Ranke's archival turn: location and evidence in modern historiography', *Modern Intellectual History*, 5 (2008), pp. 425–53.

with ecclesiastical history, both collided with law, and all of them in turn experienced the shock of the new as travellers described unknown worlds to the east and, even more surprising, to the west' (p. 122). Grafton's specification (if this is the right word) corresponds with his general picture of the *ars historica*, which is broad, colourful, and slightly blurred. If one follows his observations on Baudouin and Bodin, Poggio and Patrizi, Lipsius and Vossius, it becomes increasingly hard to grasp what kind of 'art' they were championing precisely. Was it a set of didactic rules in the tradition of the classical *ars rhetorica* and *ars poetica*? Or just various things that were more or less accidentally lumped together under one heading over time?

Grafton seems to opt for the former, but his material rather suggests the latter. Occasionally, he calls the *ars historica* a 'genre' (the title of chapter 4 is 'Death of a genre'). At the same time, his own use of the term covers types of texts as different as disputations, orations, dialogues, and commentaries, and only a few of them were explicitly assigned to the *ars historica* by their authors. Based on the variety of textual forms and content, Donald Kelley, in an essay written in 1964 on Baudouin, concluded that it 'makes more sense to treat the *ars historica* as a complex of rhetorical topoi than as a literary genre'.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that the term came to represent such a diversified body of writings may be due to one single publication, which does appear in Grafton's book, but not as prominently as one might expect (pp. 125–6). In 1579, Johann Wolf edited a collection of eighteen texts by as many authors in the Basle printing house of Pietro Perna. The title was *Artis historicae penus* – 'Treasury of the art of history'. It assembled works by Catholic, Protestant, and nonconformist authors from Italy, France, Germany, and Switzerland plus two ancient Greek historians. The edition stimulated further studies on the philological reconstruction and rhetorical presentation of the past, of which some were labelled under the heading *ars historica*. Apparently, it also challenged confessional hardliners. In the copy of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek at Munich (available online courtesy of Google), the Protestant authors Chytraeus, Grynaeus, and Zwinger are crossed out in the table of contents, and there are occasional marks of censorship in both volumes. Such signs indicate that there must have been various sorts of 'critical' reading associated with the *ars historica*.

The writers of *artes historicae* are presented by Grafton as a cosmopolitan flock of independent-minded scholars on a pedagogical mission. It was their ambition to 'persuade the young man bound for academic or for public life that the vital facts of history did not, in Carr's words, resemble fish laid out on a fishmonger's lab, but fish swimming in the ocean' (p. 207). The book hardly clarifies, though, whether the political leaders of yesterday's tomorrow actually saw the fish, let alone if they tried to swim like them. Most of the texts were written in Latin and thus not easily accessible to lay students. So was the *ars*

<sup>8</sup> Donald R. Kelley, 'François Baudouin and his conception of history', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 25 (1964), p. 39.

*historica* propagated as an ‘applied science’, but practised largely as ‘l’art pour l’art’? Grafton would deny it. According to him, the *ars historica* was a double-edged sword for rulers. It promised to teach them lessons of the past for future use, and it threatened to put them under critical scrutiny. His book recounts the story of Emperor Maximilian I, who was eager to equip his young dynasty with an old lineage and proud enough to think that what was good for Roman emperors would be sufficient for him: he, too, must be (come) a Trojan. His only fear was ‘to become a credulous laughing stock in an age of criticism’ and so he followed his own genealogists’ work with impatient interest (p. 151).

On closer look, this example is not very telling or telling for other reasons. The story is based on a report by the late sixteenth-century genealogist Reiner Reineck, which in turn is based on a report by Maximilian’s humanist courtier Johannes Cuspinian, who allegedly claimed to have listened to a conversation between the emperor and another court scholar. The history of transmission is suspect, and there are further reasons to be sceptical. Renaissance humanists notoriously convinced one another of their own political importance, probably to compensate for their lack of status security in comparison with jurists and theologians. Maximilian, from what we have learned, was hardly bothered about being perceived as credulous by scholars. He was obsessed with his genealogical projects; he was adamant to have them fulfilled by his scholarly clients according to his own adventurous plans, and he was indifferent to those humanist historians, who, partly for nationalist, partly for evidential reasons, criticized him for posing as *Troianus* instead of accepting himself as *Germanus*.<sup>9</sup>

More revealing is the example of Joseph Scaliger, whose working conditions at Leiden look like a late modern academic’s daydream. Scaliger received the highest salary ‘not only in the university, but in the city of Leiden itself’, had no teaching obligations and a university library devoted to the latest books and tools for historians (p. 193). His standing, though, was as remarkable as it was exceptional for early modern philologists. A possible explanation as to why Scaliger was so generously paid and carefully looked after is given by Grafton in another publication, where he refers to Scaliger as a highly respected ‘expert on chronology’.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, chronology may have been key to the political impact of historical studies as it promised to give special ammunition to participants in religious and political disputes that involved alternative datings of historical events. As such, chronology could be particularly attractive to legal scholars in political service and polemical spirit, i.e. the Baudouins and Bodins. As Grafton rightly points out (p. 69), proximity to law was, in terms of reputation and remuneration, generally a good prospect for a field of scholarship in the early modern period, especially if it was not long-established, such as the *ars historica*.

<sup>9</sup> See Caspar Hirschi, *The origins of nationalism: an alternative history from ancient Rome to early modern Germany* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 155–6.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Grafton, ‘A sketch map of a lost continent: the Republic of Letters’, in idem, *Worlds made by words: scholarship and community in the modern west* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), p. 27.



If so, the critical potential of historians did not so much derive from a position of high independence, but from a process of smooth adaptation, and its development served the interests of patrons and parties rather than following an agenda of independent scholarship. In short, contrary to their own self-image, advocates of the *ars historica* may have delivered more propaganda fodder than political lessons to those in charge. Although Grafton does not draw such a conclusion, some of the witnesses he cites to document the decline of the *ars historica* in the second half of the seventeenth century could support it. The generation of Le Clerc and Perizonius, in their repudiation of *ars historica*, accentuated the critical purpose of historiography while questioning the epistemic power of historians to produce political prescriptions.

In general, Grafton's analytical toolkit is not ideally equipped to offer insights into possible discrepancies between the roles early modern history writers ascribed to themselves and the functions they were designated by others. Like many other intellectual historians, he perceives them primarily as citizens of the 'Republic of Letters'. The term, as we have seen in Bayle's quotation, was introduced by early modern scholars, which is why many historians today feel comfortable with it. Yet does a widely used historical category necessarily make a good analytical category? Not in this case. Twenty years ago, Pierre Bourdieu attributed the Republic of Letters to the vocabulary of 'spontaneous sociology', because it lacked a 'worked-out concept' and therefore could not serve as an analysis of the 'functioning of the literary world'.<sup>11</sup> I do not think that the problem with the 'Republic of Letters' has much to do with 'spontaneous sociology'. Yet I believe that it encourages one to ignore the fundamental differences between the organization of scholarly relations and political communities. It creates a sense of scholarly self-determination, which is at odds with the structural conditions of learned cultures both then and now. Early modern scholars, when projecting themselves into the Republic of Letters, had to blind out their susceptibility to censorship and court culture and hide their dependences on patrons, printers, and publishers. The term also helped to conceal the interdependence of scholarly interests, political convictions, and religious beliefs. Similar to other powerful metaphors such as 'free market' or 'war on terror', the term 'Republic of Letters' distorted the reality in order to reshape it. This makes it highly interesting as a historical category, but hardly helpful as an analytical one.<sup>12</sup>

Grafton's use of the phrase is symptomatic. Instead of clarifying its metaphorical meaning, he adds further imagery that does not necessarily clarify the picture. The book begins with the following sentence: 'In the years

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris, 1992), p. 287.

<sup>12</sup> For its significance as a historical category, see Caspar Hirschi, 'Piraten der Gelehrtenrepublik: Die Norm des sachlichen Streits und ihre polemische Funktion', in Kai Bremer and Carlos Spoerhase, eds., *Gelehrte Polemik: Typen und Techniken gelehrter Konfliktführung in der respublica litteraria des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt am Main, 2011), pp. 101–38.

around 1700, a roomy but fragile imaginary mansion housed the citizens of the Republic of Letters.' A few lines further down, he writes: 'Many of those who dwelled in this ample new house of learning feared that it was in danger of going up in flames' (p. 1). This is not the occasional accident of every lively imagination. In another recent article, Grafton called the Republic of Letters 'a lost continent', 'a sort of Pedantic Park', and 'a palimpsest of people, books, and objects in motion'.<sup>13</sup> Exemplifying complex metaphors with even more complex metaphors is a sign that they are not working. Why, then, is the 'Republic of Letters' such a popular concept among late modern historians? The tone they adopt when speaking about its alleged early modern citizens is often nostalgic, sometimes ironic, and always sympathetic. It seems that many use the metaphor to express their own ideals of free and independent scholarship in an international academic environment. As likeable as this is, such a sunny view of the humanities is fundamentally at odds with the institutional constraints within modern universities. It tends to induce a false sense of security during periods of generous funding and to provoke loud, but belated outcries in times of austerity.

## II

Grafton's answer to the question 'What was history?' is as Eurocentric as can be. Yet, it is so for obvious reasons, since it would be hard to argue that a genealogy of modern academic historiography has to include extra-European traditions of history writing. Markus Völkel, a European early modernist-turned-global historian, goes even further. In his global history of historiography, published in German under the title *Geschichtsschreibung*, he states:

The European method of scientific history, despite being heavily criticized in, for instance, Africa and India, has since conquered almost all academic institutions of the world. This method has been denounced as imperialist, but at the same time it has always been used to construct the national histories of new nations.<sup>14</sup>

Völkel labels his own approach to the global history of historiography 'mild Eurocentrism' and justifies it both methodologically and historically: 'As long as the rejection of "Eurocentrism" remains a methodological project by Western educated elites, the new "decentred global history" will not be able to abandon Europe as a point of reference for its historiographical method' (pp. 277–8). At the present stage, according to Völkel, global history has to deny itself entirely if it wants to abandon its Eurocentric structure (p. 345).

If this is so, why does a history of historiography have to include all those extra-European traditions of history writing which even most of today's global

<sup>13</sup> Grafton, 'A sketch map', pp. 1, 2, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Markus Völkel, *Geschichtsschreibung: Eine Einführung in globaler Perspektive* (Cologne, 2006), p. 15.

historians treat as methodological dead ends? Völkel does not address this point directly, but indicates that he considers a global approach the most appropriate way to historicize the history of historiography more thoroughly. The main question for him is not where present forms of academic scholarship originated and how they evolved, but how history was translated, narrated, and manipulated in different times and places. Neither is he very interested in cross-cultural exchanges, or what global historians call 'hybridization'. With this, Völkel's book is not so much an exercise in provincializing, but in contextualizing Europe, which renders it appealing to more than just post-colonialist scholars – provided that they master German.

As is often the case with global histories by a single author, Völkel's *Geschichtsschreibung* is extremely ambitious. Aside from four chapters on Western Europe from early antiquity to late modernity, it includes single chapters on Byzantine, Arabic, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and American historical traditions and closes with a few pages on African historiography. All chapters are based on the same set of questions addressing the scope of information, methodological techniques, institutional conditions, literary genres, and the relationship between history writing and other practices of memory in a given culture and period. Furthermore, Völkel draws biographical sketches of major historians, summarizes their 'canonical' works, discusses secondary literature, and even proposes new interpretations of certain developments (according to him, for instance, the 'first linguistic turn' happened around 1800, when Romantic historians pushed for a vernacular historiography that would breathe the national spirit) (p. 310).

The problems arising from Völkel's Herculean *tour de force* have less to do with the composition and content of this particular book than with global histories in general. One problem is narrative or rather the lack thereof. Post-Hegelian global histories, even if they are well-structured, such as Völkel's (or, for that reason, Bayly's or Osterhammel's), inevitably deal with material too abundant, too disparate, and too complex to form a coherent argument, let alone tell a comprehensible story. Writing a book that is more than the sum of its parts is not an easy task under such conditions, whereas exhausting readers through information overload is. In Völkel's case, even his admirable ability to pack complex issues into concise images ('The Chinese tradition of knowledge proceeded by "scissors and paste"' (p. 161)) may not be enough to prevent readers from drowning in the vast sea of his material, all the more so as the book comes in painfully small print. The targeted student audience will only be able to swim through small sections at a time.

Another problem specifically of single-authored global histories concerns scholarly expertise and hence authorial credibility. All authors of global histories enter the field as specialists for a small part of it and will never be experts on most of what they are writing about. Even if they master several languages, they remain heavily dependent on second-hand knowledge and will hardly be capable of examining its quality thoroughly. Völkel's scholarly

reputation is based on specialist studies of early modern papal and European intellectual history. He concedes his limited knowledge of extra-European histories and languages, and although he does remarkably well when describing their historiographies, non-specialist readers will have reservations about giving his portraits of Arab or Chinese historians the same credit as those of their European counterparts. As long as modern historiography derives its authority from specialist expertise and first-hand knowledge of original documents, global histories by single authors will be intellectual towers built on shaky epistemological foundations.

For English-speaking readers, a valuable alternative to Völkel's *Geschichtsschreibung* is the voluminous textbook *A global history of history* by Daniel Woolf.<sup>15</sup> Compared to Völkel's work, it looks more appealing at first sight and less consistent on closer inspection. Although it is much bigger, it feels easier to swallow. It is designed as a state-of-the-art textbook with subject boxes on particular topics, extracts of historiographical classics, global timelines for each epoch, sections for further reading, and lots of illustrations. Similar to Völkel's book, it impresses with its well-thought-out structure, accessible language, concise presentation of complex issues, and, on top of that, some original interpretations, which make it interesting to professional historians, too.

Contrary to Völkel, though, Woolf, who first specialized in early modern English historiography, is eager to shake off any notion of Eurocentrism. In the introduction, he asserts that he is making a contribution to the post-colonial project of 'provincializing Europe' and specifies this with a quote from Dominic Sachsenmaier:

It would be wrong to simply identify diffusion from the West to the rest as the only force behind the genesis of academic historiography as a worldwide phenomenon. Rather, the global spread of cultures of rationality, the modern academic system and university-based historiography occurred in an intricate *jeu d'échelles* of trans-local and local contexts, colonial power formations, liberation movements, transnational intellectual networks and other factors.<sup>16</sup>

This statement is more precise in what it rejects than what it endorses, but even so, Woolf's own narrative rarely resembles Sachsenmaier's transcultural imagery. There are episodes of 'interculturality' between Islamic, Jewish, and Christian historians during the period traditionally known as the middle ages and relabelled 'Age of global violence' by Woolf, but even here the author has to concede that 'the impact of these contacts on the writing of history was for now rather limited' (p. 120).

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Woolf, *A global history of history* (Cambridge, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Dominic Sachsenmaier, 'Global history, pluralism, and the question of traditions', *New Global Studies*, 3 (2009), p. 18.

Later, from the eighteenth century onward, the impact may have grown, but apparently only in one direction: from Europe outwards. Woolf, in perfect accordance with the diffusionist approach he dismissed at the beginning, speaks of 'the spread of Western historicity to most of the rest of the world, sometimes by force, but often by invitation' (p. 345). He describes how 'the later nineteenth century would import to Japan and China a further wave of methodological and conceptual change derived from Europe' (p. 339), and he states that Indian historians, regardless of their political leanings, 'mainly looked westwards for models and methods' (p. 404). This is probably true to the present day, even in the field of post-colonial studies, where Asian and African historians not only train in 'Western' methods, but mostly leave for the West as soon as they get a decent offer from an American or British university. There are still some colonial rules dictating the post-colonial game.

With Sachsenmaier's snakes-and-ladder approach failing, Woolf follows a diffusionist model for modern history and a comparative one for all periods before. His comparisons are not guided by a principle of symmetry, but by the will to highlight areas where extra-European historians were earlier or better. The Chinese are given the most credit in this regard. Woolf claims that they developed encyclopaedias, biographies, and historical novels long before the Europeans even came close to imagining them (p. 172). Furthermore, 'Chinese historians consolidated much earlier than their European counterparts a clear and consistent set of rules and practices for the recovery and representation of the past' (p. 55). Unfortunately, Woolf does not enumerate what these rules and practices were, and neither does he explain why they did not help the Chinese to compete with Western historiography in later periods. Clearly, he does not want to introduce a 'Needham question' for the humanities, but then he cannot prevent the question looming in his narrative, since all extra-European traditions are as irrelevant in his account of modern academic historiography as they are in Grafton's book.

Another comparative technique used by Woolf is to find Chinese equivalents to great European thinkers: 'La Popelinière, Bodin and Bayle each have counterparts of sorts during the Ming, though it is rather unlikely that the Chinese authors, despite Western contact, knew of their French opposite numbers or vice versa' (p. 210). In a similar vein, he states that 'if Britain had its triumvirate of Hume, Robertson and Gibbon, eighteenth-century China could answer back with its own distinguished trio', called Wang Mingsheng, Qian Daxin, and Zhao Yi (p. 323). To complete the debunking of European singularity, Woolf calls the period 'Eurasian Enlightenment'. His terminological and comparative undertakings have, as shallow as they are, little epistemic value, but great ironic effect. When Woolf endows extra-European cultures with the Enlightenment (other post-colonial scholars do the same with the Renaissance, though hardly with the middle ages), he places himself on the shoulders of those he wants to overthrow. He is acting as a European colonizer. It would be interesting to see how European historians would react if they were told not to

speak of the 'French Enlightenment' anymore, but of 'French culture under the early Qing Dynasty', or to call early modern European barbers 'practitioners of Ayurveda'.

An involuntary demonstration of how the colonizing effect of post-colonialism can be carried to the extremes is given by Jack Goody in his *The theft of history*.<sup>17</sup> Goody, who was born in 1919, acquired academic fame as a social anthropologist in the 1960s and 1970s and has been a Cambridge legend ever since, decided to embark on a crusade against academic Eurocentrism in his old age. His polemical energy is impressive, but the blows he deals too often miss the target. By 'theft' of history, Goody means 'the take-over of history by the west', that is, 'the past is conceptualized and presented according to what happened on the provincial scale of Europe, often western Europe, and then imposed upon the rest of the world' (p. 1). Among the goods stolen in this large-scale robbery are democracy, capitalism, freedom, individualism, universities, and romantic love. Goody's aim is to show when the theft had taken place, how it can be undone, and who needs to be held responsible. The theft, according to him, began 'with the notions of Archaic society and Antiquity, proceeding from there in a more or less straight line through feudalism and the Renaissance to capitalism' (p. 26). Goody returns the stolen goods by method of semantic widening: he declares, among other things, that the bourgeoisie has existed 'ever since the Urban Revolution of the Bronze Age' (p. 135), that China had introduced capitalism, mechanization, and industrialization long before Europe (p. 209) and that the organization of pirate ships was 'often based on "democratic" principles', so there is 'no sense in which the Greeks can be said to have "discovered individual freedom" or democracy' (p. 51).

Identifying the culprits is even easier. They are to be found among those dead old white men who wrote about European history without having the chance to be enlightened by post-colonialism. Goody does not care to historicize the Eurocentric views of the authors discussed because he considers them guilty by the universal standards of his superior epistemic and moral judgement. Interestingly, his verdicts tend to sound much harsher than his actual disagreements. After stating that the arguments of Joseph Needham, Norbert Elias, and Fernand Braudel 'are flawed since they either take that advantage [of the West on the rest] back to a distant past, or also privilege later Europe in a questionable way, so that they distort world history rather than illuminate it', Goody adds a footnote, saying: 'Of course, only in certain ways; I am in complete agreement with most of their writings' (p. 125).

Worse than that, some of his verdicts are unjust or confused or both. 'Burkhardt in Switzerland' is accused of 'nationalistic ideas of the "spirit" of the Renaissance', including the celebration of limited democracy and 'the triumph of European civilisation over all others' (p. 127). If 'Burkhardt' is meant to be Jacob Burckhardt (as the 'J.' in the index suggests), then Goody got things

<sup>17</sup> Jack Goody, *The theft of history* (Cambridge, 2006).

wrong. The Swiss Patrician's picture of Renaissance Italy was not so much triumphant as ambivalent; it contrasted sharply with his view of contemporary Switzerland as philistine and uncreative, and it never served to glorify democracy because he hated it. In another section of the book, Goody notes that 'Burkhardt actually wrote of a 'mystical marriage' between Greece and his own country, Germany, so that the ancients had to have everything good that marked the moderns' and then concludes: 'Such claims must arouse a measure of scepticism in a critical reader' (p. 37). Surely they must, though in more than one way. How can 'Burkhardt' be a Swiss nationalist in one passage and a German chauvinist in another? We do not know. There are no references to Goody's sources, and the index attributes the two passages to the same person.

Less confused, but more unjust, is Goody's discussion of Norbert Elias. The author of *The civilising process* is accused of many sins, and Goody finds it particularly 'unacceptable that there is no reference to other urban societies', which could have 'led him to query the notion of a special "social personality structure" in the west' (p. 171). One can criticize Elias for many things – his fusion of Freudian *Entwicklungspsychologie* with Hegelian *Geschichtsphilosophie*, his dependence upon the memoirs of Saint-Simon, etc. – but not for the absence of cross-cultural comparisons. In a central chapter of the *Civilising process*, he writes:

One cannot avoid comparing the direction of this civilizing-curve [concerning table manners] with the custom long practised in China. There, as has been said, the knife disappeared many centuries ago from use at the table. According to the feelings of many Chinese, the manner in which Europeans eat is 'uncivilized'. 'The Europeans are barbarians', people say there now and again, 'they eat with swords'.<sup>18</sup>

The main problem underlying Goody's cavalier treatment of Eurocentric scholars is the lack of critical self-reflection. He is driven by an unwavering belief in the superiority of post-colonial historiography, both morally and epistemologically. From this standpoint, he cannot accept that, analytically, post-colonial approaches may be working better in some subject areas (such as the history of material culture or medical treatment) than others (such as the history of historiography). Neither does he acknowledge that claims to European singularity do not necessarily amount to claims to European superiority. He thus seems to overlook the long tradition of deconstructing European mythologies from Eurocentric points of views – a tradition that has borne richer fruit than the more recent provincializing exercises. For instance, it has proved more rewarding to work out how little modern Western democracy resembles its Ancient Greek namesake than to create new historiographical myths reaching back to off-shore democracies on non-European pirate boats. Finally, Goody cannot see what Völkel describes so lucidly – that even the most Europhobic

<sup>18</sup> Norbert Elias, *The civilizing process: sociogenetic and psychogenetic investigations* (Oxford, 2000), p. 107.

academics inevitably reproduce or even strengthen Eurocentric worldviews. So, too, does he when framing Asian and African history with European concepts such as capitalism, democracy, and bourgeoisie.

### III

To find a critical assessment of global history's present state and situation by a global historian, one can turn to Christopher Bayly's 'History and world history', which is the first of sixteen thematic essays in *A concise companion to history* (2011), edited by Ulinka Rublack.<sup>19</sup> Bayly, who has contributed much to the triumph of global history at Western universities in recent decades, criticizes postmodernists within his field for having 'overplayed their hand by denouncing all "grand narratives", except their own' (p. 16), and warns his colleagues of obscuring the history of the great divide between the West and the rest by explaining it away 'entirely as a "late divergence"' (p. 4). According to him, the divide may have become fully apparent only around 1800, but 'Europe's competitive advantages' had revealed themselves as early as 1550. One such advantage, he argues, was 'a more pervasive proto-anthropology' developed particularly by Churchmen in the colonies (p. 5). Bayly's assessment is all the more interesting as he does not believe global history to be in a position of political strength. Rather, he sees it threatened internally by the dominance of political correctness over epistemological soundness, and externally by the return of a distinctively nationalist historicism in research and school curricula. One cannot deny that Bayly has a point as far as school education is concerned, especially in Britain, where Niall Ferguson, Simon Schama, and other professional admirers of the national past have lobbied for a return to study great men and great battles in history teaching and found support from Tory members of the government. However, one could also argue that these public academics are trying to win back in the schoolhouse what they have lost in the ivory tower. Bayly may consider his opponents to be more powerful than they actually are – an impression that is reinforced by his challenge to the 'Cambridge School' of political thought with a 'global intellectual history'.

Bayly's essay figures under the title 'Writing history', together with three other articles on 'Causation' (R. Bin Wong), 'The status of historical knowledge' (Ulinka Rublack), and 'Historians' (Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith). Unfortunately, the last of these is a missed opportunity. Instead of being a reflection on historians' self-understanding, work ethics, social roles, political functions and so on, Kelley and Smith offer an overview on history writing from Herodotus to Lynn Hunt that repeatedly takes on the character of name-dropping. Important topics such as the complicated relationship between professional and amateur historians during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are touched on but not discussed. The essay ends with the elitist regret

<sup>19</sup> Ulinka Rublack, ed., *A concise companion to history* (Oxford, 2011).



that the Internet will enable ‘the electronically adept’ to join ‘the ranks of scholars’ and the strange expectation that it will move ‘the identity of the historian . . . another step away from the “source”’ (p. 102). Whatever may be meant by ‘source’, it cannot be original documents, because no other medium has made them available in such abundance as the Internet.

The remaining dozen essays in the book are subsumed under the heading ‘Themes and structures’. Conceptually, it is a potpourri, but there are many good pieces among them, for instance ‘Power’ by Christopher Clark (who addresses this vast topic with an insightful mix of general observations and telling examples), ‘Gender’ by Dorothy Ko (who outlines an intertwined history of gender and of gender studies), and ‘Emotions’ by Eiko Ikegami (who offers a much more nuanced criticism of Norbert Elias’s *Civilising process* using the not-so-Hegelian counter-example of Japan). The common element of all contributions is the inclusion of a global dimension or at least of a global touch, and the common element of all contributors is their employment at British or American universities.

A very different kind of multi-authored history of historiography is presented in volume v of the *The Oxford history of historical writing*.<sup>20</sup> It covers the period from 1945 onwards in 700 pages written by three dozen authors. The editors are Axel Schneider and Daniel Woolf, and the latter’s impact can be felt in a distinctively global framework, which for this period makes sense in every respect. However, compared to Woolf’s single-authored textbook, the global approach is conventionally, not to say traditionally, organized. The first ten essays are devoted to specific themes or methods, which are more representative of the state of historiography in 2011 than in 1945 or 1980. They include some original and rewarding choices, such as an overview on ‘Censorship and history’ by Antoon De Baets or a discussion of ‘The historiography of environmental history’ by J. R. McNeill. Noticeably missing in this section are articles on history publishing, and historiographical enquiry, which could have shed light on the massive changes brought about by the digital revolution. More problematic still, there is no contribution on popular and public history, which probably had the biggest social and political impact of all history writing during the period covered by this volume. So while the editors flatten the hierarchy between Western and non-Western historiography, they reinforce another hierarchy no less questionable – the one between professional and popular history.

The remaining twenty-two articles deal with historiography in one single nation or language area, from Germany to Mexico to Korea. This organization does not necessarily further cross-cultural perspectives on regional and global ‘entanglements’, which, during this period, were stronger than ever before. The articles themselves provide solid to excellent introductions. Michael Bentley, in

<sup>20</sup> Axel Schneider and Daniel Woolf, eds., *The Oxford dictionary of historical writing, v: Historical writing since 1945* (Oxford, 2011).

his witty and elegantly written piece on Britain, even makes up for conceptual omissions in the first part of the volume. He not only includes the social and political forces working in British history writing, but also the changes brought to the history profession by radio, television, computer, and the Internet (pp. 293–4).

#### IV

Writing about the recent historiography of one's own nation can hardly be done in a neutral tone. Bentley takes a critical stance, especially towards a historiographical species well adapted to British upper-middle-class culture: the theory-averse storyteller. In contrast, the tone chosen by the two historians to be discussed now is congratulatory, not to say self-congratulatory. There is nothing wrong with this as long as authors do not confuse beating their breasts with unbiased scholarship or try to make their readers confuse the two. The authors in question are not free from suspicion in this regard.

André Burguière was thirty years old when he was elected 'secrétaire de redaction' of the legendary journal *Annales* in 1969. Twelve years later, he became a senior member of the editorial board, where he has remained until the present day. This information is given in Timothy Tackett's instructive foreword to the translation of Burguière's history of *The Annales School*, originally published in 2006, and it is also given by Burguière himself in his introduction, together with an explanation as to why he undertook writing a history he was himself involved in and is still part of.<sup>21</sup> The explanation itself is not entirely convincing as it boils down to a ritualistic, but inconsistent, display of intellectual self-effacement and methodical discipline. Burguière argues that as an insider he is no more or less qualified than an outsider to write this history because he knows 'how to step back and respect certain objectification procedures' (p. 9). This means, more precisely, not to include himself in the story, a decision he also justifies biographically, using an image familiar to most history students: 'Medieval clerics had the impression, in reading classical authors, that they were dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. Similarly, I will not conceal my continuing fondness and admiration for these elders in whose shadow I learned to love history' (p. 9). The medieval metaphor serves a modern method here: you blank yourself out of the picture to satisfy quasi-formal requirements of objectivity in order to pay homage to your historiographical forefathers. Self-explanation can be a sophisticated form of self-concealment.

Burguière would have brought less trouble upon himself (more on that below) had he presented the book as what it is: an exemplary piece of memory politics. It is based on the conviction that the 'histoire scientifique', introduced by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in the 1920s, 'has not been superseded', but

<sup>21</sup> André Burguière, *The Annales school: an intellectual history* (Ithaca, NY, 2009).

only asks 'to be reborn' (pp. 9–10), and it is driven by the motivation to prepare this rebirth along the lines of his own research philosophy, which is, in a nutshell, historical anthropology operating on the mystical category *mentalités*. Thus, Burguière's own role as curator of the intellectual heritage bequeathed by the founding fathers of the *Annales* is afforded a higher status in this book. Fittingly, it starts and ends with the anecdote about an American historian at an international conference, who aggressively expressed her astonishment at the 'obsession among the *Annales* school historians' to cite the review's founders at every turn (p. 1).

Burguière's memory politics result in a story that begins with two differing equals, Febvre and Bloch, who created the 'spirit of the *Annales*' in a collaborative effort full of heated exchanges, declarations of friendship, and bursts of originality. It then turns to their powerful successors in the post-war period, who superseded the founders' legacy with problematic methodological concepts and research practices. Most damaging of all, in Burguière's eyes, was Ernest Labrousse, with his attempt to replace the informal co-operation of international scholars with the formal co-ordination of national Ph.D.-cohorts, to favour socio-economic quantification to anthropological interpretation and to weaken the enquiry of *mentalités* by giving in to 'determinist temptation' (p. 103).

Compared to Labrousse, Fernand Braudel is presented as a rather minor figure (also in terms of damage done), which is a bold assessment considering the standing attributed to him in most other studies of the *Annales* School. Burguière describes *histoire totale*, a concept introduced by Febvre but mostly associated with Braudel, as a 'monstrous and ridiculous chimera', and he seems to consider Braudel's greatest contribution to the *Annales* School as having shown Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie a way out of the Labroussian army (pp. 133–5). Ladurie indeed emerges as the true heir to Bloch and Febvre by transforming the study of mentalities into historical anthropology. The final part of the book then turns into a lengthy review article of more recent works, including a subchapter entitled 'Passing of the Comet', which offers Foucault posthumously a place within the *Annales* School, though not without criticizing him for ignoring the concept of mentality (p. 210).

What brought Burguière into trouble was the decision to limit his history to France. Given the book's principal purpose, to serve memory politics, this was a reasonable choice. Yet again, Burguière was unable to justify himself. He half-apologized for failing 'the founders of the *Annales*', who had denounced 'the Gallocentrism of French historians', and half-explained the decision away by his 'greater familiarity with French studies' (p. 5). The trouble came in the form of a long and somewhat autobiographical review in the *London Review of Books* that spared no effort to strip the French historian to his shirt. Its author is Richard Evans, and its main theme is the historiographical virtue of internationalism.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Richard Evans, 'Cite ourselves!', *London Review of Books*, 31 (17 Dec. 2009), pp. 12–14.

Burguière does not figure prominently in Evans's review and neither does his book. Evans starts with a recollection of his own youthful self being passionate about international scholarship in general and the Annales School in particular. The bulk of the review consists of a different history of the Annales, largely drawn from Lutz Raphael's *Die Erben von Bloch und Febvre* of 1994.<sup>23</sup> Evans highlights Febvre's cynical manoeuvres to turn his heresy into the new orthodoxy while continuing to sell it as heresy. He also argues that Braudel's pupils narrowed the international outlook and character of the movement to a hexagonal affair. This is where Burguière comes into play. Evans introduces him as a hopeless case of national narrowness, which may not be entirely wrong, but he does it in a way that is not entirely correct. Burguière, in his clumsy apologia, writes: 'At a time when international scientific organizations and events . . . seem to be globalizing historical research to the same extent as is seen in the experimental and exact sciences, it is troubling to observe that most historical debate continues to unfold within a national framework' (p. 5). Evans renders this as follows: 'Burguière writes that he has confined his book to French historians, mainly because "most historical debate continues to unfold within a national framework".' And when Burguière meditates: 'By virtue of its international success, *microhistoria*, launched by Italian historians . . . close to the Annales school, may belie the idea of a national isolation of historiographical issues and trajectories' (p. 6), Evans concludes: 'He believes there has always been, and continues to be, a "national isolation of historiographical issues and trajectories".'

This exercise in the fine art of misquoting finds a match at the end of the review, where Evans uses a sledgehammer to crack a nut by first suspecting Burguière of not having read Raphael's study and then qualifying his book as 'self-important, pompous, pretentious, solipsistic, often obscure, sometimes barely coherent'. One cannot help thinking that there may be some nationalist undertones in this internationalist bashing. Poor Burguière published a riposte entitled *Déconstruction d'une démolition* five months later, thereby giving another impression of his provincial horizon, as it was not a reaction to Evans's review, but rather to an appreciative account of it in a French journal.<sup>24</sup> Preoccupied with damage limitation, Burguière did not dare return the compliment of a nationalist attitude to his critic, although it would not have been too difficult to do so, considering that Evans borrowed a few arguments of the review from his own book, which he had published a few months before and in which he praised the internationalism of British historians.

<sup>23</sup> Lutz Raphael, *Die Erben von Bloch und Febvre: Annales-Geschichtsschreibung und nouvelle histoire in Frankreich 1945–1980* (Stuttgart, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> André Burguière, 'Déconstruction d'une démolition', *Books*, 1 May 2010: [www.booksmag.fr/blog/droit-de-reponse-dandre-burguiere-221](http://www.booksmag.fr/blog/droit-de-reponse-dandre-burguiere-221); 'Les historiens français refont leur histoire', *Books*, 22 Feb. 2010: [www.booksmag.fr/focus/les-historiens-francais-refont-leur-histoire-856/recherche/area=europe](http://www.booksmag.fr/focus/les-historiens-francais-refont-leur-histoire-856/recherche/area=europe).

*Cosmopolitan islanders*, as its title reads, is an extended version of Evans's inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge.<sup>25</sup> According to the nature of the event, it is a celebratory account of his discipline, British historiography of the European continent. What makes the eulogy special is that it comes by means of statistical data on historians working on nations other than their own. Evans selected Britain, the United States, Germany, France, and Italy and came to the conclusion that US historians are the most 'cosmopolitan', with 61 per cent working on foreign topics, followed by the British, the French, the Germans, and the Italians, with only 12 per cent studying non-Italian history. The conclusion is premature.<sup>26</sup> The figures collected by Evans's research assistants are, with the exception of Britain and Germany, hardly representative of the whole guild of academic historians within each country and, on top of that, they amount to a comparison of apples and pears. For France and Italy, only two history departments in each country have been included, of which none is situated at the *École normale supérieure* or the *Scuola normale superiore*. For the United States, in contrast, the data is taken exclusively from seven of the greatest private universities plus Berkeley. It would not be too bold an assumption that the number would drop dramatically from 61 per cent with the thousands of public US institutions included. The only argument Evans can make on firm ground is that there are more historians studying foreign countries at British than at German universities.<sup>27</sup> Whether this is a sign of greater British cosmopolitanism is yet another question. One can also write the history of foreign countries for the purpose of national celebration, a motive that has a particularly great tradition in Britain.

A second argument brought forward by Evans for British historians' cosmopolitanism and, ultimately, superiority, is the impact they have on foreign countries' national historiography, as reflected in the great number of translations and sales of their books abroad. This is a stronger, but still not entirely convincing point. It is indeed striking how well British historians are generally received on the continent, and it would be hard to argue that this has nothing to do with elegant writing and interesting arguments. But why are they interesting? In some countries, especially in Germany, British historians seem to walk through the political minefield that the more recent national history still is for domestic scholars. They are thus more inclined to move in directions where locals would not dare go and tend to be warmly welcomed by them when

<sup>25</sup> Richard Evans, *Cosmopolitan islanders: British historians and the European Continent* (Cambridge, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> For another critical assessment of Evans's data based on different statistical material see Peter Baldwin, 'Smug Britannia: the dominance of (the) English in current history writing and its pathologies', *Contemporary European History*, 20 (2011), pp. 351–66.

<sup>27</sup> The most complete comparative data on British and German history publishing after 1945 is now available in Olaf Blaschke, *Verleger machen Geschichte: Buchhandel und Historiker seit 1945 im deutsch-britischen Vergleich* (Göttingen, 2010). As far as I can see, though, Blaschke does not provide quantitative information about publications on foreign topics.

returning unscathed. Christopher Clark's revisionist history of Prussia, *Iron kingdom*, is a recent example of this. Evans rightly points out that one reason for British historians' popularity abroad is – 'France aside' – the openness of foreign historians to foreign ideas (p. 50).

In order to turn this success story into an argument for the general superiority of British history writing, Evans makes an opposite claim, and this is where his argument falters. He observes that continental historians are little read in Britain, let alone translated into English, and ascribes this to a lack of quality and readability. His judgement on German historians is short and clear: they

have no incentive to write for anyone apart from each other and a captive readership of students taking their courses, and strive to make their reputations with the longest books, the longest sentences and the longest footnotes; British publishers look at their work with horror as unreadable and unmarketable, and seldom translate it. (p. 55)

As with most national stereotyping, this statement may contain a grain of truth, but does not explain very much. What about British historians working on Britain? Could it be that they cultivate more insular reading habits for the simple reason that many of them are not as familiar with French, German, and Italian as their continental counterparts are with English? And what about the low number of German novelists being translated into English? Do we have to make their long footnotes and bad writing responsible, too, or could this have more to do with hegemonic complacency on the side of British and American publishers and publics? Questions about historians can hardly be answered by looking at historians alone, but then their successes or failures could no longer be presented as a direct result of personal virtues or vices. Evans, in his extended inaugural lecture, understandably has little inclination to succumb to such sobering thoughts.

Much of *Cosmopolitan islanders* consists of quotes taken from emails of friends and colleagues speaking about their – mostly successful – reception abroad, and of vignettes of previous Regius professors and their works on continental history. This makes for a read not unlike Burguière's book, except that the Frenchman's heroes appear more fascinating in many ways than a Temperley, Taylor, or Trevelyan. One has to wait till the last chapter to reach the best part of the book, where Evans speaks about the prospects of British historians' engagement with the continent. Having written the book before the British government announced drastic university reforms, Evans locates the biggest threat as being 'the rapid and continuing decline of language-learning' in British schools (p. 201). This, according to him, leads to fewer young historians being capable of studying foreign sources in their original language, an effect reinforced by the little time Ph.D. students have to improve their foreign-language skills because of government requirements to complete their studies within three to four years (p. 215). For the generation of younger historians

now filling new posts at British universities, Evans is already seeing his countrymen being gradually replaced by continentals, most of them Germans. So, will the refined species of Cosmopolitan islanders be succeeded by Teutonic language-torturers and footnote fetishists? Not necessarily, Evans reassures his readers, as long as many of the newly employed German historians have already taken their undergraduate and postgraduate studies in Britain and thus had the chance to adapt to 'the British tradition of writing for a broad readership in a literary style' (p. 207). With student fees skyrocketing in Britain and the overproduction of academics reaching unprecedented heights in Germany, this may soon turn out to be a pious hope.

## V

Perhaps, though, that great tradition of British historians feeding the literary market with beautiful prose is less dependent on university education than Evans believes. What could, in fact, be more important is the relationship between academic and non-academic history writers, the organization of the literary market, and the commercial opportunities beckoning to history writers. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was not unusual for prominent historians to move in and out of universities. They imagined themselves as independent 'men of letters', cultivating the ideal of gentlemanly amateurism while simultaneously making money by satisfying the demands of a growing middle-class readership. Eminent scholars such as E. H. Carr and E. P. Thompson only spent a part of their professional lives within ivory towers and the rest as freelance writers, newspaper editors, or diplomats. Careers like theirs, which were very unusual in French higher education and virtually non-existent in German universities at the time, served as an antidote to the ossification of academic historiography. Today, border crossers resisting the dictates of academic professionalization are a rare sight at British universities, too, though there still are a few prominent examples, such as Noel Malcolm at Oxford University or William St Clair at Cambridge. Still, many historians with purely academic careers have so far stuck to the tradition of writing for professional and lay audiences alike, and one motivation to do so has been the continuing possibility to enhance a modest academic salary with considerable revenue from publications.

In fact, with Andrew Wylie and other literary agents adding senior faculty staff to their list of 'highbrow' authors and marketing these authors with 'lowbrow' methods on a global scale, some academic historians are now able to pocket advance payments that would have made previous generations of 'men of letters' blush – or turn them green with envy. I do not think that there are academic historians on the continent who have an agent, let alone secure large advances for book contracts, but I might be wrong, because if there are any, they probably would not let anybody know for fear of the persistently powerful prejudice that commercial success is a sign of intellectual failure.

To get a full picture of how public historians in Britain survived in the role of ‘men of letters’ by conforming to gentlemanly ideals of wit and style and turning them into commercial success, one has to reach for the book of a literary scholar who himself combines many features of this role. This is *Common reading: critics, historians, publics* by Stefan Collini.<sup>28</sup> The book consists of two dozen short essays, most of which were written on the occasion of a book review and first published in the *Times Literary Supplement* or the *London Review of Books*. More than half deal with a single literary critic, public philosopher, or historian; the rest is devoted to more general topics such as ‘The author as celebrity’ or ‘The literary critic as hero’. Among the historians selected by Collini are figures as diverse as Arthur Bryant and Perry Anderson, E. P. Thompson and Herbert Butterfield.

E. H. Carr appears once again, portrayed by Collini as an anti-intellectual intellectual, a popular role in twentieth-century England, though more on the right than, as in Carr’s case, among sympathizers with Soviet Russia. Carr’s self-image as an outsider in all camps, cultivated with the necessary moderation and panache, partly explains his appeal to broad audiences. He behaved as a realist among academics, as an intellectual among diplomats, and as a Russophile among Cold Warriors. His preaching of ‘realism’ and damning of ‘illusion’ had, Collini writes, the paradoxical effect that ‘he tended to underestimate the role of ideology in determining *Soviet* policy, just as he had in the case of Nazi Germany in the late 1930s. His devotion to *Realpolitik* thus turned out to be in this respect *unrealistic*, a failure accurately to register the actual moving forces in world affairs’ (p. 164). Collini also detects ‘a streak of soured romanticism’ in Carr’s commitment to ‘realism’, which he sees expressed in the regret that the future did not look as bright anymore to Carr as it had looked to the British of the nineteenth century (p. 173).

What makes Collini’s portraits so rich, apart from his subtle and precise prose, is his sense of scholarly self-contradictions and his ability to describe them as a source of both ideological blind spots and literary productivity. Naturally, this sense bears richer fruit when Collini deals with authors of a certain intellectual calibre. Arthur Bryant, devotee to ‘the historic and eternal English vision’, fighter of England’s hereditary enemies (‘intellectuals’, ‘dons’, ‘highbrows’, ‘secularists’, ‘progressives’), friend of the ‘good ordinary Englishmen’, and best-selling ‘man of letters’, cannot offer much more than a picture of piled-up anachronisms:

the figure whom Britain’s cultural and political establishment had gathered to honour in Westminster Abbey in the 1980s had sustained into the 1950s a relation with a public defined in the 1920s and 1930s while writing in the manner and with the confidence of an Edwardian man of letter who in turn was striving to emulate the achievements of Victorian historians. (p. 137)

<sup>28</sup> Stefan Collini, *Common reading: critics, historians, publics* (Oxford, 2008).



More rewarding is Collini's portrait of Perry Anderson as a Marxist of aristocratic grandeur. Collini does not hide his admiration for the man. 'It hardly seems fair', he writes about a collection of Anderson's essays (with obvious similarities to his own anthology), 'that one man could move with such ease through the history of so many periods and regions or through so many different kinds of writing' (p. 190). This, however, does not prevent him from describing Anderson as a person sharing many traits with British 'men of letters' on the conservative side. Despite his cosmopolitan flair and polyglot virtuosity, Anderson appears as a distinctively British intellectual—an upper-middle-class rebel adhering, in his own words, to the principle that 'writing well is the best revenge' and displaying a gentlemanly disdain for 'institutions of higher learning' with their 'pretentious jargons, guild conceit' and 'standards of writing that would have left Marx and Morris speechless' (p. 188). Anderson's fear that the migration of his comrades into universities would cripple the intellectual power and aesthetic prowess of the left was followed by himself taking up a distinguished chair at UCLA (though part-time only), and with the Marxist movement in the West driven to the margins of the intellectual spectrum, Collini cannot help asking which readership Anderson is addressing himself to with his refined English that comes decorated with pieces of German, Latin, and French. The answer remains vague, but Collini's final conclusion comes surprisingly close to that on Arthur Bryant—with a small, but crucial distinction: while Bryant was outmoded, Anderson is and has always been 'untimely', an aristocratic mind deriving his relentless intellectual energy from an eighteenth-century code of honour that 'scoundrels should not be allowed to get away without, at the very least, a good thrashing' (p. 195). If this is so, then Anderson must feel very much at home in our post-neo-liberal era of neo-liberalism.

And what about Collini himself? Whom does he write for, for what purpose and from what position? The answer may be even more difficult than in Anderson's case. It is fascinating, but also irritating to see that Collini, in much of his work, revolves around the public role aspired for and attributed to British intellectuals without ever making himself, at least to my knowledge, a part of the story he tells. Many critics of his books have been desperate to pin him down, with little success so far. Terry Eagleton, in a review of Collini's *Absent minds: intellectuals in Britain*, thought to have found 'an enormous blind spot', that is the 'critique of its own modern-day, middle-class liberalism'. The study, he criticized, dished out even-handedly to the left and right and thus stood 'where we all instinctively, corporeally imagine we are: bang in the middle'.<sup>29</sup> In Eagleton's eyes, of course, the middle is a no-go area in a double sense. It is way too far to the right and no place for committed scholarship. With Collini becoming a prominent voice against the commercialization of higher education

<sup>29</sup> Terry Eagleton, 'The truth speakers', *New Statesman*, 3 Apr. 2006: [www.newstatesman.com/200604030039](http://www.newstatesman.com/200604030039).

in recent years, the reproach of lacking commitment may not stick very well anymore, while the political left–right spectrum just seems more obsolete a classification than ever.<sup>30</sup>

And, still, the question about Collini's public position and self-perception continues to loom large. When E. P. Thompson thought in the early 1970s that commerce had taken its grip on academic life, he left the University of Warwick in protest and became a political campaigner and freelance writer. It seems that Collini has never flirted with such a drastic reaction to the state-run pseudo-commercialization of higher education. Instead, he turned himself into a staunch defender of the university as a bastion of intellectual curiosity, independent from the dictates of commerce and politics. This is obviously a vision of the university from a humanities department, and by drawing a clear demarcation line between academic and economic rules, Collini risks blinding out the forces of commercialization within the university, be it the willingness of scholars to be promoted by literary agents or the eagerness of scientists to be funded with corporate money (which then also helps to cross-subsidize the humanities, especially in places like Cambridge). Sparing his colleagues in college, but not the scoundrels in government, Collini becomes an 'untimely' thinker himself, treasuring an institutional heritage that may have been given up long ago. Ultimately, his presentation of the university as a unique and privileged place of intellectual endeavour implies, perhaps against his own intention, the clearest renunciation so far of the role of the 'man of letters', as played by British scholars, whose trademark has been to treat the university as one of many mind-narrowing establishments and to associate intellectual independence with a lack of institutional allegiance. Is now the time, after decades of premature announcements, to issue a death certificate to that tenacious survivor of the early modern period? Not necessarily. With the humanistic academic becoming a stranger in his own house, the British man of letters may see yet another new spring – in timely fashion.

<sup>30</sup> For Collini's contributions to the recent debate on higher education, see now his *What are universities for?* (London, 2012).