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Review of Woolf, D. (2019) A concise history of history: global historiography from antiquity to the present

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Daniel Woolf, *A Concise History of History: Global Historiography from Antiquity to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 342 pp. (paper).

What was extraordinary about Daniel Woolf's *A Global History of History* – a tome of over 600 pages, published in 2011 with Cambridge University Press – was not merely its ability to cover historiographical traditions from all over the world. Perhaps more striking was that the author also sought to explain why much of this historiographical diversity had disappeared in the course of the twentieth century, due to the growing hegemony of a kind of history writing originating in nineteenth-century Europe. Concretely, this meant that Woolf had much to say about Javanese *babads* (historical poetry), Ottoman *vak'a-nüvis* (courtly annalists), and *phongsāwadān* (dynastic chronicles) in Thailand, but also explained in some depth why Ranke had become a household name among historians across the globe. For a volume targeted at a student audience, this balanced treatment of historiographical traditions was a great didactic advantage. On the one hand, the book familiarized students with authors that no historiography course can afford to ignore: Thucydides, Tacitus, Guicciardini, Hegel, Marx, and Weber. On the other hand, the book convincingly challenged the Eurocentrism characteristic of many older historiography textbooks, not merely by devoting extensive attention to Asian, African, and Latin-American ways of remembering and recording the past, but also by framing the rise to dominance of Western historiography as a tragic story of loss (“a gradual reduction over the course of many centuries in possible pathways to the past”).

Less helpful, however, from a didactic point of view, was that Woolf shared too much of his vast erudition with readers for whom even Herodotus and Tacitus are sometimes hardly familiar names. What will they learn from sentences like the following, randomly selected from a section on Islamic historiography? “The Sanskrit-language Kashmir chronicles that had followed Kalhaṇa in the thirteenth century were rendered into Persian during the sixteenth, and augmented by new works in Persian such as the anonymous *Bahāristān-i-Shāhī* (completed 1614), and the sixteenth-century autobiographical history of the Central Asian Mughals, *Tā'rīkh-i-Rashīdī* (“History of Rashīd”; comp. c. 1541-44) by the warrior Mīrzā Muhammed Haidar (1499 or 1500-51).” Though strong in providing historical context and vivid in its narrative, the book included just too many names and book titles. For this reason, I have never dared to make it required reading for my undergraduate students at Leiden. In the past few years, we have used Jeremy D. Popkin's *From Herodotus to H-Net: The Story of Historiography* (2016) – a book as global in its ambitions as Woolf's, but much shorter and less information-dense.

Fortunately, in response to considerations like these, Woolf has returned to his desk to produce an abridged and adapted version of his book, now with undergraduate readers in mind. The result, published as *A Concise History of History*, is as strong as the original in telling a truly global story, but does so in less pages and in more accessible language. The endnotes have disappeared and the bibliographies have been cut down. Didactically helpful additions include a glossary of terms and questions for classroom discussion or essay assignment at the end of every chapter. Also, in comparison to the original book, *A Concise History of History* spends more pages on current developments in the profession, such as the rise of global

history and the return of *longue durée* history, symbolized by Jo Guldi's and David Armitage's *The History Manifesto*. Speaking about public history, Woolf makes the interesting observation that academic historians across the world increasingly seem to engage with audiences outside of the university. "In a sense," he concludes, "we may be cautiously circling back to a nineteenth-century environment when historians were frequently public intellectuals who saw their role as preparing citizens first and producing scholarship (an important) second." Which is, of course, a perfect theme for a class assignment ("Describe the differences and similarities between then and now").

For teachers of historiography classes who can expect their students to read a little more than Popkin's 250 pages, Woolf's concise textbook comes close to being an ideal textbook. Still, I would recommend teachers to keep *A Global History of History* on their desks, if only because of its rich array of text boxes (one or two-page excerpts in English translation from historiographical classics as varied as Assyrian chronicles from the eighth century BC to Voltaire's *The History of Charles XII* from 1731). Whether their disappearance in the abridged edition is a loss or a gain depends on one's didactic principles. I for one liked them a lot, simply because students tend to remember much more from in-depth discussion of one or two excerpts than from a 90-minute lecture that tries to survey centuries of historical thinking and writing. But as long as lectures or seminars continue to let students encounter such primary texts, *A Concise History of History* is a very attractive textbook for background reading.

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Herman Paul is Professor of the History of the Humanities at Leiden University, where he directs a research project on "Scholarly Vices: A Longue Durée History." He is currently at work on a book-length study of virtues and vices in nineteenth-century German historical studies. Recent (co-)edited volumes include *How To Be a Historian: Scholarly Personae in Historical Studies, 1800-2000* (2019) and *Scholarly Personae in the History of Orientalism, 1870-1930* (2019).