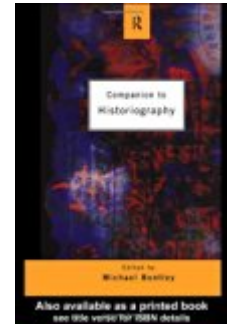


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Bentley, ed. *Companion to Historiography*. New York: Routledge, 1997. xvii + 997 pp. \$150.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-03084-7.

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Companion...or Just Good Friends?

A thousand-page book on the historiography of the world. With such a subject, a thousand pages may be limited space, it may also be way too much. No single author is able to write a substantial book of a thousand pages on world historiography, as no one has the breadth of knowledge to write such a study or to judge all of it as a reviewer. The editor, however, who engages a whole battalion of experts (43 in this case) for such a laudable project runs a high risk of ending up with extreme differences in quality and approach, and no apparent structure. Every veteran reviewer has his own killer phrases for unstructured and inconsistent compilations. The German language has reserved a special word for them, *Buchbindersynthese*, a bookbinder's synthesis.

Let us not beat around the bush: The *Companion* offers just what the rather pretentious and boastful folder of the publishing house claims: "ground-breaking breadth of scope...international and multidisciplinary...original...comprehensive...easy to use." Indeed, almost without exception, the authors managed to "present a study of recent historiography and focus on a particular theme or problem...conveying a genuinely multi-cultural, wide-angled view of the ideas, traditions and institutions that lie behind the contemporary presentation of world history in direct, jargon-free language" (quotations from the sales folder). In his introduction Michael Bentley adds two more reasons why every student of history will profit from "historiography": first, a book like this will confuse and eliminate one's "innocence" in the reading of history. Second, by demonstrat-

ing how the idea of history and its study have changed over the years, and continue to change, the *Companion* stimulates reflections on one's own assumptions and approaches.

Like any manual on historiography, the *Companion* opens with the traditional section on the "founding fathers." The open-mindedness of this part, however, is a surprise compared to a standard course at a European university. Apart from the obligatory Greeks, Romans, and early medieval scribes, the editor also commissioned chapters on Islamic and Chinese history writing. The last chapter, with the appetizing title "Modernizing the Historiography of Rural Labor: An Unwritten Agenda" promises an even more radical break with university seminars on Tacitus and Augustine than the five preceding chapters. Jairus Banaji argues for the comparative perspectives on agrarian history offered in Latin American and South African studies that are missing in the social and economic history of the ancient world. No matter how convincing his argument on the fluidity of the definitional borders between tenants and paid laborers in the ancient world may be to the lay reviewer, Banaji's manipulation of a multitude of different names for categories of laborers, peasants, sharecroppers, and the like inevitably get rather specific and somewhat confusing for the general historian.

The medieval world of Part Two has chapters dealing with the five medieval topics any layman would expect: crusades, nobility, states, religion, and warfare. If our

layman had read *Montaillou* he might also have suggested the theme of the sixth chapter: "Family, Gender and Sexuality in the Middle Ages" by Janet L. Nelson. Evidently, the rising interest in the medieval family and women in our century may be linked to the suffrage movement at its beginning and to the feminist movement of the 1960s. The position of medieval studies within academe appears to have changed: traditionally the domain of male researchers checking prescriptive legal documents against literary texts, in many universities it has now become a female domain. As Nelson points out, this has to do with the general shift in historiography toward the study of everyday life, private life, and modern social science methods. The "gendering of history" in the 1980s concludes this process, and yet the concept of gender as "a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (p. 155) has produced many exciting new studies in the medieval field. Nevertheless, Nelson notes with regret that mainstream medieval scholarship persists in its focus on the five topics of our layman. "*The New Cambridge Medieval History* has envisaged no chapters on family, gender or sexuality....The history of the family has not ignored sex, but there has been a reluctance to historicize sexuality, still less to regard this reluctance as problematic" (p. 167). This quotation highlights another quality of the book: Many of its authors have a critical eye for the trends, traditions, and deficits of current historiography, many break a lance for an alternative approach or a marginalized view, without, however, becoming sectarians engaged in single-minded polemics.

Part Three, on the early modern age, appears to be a bit unbalanced in several respects. Wolfgang Reinhard of Freiburg University, the author of the chapter "The Idea of Early Modern History," is the only German on the team. His list of references contains publications in English, German, Dutch, Italian, French, Portuguese and a few other languages I may have missed. Far from taking this as a minimum standard, the contrast to James Sharpe's chapter on "Popular Culture in the Early Modern West" is astonishing. Judged by the place of publication of his references, the intellectual world today consists of five cities: Boston, New York, London, Cambridge, and Oxford. The fact that almost all authors of the volume are British or American certainly influenced the selection of topics and literature. In this part English predominance catches the eye in two out of six cases: "The English Reformation" and "Revisionism in England." Nevertheless, because of the sheer size of the volume, one hesitates to demand more foreign-language references and international authors.

This remark, however, does not involve the good use Stephen Pumphrey makes of the mere thirteen pages he has to give us some thoughts on the historiographic concept of the "scientific revolution." Paying tribute to the constructivist approach of the book, Pumphrey emphasizes that the idea of the scientific revolution in the periodization of history, linking Copernicus and Newton, is a modern construction. This concept is, indeed, "a very interpretative category...proposed by twentieth century historians using criteria to which the historical agents could not have assented" (p. 293). Well-written and well-structured, his essay is representative of the overall quality of the book and offers some insights and food for thought for student and specialist alike. Having been introduced to Kuhn's paradigms, Shapin's air pump, and Dijksterhuis's mechanization of the conception of the world in ten pages, who could ask for more foreign-language references and international authors in the three-page list of references?

Part Four on the modern age consists of two sections, one on "Revolution and Ideology" and one on "Area Studies," demonstrated the editor's wise decision not to strive for completeness or a "representative" selection. He has instead assigned relevant topics to good writers. The net result is a compilation of essays offering an inevitably impressionistic view of historiography without, however, falling victim to the other extreme, that any topic will do, and leaving it entirely up to the reader to reconstruct the overall framework. "Revolution and Ideology" contains, apart from the expected chapters on the French and Soviet revolutions, National Socialism, and Orientalism, a fifth essay entitled "Modern Italy—Changing Historical Perspectives since 1945."

Catherine Merridale's essay on the Soviet revolution demonstrates that there is a thin line between too pedestrian and too specialist, between a chronology of events and a personal statement of opinion. Her chapter fails to fulfill the introductory promise to take the debate of the past ten years on the 1917 revolution as an example of the relationship between history-writing and contemporary political attitudes. In principle, no one would contest her choice of 1917 as the pivotal point of Russian and Soviet history "influencing assessment of the entire history of the USSR" (pp. 526-527). Yet the author is quite carried away by her argument against a totalitarianist view of 1917 and Soviet history in general. Thus, the essay ends up discussing the *history* rather than the *historiography* of the revolution. As Western studies of the revolution are central to this debate, little space is left for a sophisticated consideration of the complex relations between the

CPSU, Soviet academe, and history.

Ironically, any totalitarianist would subscribe to Merridale's scanty remarks on the development of Soviet historiography that history and history-writing were generally dictated by the Party, with a temporary improvement during the first "thaw" and the logical fall of party historiography in the second "thaw." The question arises of when the essay was written. The question of whether or not the 1917 revolution was inevitable kept both Soviet historians and Western specialists awake in the years 1988-1991 and maybe one or two years after the end of the Soviet Empire. In current Russian historiography this is a non-issue; most western specialists also prefer the less-politicized topic of a reinterpretation of late tsarism. An essay on historiography without history is unthinkable (and the other way around), but it is a delicate balance.

The second section of part four deals with area studies and includes an inevitably debatable selection: China, Japan, Africa, Latin America, (Northern) America, and India. What bothers me in this selection is not the Eurocentric perspective, nor the omission of Oceanic historiography. Rather, the editor should have realized that the focus of the Companion is west European and marginalizes east European, especially Russian historiography. Evidently, the chapter on Marxist historiography by S.H. Rigby in the second section of part 5, "Approaches," is no substitute here, nor is the chapter on the Soviet revolution by Catherine Merridale described above. Similarly, one will look in vain for essays on the region covered by HABSURG or on the Ottoman Empire.

Nevertheless, the quality of the area studies essays is quite exceptional. Here, even more than in the other parts of the companion, the authors walk a thin line between in-depth analysis and basic sketches for non-specialists. C.A. Bayly manages to do so quite elegantly: His essay on Indian historiography impresses the non-specialist as competent and insightful without becoming unreadable with details or demanding too much knowledge of Indian history. He too stresses the production of history as part of cultural self-identification, avoiding simplified relations between politics and history writing, particularly in the interpretation of British rule, its civilizing mission and its role in nineteenth century economic growth, and the independence movement. Consistent with his concept of historiography, Bayly even delineates the institutionalization of the discipline in independent India.

The fifth part, "Contexts for the Writing of History,"

consists of two sections, "Hinterlands" and "Approaches." The selection of topics in the first section does not pretend to be absolute or comprehensive, but they are well-chosen: philosophy, anthropology, archaeology, and history of art. The chapter on archeology, the study of the unwritten material records of the human past, is by Guy Halsall. He starts off by criticizing the lack of a dialogue between historians and archaeologists often dealing with the same issues and questions. As the (missing) link between historians and archeologists is in their approach to the past, he presents a solid survey of archaeology as a discipline, rather than a collection of spectacular discoveries and excavations or the technical sophistication of fieldwork techniques.

Unfortunately, when discussing the functionalism that took over from the discredited concept of cultures after WW II, the author fails to make cross references to anthropology (Malinowski) or Marxism (Childe). The nomothetic views of the new archeology in the 1960s moved away from simple functionalism and (back) to long-term historical processes, a new paradigm evidently related to the progress of technology and computers and to the skills of archeologists. For the same reason it took two decades before new archeology began to make headway in historical fields with no lack of written sources. This leads back to the call for closer relations between archeologists and historians. Halsall's solution is as provocative as it is paradoxical: "(because of) the ignorance of specialists in one discipline of the problems involved in the use of data in the other...we have to eliminate the cross-disciplinary comparisons and borrowings from all but the highest and most sophisticated levels of interpretation" (p. 821).

Michael Bentley must have had an even harder time selecting the topics for the second section, Approaches, of the last part. At first sight his choice looks somewhat disparate: historical narrative, *Annales*, Marxist historiography, gender studies, world history, and a chapter entitled "Archives, the Historian, and the Future" by Michael Moss. Moss immediately comes to the heart of the matter: in the nineteenth century, the collecting and preserving of documents in archives was a national and scholarly imperative. The shift from a history of Great Men and high politics to socio-economic studies, local history and the ever increasing production of written records in the twentieth century burdens the professionalized archives and archivists. Evidently, larger teams of historians taking archives apart systematically is more of a tradition in the French *Annales* school than in Anglo-Saxon (or German, for that matter) scholarship.

Nevertheless, these problems of selection and storage dwindle compared to the challenges of information technology. With this future ahead, who would blame Moss for trying to address too many issues at once: the competition between archivists and historians as to who decides what records are “historically significant” and worthwhile keeping, the need for a diplomatics of modern records, as well as the likely consequences of the computerization of archival work. Nevertheless, many might want to argue with the second part of his gloomy conclusion: “(There will) certainly be difficulties in defending the conservation of so many records in paper or machine readable form to support a discipline whose centrality to the human sciences can no longer be taken for granted” (p. 973).

Guessing that the editors at Routledge probably set

one thousand pages as an absolute limit, I will not open the Pandoras box of why not....Yet, thousand page limit or not, why is the biographical information on the authors so minimalistic: name, first name (or initials), university? Having turned page 997, what more can the reviewer—tired, but satisfied—ask for? In view of the book’s steep price of \$150.00, the only thing that comes to my mind is a two-volume pocket edition in a few years. After all, the book is a must for students of historiography, both as a solid basis for beginners and as a valuable comparative eye-opener for specialists.

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