

Book Reviews

PETER BURKE. *The Polymath: A Cultural History from Leonardo da Vinci to Susan Sontag.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020. Pp. 352. \$39.00 (cloth).

Peter Burke's most recent contribution to the history of knowledge is a curious artifact. *The Polymath: A Cultural History from Leonardo da Vinci to Susan Sontag* is a book about people who exhibited erratic, superficial, and incomplete proficiency in many disciplines. It is written, however, by an author committed to a deep, systematic, and authoritative mastery of a single discipline. *The Polymath* is best understood in light of Burke's oeuvre as a whole. His first work of cultural history appeared in 1972, and since then he has contributed prolifically to the field, especially to the history of knowledge. Nominally an early modernist, his research has made forays into the twentieth century, as in his 1990 book on the Annales School,¹ and even up to the present, as in his two volumes on the social history of knowledge.²

The Polymath is principally a survey of polymathy's development over time, and as such favours gentle guidance rather than provocation in its argument. Since the historiography of polymaths is limited, there are few debates that Burke could engage with even if he were inclined to. Of the book's ten chapters, six are mainly chronological and three mainly conceptual, with a mix in the final chapter. The first chapter, "East and West," is an acknowledgement of polymaths' existence beyond Burke's chronological and regional areas of expertise. He notes a number of classical and early medieval Europeans, as well as several Asian and African scholars, whose broad learning would have to be encompassed by any definition of polymathy. The second chapter on "the renaissance man" opens with pre-printing press efforts to

¹ Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-89* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

² Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge: From Gutenberg to Diderot* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000) and Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge II: From the Encyclopédie to Wikipedia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

master all available knowledge — an endeavour helped by the smaller volume of information and hindered by the logistics of transmitting it — and closes with the famous Italian cohort of polymaths: Alberti, Leonardo, and Brunelleschi, among others.

The third chapter covers eight early modern “monsters of erudition”: Alsted, Comenius, Peiresc, Caramuel, Rudbeck, Kircher, Bayle, and Leibniz. In these scholars Burke sees the high point of the polymathic project. The next two chapters trace polymathy’s decline in the face of social and intellectual pressures. He first covers the rise of the “Man of Letters,” whose diverse knowledge was tempered by decorum and civility, before turning to the disciplinary territoriality of nineteenth century academia. In the final chapters, Burke discusses the experience of contemporary polymaths, which he suggests is characterized by interdisciplinarity and the challenges presented by the internet’s mass of information.

Burke’s chronology of the European polymath is logical, clear, and generally hard to dispute; it is certainly well evidenced by his lists of polymaths and their works. The book’s most compelling elements, however, are its three conceptual chapters: “Introduction: What is a Polymath?,” “A Group Portrait,” and “Habitats.” As Burke notes, polymathy as a phenomenon has been understudied, despite individual polymaths’ popularity with biographers. He offers three typologies of polymathy as an organizing schema and as a set of tools for future scholars. First, he distinguishes “simultaneous” from “serial” polymaths. Simultaneous polymaths develop skills concurrently and amalgamate them freely, as in the case of Leonardo’s artistic and anatomical interests. Serial polymaths successively, and successfully, pursue careers in multiple disciplines, each time neglecting the earlier line of work. Vilfredo Pareto, for example, transitioned from engineering to economics, and Jared Diamond from ornithology to history.

One can further divide polymaths into “centrifugal” and “centripetal” types. Centrifugal polymaths acquire disparate knowledge, often for the sake of its diversity, sometimes leading to expertise spread so thin that a great many projects are left incomplete or unsuccessful. Centripetal polymaths seek to synthesize their broad knowledge into a universal theory, a pursuit characterized by Johann Alsted as “the beauty of order.” Finally, Burke highlights the distinction made by Isaiah Berlin between Foxes and Hedgehogs: “foxes” will have many small insights while “hedgehogs” will have one big one. For example, the collector Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc was fox-like, coming to ideas via various items in his collections. Economist Herbert Simon, on the other hand, claimed to be a hedgehog with a “monomania” for the study of decision-making.

Surveying over five hundred polymaths, this book is currently the most exhaustive account of change over time in the experience and manifestation of polymathy. It successfully drags this obscure topic into the spotlight of scholarly analysis, even if it can be a little dense in its desire to illustrate each point exhaustively. For anyone wishing to work on the topic, *The Polymath* is indispensable; and for intellectual and cultural historians in general, it is certainly a useful guide, especially for the list

of polymaths in the appendix. The book's real merit is Burke's competing typologies of polymaths — serial vs. simultaneous, centrifugal vs. centripetal, fox vs. hedgehog — and his evenhanded analysis and lucid explanation of each paradigm. These typologies offer new tools with which scholars can begin to examine polymaths more systematically. This is a promising topic for future study, to be developed further by comparative intellectual and cultural historians as they consider polymaths and their practices across regions, periods, and cultures.

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VALERIE HANSEN. *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World –and Globalization Began.* Toronto: Scribner, 2020. Pp. 320. \$26.00 (paper).

Globalization and interconnectivity have become bywords for the digital age, synonymous with the human mobility, commercial exchange, and intellectual cross-fertilization that form the texture of lived experience. This global reality is often posited as emerging out of (early) modern imperialisms and colonialisms. Valerie Hansen in *The Year 1000* challenges us to look beyond these familiar colonial and post-colonial modernities toward the medieval global circa 1000 CE.

The book is divided digestibly into chapters both thematic and episodic. Chapter one outlines agricultural surpluses, demographic shifts, knowledge exchange, voyages of exploration, and increased trade that undergirded 1000 as a watershed in globalization. Chapters two and three challenge Eurocentric Age of Discovery (AofD) globalization narratives by arguing that earlier Viking voyages first linked European and American trading networks and “kicked off globalization,” while trans-American networks themselves were both indigenous and pre-Columbian (52). Chapter four then breaks to discuss how European networks were tempered and expanded as plundering chieftaincies transformed into monotheist monarchies through the example of the Rus. Chapter five resumes the argument for pre-AofD connectivity in Africa by linking the spread of Islam, material exchange, and the trans-Saharan gold trade along mature continental and maritime routes. Chapter six pivots to Central Asia, arguing that Eurasian material and cultural exchange persisted despite the Islamic-Buddhist ecumene split, while chapter seven weaves Indian Ocean merchants and Polynesian navigators into the argument for intensified material and cultural mobilities. These themes culminate in the final chapter on Song China where the concentration and maturity of networks of exchange made China “the most globalized place on Earth,” challenging previous Yuan-Ming periodization (1271-1644). Therein, Hansen highlights the Song dynasty's globally linked maritime network, vastly exceeding Columbus', and its proto-industrial ceramics export industry.

A key strength of this narrative, and overdue historiographical corrective, is Hansen's inclusion of the Americas, Polynesia, and Australia in the story of pre-Columbian globalization. Previous studies treated these territories as marginal to

larger politics that served as antecedents to modern nation-states, a discourse still geographically anchored in Eurasia.¹ However, the inclusion, for instance, of Vikings as capable navigators of the North Atlantic, and Mayans as both intensely commercial and expansionary, even possibly enslaving Vikings, allows the shedding of that vestigial husk of Eurasia-centric historiography. Hansen's medieval globalism is thus decidedly multi-polar and regionally dynamic.

Accordingly, this work serves as a watershed in the periodization of globalization and historiography of Afro-Eurasian exchange. To date, studies have focused on Mongol Eurasia (1206-1368) as the pivot point to globalization processes across Afro-Eurasia. Janet Abu-Lughod's oft-cited study emphasizes how the Mongols linked discreet global regions of interaction and exchange, broke down barriers, and intensified interaction.² Hansen, instead, demonstrates that by at least 1000 human society was already experiencing a surge in these processes. Thus, the Mongol Empire was not so much a radical departure from previous historical trajectories, but their culmination. Here geographical knowledge is instructive: Arab, Indian, and Chinese traders accumulated knowledge of coastal seas and routes that informed the intensification of maritime trade under the Mongols and further, made European explorations possible.

However, pushing back the start of globalization comes with risks. If global connections and cross-fertilizations with impacts down to "ordinary people" are the benchmark for globalization, why not start earlier? David Christian's call to contextualize trans-Eurasian exchange as subject to steppe nomad mobilities since the Bronze Age, and archaeolinguists' mapping of language onto the prehistoric global spread of agriculture, complicate any specific inception date for globalization.³ More recent research shows the first iteration of the Silk Roads (100BCE-250CE) witnessed the transformation of an exchange system from small-scale and regional to transcontinental. For example, Chinese silk and weaving technology spread all the way to the Syrian city of Palmyra where raw silk from tribute payments to the Xiongnu Empire ended up woven into textiles for the local market or transshipment.⁴ This too meets the criteria for diverse, vast linkages broadly affecting locals. Admittedly, these were slower mobilities, but if intensity and speed is the primary metric, then does that mean geography at scale is immaterial? That would be counterintuitive, rendering, for instance, archaeobotanical histories explaining the unhurried diffusion of foodways across Afro-Eurasia as non-global. Perhaps

¹ Thomas Allsen, *The Steppe and the Sea* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Penn. Press, 2019); Peter Stearns, *Globalization in World History* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

² Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), 154 and 182-183.

³ David Christian, "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History," *Journal of World History* 11, no. 1 (2000): 1-26.

⁴ Craig Benjamin, *Empires of Ancient Eurasia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1 and 133-137.

the solution lies in a big-tent approach to histories of globalization that remains tolerant of diverse manifestations, chronologies, and outcomes.

Hansen has provided yet another highly readable work on the medieval world of global exchange circa 1000. Its challenge to the boundaries of pre-modern globalization and intuitive use of richly detailed historical episodes make it of interest to specialists as well as an accessible and well-designed teaching resource for global history. As with her work on the Silk Roads, *The Year 1000* will be a guidepost for future research on globalization and human mobilities.

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ALAN MACEACHERN. *The Miramichi Fire: A History.* McGill-Queen's Rural, Wildland, and Resource Studies Series 13. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. Pp. 288. \$110.00 (cloth).

A thorough analysis of one of North America's worst natural disasters, Alan MacEachern's *Miramichi Fire: A History* offers an account both of the fire itself and its immediate impacts, as well as the later processes by which the fire was remembered, and ultimately, largely forgotten. Sweeping through the town of Miramichi, New Brunswick in 1825, the blaze was part of a particularly awful forest fire season throughout Eastern Canada and the north-east United States, with the town becoming a particularly potent symbol of its devastating effect on the region. The "forgetting" of the Miramichi fire is as worthwhile an investigation as the fire itself; while it was devastating, and reduced an entire community to ashes in a matter of perhaps fifteen minutes, its scant memorialization astonishes. In the years immediately following, the fire was the subject of numerous literary works and an international relief effort, but was not a major subject of discussion afterwards. MacEachern offers a valuable contribution on processes of historical memory, as well as a work of environmental history.

Certainly, MacEachern provides a thorough account of the fire, and marshals a significant number of contemporary sources to reconstruct the events of the catastrophe. Evidence tracking how little burning there had been in previous years (thus allowing for the ample accumulation of vegetation), the pattern of burning, and even the movement of a hurricane's remnants north on the coast, all illustrate just how unusually powerful the set of circumstances were that produced the Miramichi fire. Moreover, the transnational relief efforts directed towards aiding the communities affected are surveyed with erudite brevity, offering substantial but not miring detail. MacEachern's study illustrates, as much astute environmental history does, how arbitrary national boundaries can be: fires burning simultaneously with the conflagration in Miramichi on both sides of the border factored into how people responded to the situation in New Brunswick. The at-times distracting

humour in the book (among a multitude of examples, the book's third chapter is entitled "Leafs vs. Flames") and lack of a clear estimation of the fire's overall impact are relatively minor faults in the otherwise thorough account of the fire's immediate and long-term effects.

The issue of historical memory is a major component of the book, and provides an excellent illustration of how the subfields of historical memory and environmental history can work effectively together. Despite the nearly apocalyptic events of the day, the fire itself was not as terrible a disaster in the long term as might be assumed. To the contrary, thanks in part to post-fire relief efforts and the pattern of burning, a considerable level of continuity in Miramichi life before and after the fire was ultimately possible. The timber industry, the main economic engine of the colony, revived shortly after the blaze thanks to the numerous unburned trees, a common aspect of forest fires (132–133). This, ultimately, is the groundwork for MacEachern's argument regarding historical memory: the remarkable degree of continuity in Miramichi after the conflagration, despite the devastation of the fire, contributed to its "forgetting." Memorialization of the event was also hampered by a simple lack of repetition, which is strange in that such memorial efforts may well have occurred despite the timber industry's swift reemergence; while commemorations had been undertaken in the immediate wake of the fire, and on its anniversary (October 7th), only a decade after 1825 these days of commemoration were no longer observed (134–137).

A methodological element of MacEachern's study that he foregrounds is the importance of online databases to the way in which the book's research was undertaken. The amount of international press about the fire is integral to the book's positioning of historical memory, as well as the aid efforts directed towards Miramichi's rebuilding. This allows for discussion of some interesting events not previously mentioned in any North American accounts of this event. As MacEachern writes, "I learned that some would-be British immigrants sailed to the Miramichi region in early October 1825, found it in flames, and sailed right back, reporting what they had seen in local British newspapers" (12). Such an appreciative account of the possibilities online databases provide for research is welcome, and draws the historian's attention to these new avenues by which research may be undertaken with a greater attention to the global context.

The Miramichi Fire offers an engaging example of how the subfields of environmental history and historical memory can work together. Its writing style is accessible for undergraduate courses in Canadian history, while its analysis is sophisticated enough for graduate seminars on environmental history and historical memory.

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