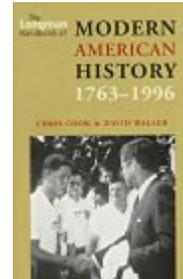


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Chris Cook, David Waller, eds. *The Longman Handbook of Modern American History, 1763-1996*. Essex and New York: Longman, 1998. xvi + 451 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-08488-9.

Reviewed by David B. Parker (Department of History and Philosophy, Kennesaw State University)  
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*The Longman Handbook of Modern American History, 1763-1996* is one of a series of history handbooks produced by this British publisher. Chris Cook, who edited the series as well as this particular volume, was Visiting Research Fellow at the London School of Economics and Head of the Modern Archives Survey at the British Library of Political and Economic Science; co-editor David Waller is Senior Lecturer in American Politics, Nene College, Northampton. The British origin of the book no doubt explains its title. Most of us teaching in the United States would define modern American history as twentieth century; a British scholar, on the other hand, might use that phrase to denote the period after British colonialism. The background of the editors might explain the books emphasis on politics, and especially recent politics.

The book is divided into several parts. The first and lengthiest, "Political History", contains a chronology and sections on the Constitution, the three branches of government, political parties, and presidential elections. Many readers will be frustrated by Cook and Wallers emphasis on recent politics. (The cover illustration, the famous photograph of a young Bill Clinton shaking hands with JFK in 1963, seems out of place on a handbook covering two and a third centuries of American history, but it sets the tone for the rest of the book.) The section on party composition in Congress, the list of Speakers of the House, and the table of voter turnout percentages in presidential elections all begin in 1945; the book does not have this information for the pre-1945 years. Those of us who teach American history would find the earlier numbers at least as useful as the later. Cook and Waller offer no explanation for this sort of omission.

The second part of the book, "Social and Religious History", contains a dozen sections, from Public Health

and Social Welfare and Education to "The Environment" and "The Gay and Lesbian Movement", each consisting of a chronology of key events and, in just over half of the sections, some sort of additional information. "The Womens Movement, for example, adds a list of states that allowed women to vote before the Nineteenth Amendment and two tables: divorce rates from 1920 to the present and legal divorces after the Roe v. Wade decision. Again, some readers might be annoyed with the selection of information. Why divorce rates only after 1920? How about abortions, legal or otherwise, before 1973? Is the editors point that the womens movement led not only to greater political rights, but also to higher divorce and abortion rates?

Part three, "Economic History", contains statistics on population, immigration, government budgets, inflation, labor, banking, agriculture, transportation, employment, and so forth. A table entitled Urbanization, 1900 tells how many American cities had 200,00 or more residents, 100,00 to 200,000, 50,00 to 100,000, and so forth, for that one year, suggesting that Cook and Waller do not understand urbanization as a process rather than as some sort of static aspect of history. And of course having the figures for just one year makes the table useless for a teacher trying to show urban trends.

Immigration statistics, broken down by country, cover only the years after 1970; the so-called new immigration of the late 19th/early 20th centuries, an important part of our survey courses, is not covered at all. The balance of trade statistics begin in 1900. Did the United States not have a balance of trade before the twentieth century? Statistics on consumer prices and inflation are contained in two tables; one covers the years to 1890, the other since 1945. The reader has no way to connect mod-

ern (post-World War II) figures to earlier ones.

Part four, "Foreign Affairs and Defence", is followed by a series of some two hundred brief biographies (Bella Abzug, Dean Acheson, and the John Adamses to Wendell Willkie and Woodrow Wilson, each a few sentences), a Glossary of Terms (apparently intended to be able to stand on its own, rather than as simply a list of words used in this Handbook), and a bibliography of works in American history.

In addition to its frustrating and inexplicable omissions, the book has mistakes. Among the entries for 1785 in the Political Chronology is New York State makes slavery illegal (p. 8). But slavery continued in NY until 1827. What happened in 1785? The New York Manumission Society was established and a law banning the importation of slaves into the state was passed-but a bill providing for gradual abolition was defeated in the state legis-

lature. John F. Kennedy is listed as having become president (not simply elected to the office) in 1960 (p. 277) and in February 1961 (p. 268); the correct date is somewhere in the middle.

In short, this is an incomplete and unreliable handbook. Perhaps European journalists needing a statistic or a name to spice up a story on the United States will find some use for it; historians, as both teachers and scholars, likely will not.

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