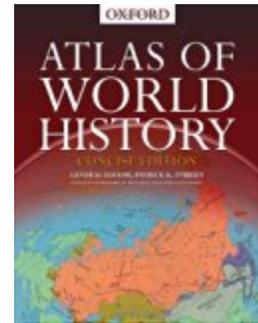


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Patrick K. O'Brien, ed. *Atlas of World History*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 312 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-521921-0.

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## World History at a Global Glance

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This text is a very good, concise atlas for the general reader, students, and anyone interested in the graphic illustration of world history. The scope and presentation are truly global, from the excellent maps and charts with the paleo-anthropological text on human evolutionary development and prehistory since the last ice age of 12,000 B.C./B.C.E., to the last section on the twentieth century.

The editor and authors provide excellent thumbnail sketches of the dynamic scope of the human historical record. Incorporating a late-twentieth-century historical perspective, they avoid most Eurocentric biases in the maps and texts. By necessity the basic organization of the atlas remains along a temporal sequence. But within that framework the authors present a global perspective focusing upon the totality of the human historical experience in Eurasia, Africa, Australia, and the Americas, in terms not simply of political and economic development but of cultural and social development as well. Particularly useful and informative are those comparative and comprehensive sections that usually begin or conclude each of the five major sections into which the atlas is divided. Throughout the atlas efforts are made to establish a comprehensive and comparative polycentric global historical perspective, through, e.g., the paleo-anthropological sub-section, the five sub-sections on prehistory, Eurasian trade at the beginning of the common era, the religions of the Medieval world, and the last nine sub-sections on global events and processes of the twen-

tieth century. Only the most narrowly focused would complain about the comprehensiveness of the effort.

Two glaring Eurocentric conceits, however, remain in the text. First, if this text is intended for a global Anglophonic audience outside of the United Kingdom, the exclusive reliance upon Before Christ (B.C.) and Anno Domini (A.D.) to date events should be rectified with the addition of Before the Common Era (B.C.E.) and Common Era (C.E.), respectively. Secondly, despite the excellent effort and presentation of non-Western historical events and maps, the atlas still remains weighted towards a presentation of Western history and the modern era. The first two sections on the ancient world and the medieval world are covered in 100 pages. But the last three sections on the early modern world, the age of revolutions, and the twentieth century are covered in 171 pages. While sources and events place a greater emphasis upon the modern era and Western civilization, the atlas needs to go further in its non-Western materials in future editions, especially for Africa which is minimally represented in the last three sections by only three sub-sections pertaining exclusively to it: "Africa, 1500-1800," "Africa, 1800-1880," and "The Partition of Africa, 1880-1939." These criticisms, however, do not substantially tarnish a fundamentally sound work.

Finally, questions arise about some of the specific map projections and presentations. The contoured maps, while breaking up the text from a monotonous blocked appearance, at times can be distracting and, for general readers, possibly confusing. Examples of this would be

the contoured maps on “The World of the Crusaders,” where a critical Viking region—Atlantic Europe—literally fades off into the horizon (p. 94); or that of South America regarding “The Slave Economies of the Western Hemisphere,” where Atlantic South America, importantly coastal Brazil, is distorted at the horizon of the map (p. 127). And the sub-section “The Growth of the Atlantic Economies” utilizes only two European maps and none of the entire Atlantic economy (pp. 128-29).

The sections on the Americas are solid. But some of the Native American sub-sections need to be more strongly coordinated with each other in terms of narrative and temporal continuity, e.g., “Civilizations in Mesoamerica and South America, 500-1500” and “The Inca and Aztec Empires, 1400-1500.” While the maps in these sub-sections provide substantial information on ethnic and political divisions, the important pre-Columbian trade routes and commercial connections

should have been more fully integrated into them. The sub-sections on Latin America cover the diversity of that region without glossing over too much in the basic narrative. And the sections on the historical development of the United States are thorough and do not suffer from the North American preoccupation with either traditional conceptions of U.S. historical exceptionalism or the new political triumphantism of the early twenty-first century.

But none of these specific criticisms are fatal flaws in an essentially sound historical presentation. The *Oxford Atlas of World History* is highly recommended as a good educational value for the general reader or introductory student at the university and community-college level, as a useful and educative addition to those libraries’ holdings, or as a supplemental or complementary text in undergraduate courses.

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