Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

A Concise Companion to History

Review Number:
1104
Publish date:
Friday, 1 July, 2011
Author:
Ulinka Rublack
ISBN:
9780199291212
Date of Publication:
2011
Price:
£25.00
Pages:
368pp.
Publisher:
Oxford University Press
Place of Publication:
Oxford
Reviewer:
Alix Green

The somewhat conventional choice of jacket imagery ? detail of Clio, the muse of history from Vermeer?s *The Art of Painting* ? belies the ambitious aims of Dr Ulinka Rublack?s *Concise Companion to History*. It sets out to be a ?guide to be inspired by and rethink history? (p. viii) in a context where the old certainties of practice within the discipline ? as well as the clarity of its boundaries ? have broken down.

The 16 chapters are divided into two parts. The first four cover issues around the writing of history, including R. Bin Wong on ?Causation? and Rublack?s own piece on the ?Status of historical knowledge?. Part two is headed 'Themes and structures' and the titles provide an indication of the breadth of the editor?s enterprise: from Kenneth Pomeranz on ?Commerce? and Pat Thane on ?Population? to Elizabeth Buettner on ?Ethnicity?, Peter Burke on ?Communication? and Miri Rubin on ?Religion?. Rublack?s thoughtful sequencing of the chapters works well, and particularly on reflection, as some rich, creative and unexpected resonances between chapters come to the surface.

Rublack?s strongest commitments as editor are to global interconnections and to a multi-centric, creative and collaborative conversation. She therefore declares in the Preface ?one unified aim. This is to mark a significant departure in a genre still shaped by stories about history which are predominantly Western?. All the contributors take on this challenge and the reader is invited to range widely within the free and creative thematic structure. Rather than attempt to map the field of academic history, Rublack has given her authors

licence to define their own space, writing ?incisive, stimulating essays on their theme while engaging with the historiographies they judged particularly relevant? (p. viii). This freedom has been largely rewarded, with many rich and challenging (in the best sense of the word) pieces on ideas and concepts that we ?handle? all the time as historians but rarely explore, such as power, culture, ethnicity and emotion. While the structure and some of the headings will seem familiar from other companions to history, such as John Tosh?s ?Historians on history? (1), Rublack?s innovative editorial approach has given rise to a rather different product, one that encourages us to revisit the categories in which we think.

Given the ambitions of the collection to break down some of the established frameworks within which history is practised, however, it is interesting to note the range of institutions from which the contributors are drawn. While working in diverse fields, all 16 are based in English or US institutions, with four of the former group affiliated to the University of Cambridge. This is striking in the context of the *Companion*?s commitment to pluralism, though perhaps also symptomatic of a wider problem within the discipline: that history tends to be presented as a far narrower entity than it really is. Christopher Bayly is critical of the media for their persistent demands for traditional, nationalist history (in his chapter on History and world history); can we extrapolate that such an environment tends to select for public profile historians from the traditional elite among institutions? Or are there within the discipline itself factors that, in combination, push such historians to the forefront? These are questions that call for further exploration.

In a book with a diversity of perspectives and preoccupations, reflecting that of the modern discipline, some interesting themes emerge. But there is one that seemed both striking and significant: practices. Many contributors placed an emphasis on the concept of practice, whether that of the people we study or our own as historians. Eiko Ikegami, for example, in her stimulating chapter on the topic of emotion, stresses the lived practice of emotional culture. People are not passive recipients of prescribed norms, she argues; rather, they have and exercise agency, by means of which these cultures are revised and recreated. In the following chapter, Anthony Grafton grounds the history of ideas in institutions and cultural practices.

There is surely a connection between the two forms of practice ? our own and that of the people we study ? though one not explicitly made in the *Companion*. If we now recognise as of great significance what people did ? how they acted, reacted, thought, interpreted, planned or prayed ? situated in the rich context in which they were doing it, then we also should be concerned to investigate what we do when we conduct ourselves as historians.

Rublack brings out this self-consciousness in her chapter on the status of historical knowledge when she suggests we ?need to examine what historians regard as their tools and skills and how these relate to their life-experiences, intellectual traditions, institutions and ideals if we want to understand how they go about business of interpretation? (p. 58). She goes on to explore historians? own accounts of what these tools and skills should be, from Ginzburg?s intuition for the incidental to Bloch?s understanding of historical enquiry as craft to Jordanova?s emphasis on self-awareness in the use of evidence and the ability to write (via a disassembly of Evans? ideal of an ascetic objectivity).

Bloch?s placement at the core of the chapter is helpful. Bloch takes Herodotus? understanding that enquiry lies at the heart of the historical endeavour and aligns it with the process of experiment and critical evaluation that goes on in a laboratory. This manoeuvre prepares the ground for an understanding of history as practice. His vision was that historians, working with a commitment to continuing enquiry, would collaborate to clarify the dominant problems and to put historical evidence through the metaphorical laboratory. Outlining Bloch?s thinking allows Rublack to open up a discussion of what ?historians involve themselves in *doing* when they create knowledge about the past? (p. 74).

The emphasis on practices in the historical endeavour is a particularly helpful one as it focuses our attention and critical awareness on processes: not only those by which we conduct our own enquiries as historians, but also those that guide the discipline within which we operate. If we think about these processes, we are perhaps less concerned with defining and controlling our content (the ?what?) and therefore become more open to a conscious intellectual engagement with our task (the ?how?). Practices may be reinforced over

time, but they can also be challenged and reimagined, a concept which is energising and productive and stands in contrast to the traditional model of transmission: ?a patriarchal clientele-based model of discipleship? as Rublack describes it (p. 70). A focus on ?how we think? rather than ?what we think? also seems to offer a way to approach the dilemma of the discipline: ?specialisation, the fragmentation of knowledge, and the plurality of approaches? that disperses trust among professionals (p. 65).

Rublack concludes her chapter in a broadly optimistic tone, recognising ?the dynamism that the subject has displayed, as its importance across the world has extended? and the ?extraordinary transformation? that history writing has undergone. She also issues a call to action: for ?more team-work, cross-fertilisation, through diverse people with different skills in experiment? (p. 78).

In terms of the principal aim of marking a departure from a Western-dominated genre, the *Companion* makes some significant contributions. While the effort is not sustained throughout ? with some chapters giving the impression of ?bolting on? the global dimension to a resolutely US/European structure ? there are many genuine and successful attempts to integrate fully perspectives from outside the author?s geographical ambit and to generate thought-provoking analogies across time and space.

An idea that seems helpful in the task of rethinking the reach of our work as historians and our recognition of a wider world of human experience and action is scale, and one that many contributors, including Bayly, Rublack and Wong explore. Dualistic models combining the local and the global seem attractive as they stand in evident distinction from the national as a unit of historical analysis, the dominance of which is now subject to critique.

While the disruptive effect of the breakdown of old certainties is a creative force ? and the clear commitment to plurality shown throughout the book is to be welcomed ? problematising or myth-busting is not an end in itself. In the concern to challenge and break down the domination of the West and of national paradigms in historical thinking and writing, there is a potential loss of the capacity to recognise (both in the sense of ?see? and ?acknowledge?) resonances that global perspectives can have *with* the West. We may rightly be concerned with avoiding the distortions of a Western-dominated mind-set and therefore commit ourselves to the study of people and practices outside the West. But we take that commitment too far if we then impair our ability to set those new global perspectives against or alongside our own contexts, or, indeed, to move creatively between the two. Indeed, we risk of replacing one partiality with another.

When the discipline undergoes a significant shift in perspective ? such as that from a Western to a global mind-set ? we need to develop as historians a sensitivity to the sometimes subtle implications for the practice of history. In his chapter on power, Christopher Clark is alive to this as he explores how, in history writing, it tends to pool around the object of contemplation*: ?*the more they [historians] know of their protagonists, ?the more power ? at least over their own destinies and immediate environments ? these appear to wield?. In writing against the ?gradient of power? and celebrating ?subaltern actors?, historians can render the powerful just as anonymous and faceless as their subjects were once thought (p. 153). Is there a similar risk of rendering the West ?faceless? when set against the newly discovered vibrancy of a global perspective?

There were further opportunities within the *Companion* perhaps not fully realised to explore the complex and often charged issues of working with and between a Western and a global perspective.

First is analogy. Some powerful use of analogy is made, such as Clark?s discussion of the tendency of power to resist concentration, which embraces 18th-century France and Prussia, Han and Qing China and Japan under the Tokugawa shogunate. It would be productive to engage further in such explorations, for example, of analogical minority experiences within Western countries to those of people in colonial contexts: experiences of negotiation, self-definition and cultural engagement. Megan Vaughan?s lucid chapter on culture features an interesting discussion on the appropriation of the language of culture for colonial subjects seeking to articulate claims for rights and representation. She explains how leaders of nationalist movements had to employ a ?dual discursive strategy?, demonstrating a ?commitment to a progressive notion of modernization?, which is universalist in spirit, while at the same time asserting a claim to self-determination

based on the distinctive character of the people?s traditional culture (p. 233).

One potential Western counterpoint to this could be the campaigns for Jewish emancipation in pre-1848 Prussia. Leading figures, often drawn from the rabbinate, integrated the Enlightenment understandings of universal human dignity and equity, on which previous demands for citizenship had been based, with a Romantically-inspired assertion of Jewish religious distinctiveness and integrity. The political (universal) and the religious (particular) were regarded and described as co-extensive spheres. The discursive strategy ? to borrow Vaughan?s neat phrase ? drew on two discernable and in many respects conflicting philosophical positions, but its advocates did not recognise them as being in a dualistic relationship; rather they resolved and dissolved the tension by appropriating the Romantic Christian State model of the religious polity and transforming it through the encounter with the Enlightenment rights of man.

There may well be much to gain from exercises such as setting the African or Asian experiences of engagement with and creative transformation of colonial discourse alongside those of European Jews or other minorities also pressing for their rights. The potential power of the striking and boundary-crossing analogy is significant, not least in the service of an endeavour such as the *Companion*?s to disrupt an unreflective historical orthodoxy and generate creative global conversations.

Second is the nation. It is possible to appreciate the appeal of a dualistic model of local and global in the potential it carries for subversion of the national. There is a neat polarity that allows the significance of the individual or group ?the subjects of our historical accounts ? to be retained or enhanced while situating them into contexts and flows that are now much wider in scale. But there seems to be a recognition gap in terms of understanding how and why concepts of the nation, and people?s investments in those concepts, have remained so resilient in a world where national boundaries seem far less relevant or distinct, either to globally-connected citizens or to globally-conscious historians.

Bayly?s chapter on ?History and world history is the most exposed in this regard. He identifies ?the policies and economics of the media? as partly responsible for ?the persistence, even re-invention, of nineteenth-century national and racial historicism?. These have the effect of constraining academic historians to write ?big books on wars and great statesmen, which can show us ?how we got here? ?(p. 15). Bayly?s critical view of the influence of politics and the media is apparent in the section on world historical methodologies, in which he discusses the historicist distortions that have created and reinforced ?narratives of nation states evolving since antiquity? (p. 13) in India, China, the US and Britain.

There is some rich material here and Bayly draws together evidence of national illusions and delusions with skill and vigour. But it seems to me to be not entirely satisfactory to stop at the point of attributing (partial) responsibility for the persistence or reinvention of national historicism to the inclinations of politicians or the media. While the patterns of influence are of course complex, both groups are highly sensitised to public opinion and perception. Commentaries on the results of some poll on historical figures or calls for a return to teaching ?kings and queens? need to be understood in a wider public context, in which there is an interplay of conversation, proposition and response.

Even if we were to take an entirely cynical line ? itself a distortion ? it seems unlikely that the imperative for nationalist historicism among politicians and the media would come entirely from within their own institutions. There would be no mileage in an aspirant minister or a newspaper editor adopting a line that would not ?play out? well with their audiences. Are politicians and journalists rather serving as embodiments for what is actually an endemic problem in (certain?) societies, due to their visibility and public roles? Is there some hesitation to go further with the analysis and ask what it about *us* as human beings situated in our societies that makes us cleave to national paradigms?

And is there unrealised potential for recognising greater hybridity? (Buettner?s chapter on ?Ethnicity? highlights hybridity as a theme on the scholarly agenda in the context of the rejection of biological determinism, but there is scope for exploring this concept further in the political dimension.) To make the connection back to the central concern with practices, how do people find their own ways of living and

operating that negotiate between the local, the national and the global? If we claim to be interested in practices, we should be concerned with the processes of accommodation that happen at the interfaces between levels of human action, and the national is one such level for many people (they bear citizenship and vote, they pay taxes, hear news, join associations and use services and facilities that are national in character). Can we mentally extract this level from our consideration if it is embedded in the practices of the people we study?

Wong?s consideration of causality is interesting in this respect. He gives a similar account to the other contributors of the erosion of historians? confidence in grand narratives and the nation state as the natural unit of analysis from 1960s, but recognises that they have not invested much effort in creating replacements. ?We need to move beyond the binary choice,? he argues with respect to accepting or rejecting grand process-driven narratives (p. 41), and the call for greater sophistication, for historians to acknowledge and work with different levels of causation, resonates throughout his chapter. Both those who ?stress global trends towards homogeneity? and those sensitive to the emergence of ?new and different local practices? are correct, he says (49-50). This is a proposition that would meet with broad acceptance, but with it must go Wong?s further assertion that some cultural and social practices have spatial dimensions *between* the local and the global. He highlights the risk of a perception gap: ?if our geographical awareness remains fixed between the alternatives of nation states and their rejection by moving to the polar extremes of very local or the global, we will lose important opportunities to recognize patterns of similarity and difference across our monographic studies? (p. 53).

Wong makes a refreshing contribution to the *Companion*. It seems to take us beyond ideological impasses, opening up a space in which historians can acknowledge the richness and complexity of the local while still fruitfully considering questions of causality, and can consider the larger structures ? including national ones ? that affect people?s lives and shape cultures of identity and emotion. His engagement with trans-national analogies is also productive, as is his suggestion about including in our evaluation of any period of time ?the ways in which it was similar to or different from what came before? and asking ?what its features might portend for subsequent periods? (p. 54). Taken together, these factors open up a discussion around the potential for a new breed of ?useable pasts?. If our politicians, our media, and, indeed, our societies, are struggling to break out of historicist modes of thinking, a discipline that can work with and help shape the public realm through its understanding of causality and consequence will be of great value.

Engagement with the public realm is, however, a notable silence in a book that does much to challenge orthodoxies of historical practice. The inclusion of a chapter on environmental history, by J. R. McNeill, recognises the emergence of a vibrant and strongly interdisciplinary field. Other chapters cover themes in new, thoughtful, energising and often striking ways, such as Dorothy Ko?s on gender. But public history is rather conspicuous by its absence, particularly given the *Companion*?s interest in the practices of history. With historians, as other scholars, increasingly conscious of the funding imperatives that privilege impact, there is a ?public? dimension to much, if not all, historical work, if we can embrace a broader understanding of the public domain.

There may be some hesitancy within the discipline to demarcate the boundaries of a distinct sub-discipline of public history, which would then enclose and identify its practitioners. Demarcation of new sub-disciplines *within* academic practice, such as environmental history, may be an important stage in that it brings recognition and opportunities. Is public history a rather different case in that demarcation represents a risk due to its association with practical application *outside* the academy, primarily in the heritage sector and the media? Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith?s chapter on historians makes passing reference to those new additions to the ranks, the public historians who ?curate for and direct museums, serve as guides in historic sections of cities, and lead preservation efforts? (p. 102). This definition of the work of public historians is perhaps revealing in its narrowness, suggesting there is little overlap or intellectual engagement between historians working as academics and the historically-trained working in museums and archives.

Unfortunately, the debate about the historian and the public realm ? and the role and status of public history, whether as a distinct field within the academic discipline or as a more diffuse influence or approach ? is not

picked up in the *Companion*. Such a debate - embracing a broader understanding of public history, perhaps building on Andrea?s definition of meeting the ?practical and intellectual needs of society at large?, including public policy and corporate strategy alongside community understanding of heritage (2) ? would be a valuable addition to the discussion about historical practice that Rublack initiates.

It would be interesting, for example, to explore Pamela H. Smith?s comments on the status of science in public policy. ?Investigation by the quantitative and reductionist methods of the natural sciences is accorded a greater level of trust? than historical understanding, and its ?dominant intellectual authority?, she argues, drives the flow of funding from Government and from business (p. 296). Given that this apparent privileging of quantitative approaches now seems to be further entrenched (despite, as Smith notes, modern theoretical physics complicating our view of scientific objectivity), how should historians make their claim to an alternative and valuable intellectual authority?

Such as debate might also play a role in addressing some of the challenges Rublack?s preface suggests the discipline is facing. How can history respond to interests of increasingly interconnected people? Can history be something more than either a comforting companion or an uncanny shadow? (p. vii).

Notes

1. J. Tosh, ed, Historians on History, Harlow (Pearson Education Ltd.), 2000.Back to (1)
2. A. J. Andrea, ?On public history?, *Historian*, 53, 2, 381-7.Back to (2)

The author is happy with this review and does not wish to comment.

Source URL: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1104

Links:
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7743