

REVIEW ESSAY

SAMPLING WORLD HISTORY TEXTBOOKS:

A REVIEW ESSAY

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Anthony Esler. *The Human Venture*. Vol. I: *The Great Enterprise, A World History to 1500*. Vol. II: *The Globe Encompassed, A World History since 1500*. Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986. Pp. xii, 340; xii, 399. Paper, \$25.33 each volume. Instructor's manual available.

William H. McNeill. *A History of the Human Community*. Second edition. Vol. I: *Prehistory to 1500*. Vol. II: *1500 to the Present*. Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1987. Pp. xii, 474; xii, 430. paper, \$25.00 each volume. Clothbound combined edition, \$36.00.

Peter N. Stearns. *World History: Patterns of Change and Continuity*. New York: Harper and Row, 1987. Pp. x, 598. \$25.95. Instructor's manual available.

Recently published world history texts by Peter N. Stearns, Anthony Esler, and William H. McNeill provide some exciting new options for teachers of global history. Each of these works offers an intrinsically interesting approach to the history of humankind from earliest times to the present and could provide a solid base from which to build a successful course. This essay will examine each of these works in turn, focusing on their potential usefulness in the classroom.

The Stearns text is organized around one central and intriguing organizational principle. Stearns argues that much of the history of the world can be understood as the story of the emergence, development, and interaction of seven major civilizations: (1) the Middle East; (2) Indian and Southeast Asia; (3) East Asia (China and Japan); (4) the West (including the classical Mediterranean and, in recent times, the USA); (5) eastern European civilization (essentially Russia); (6) sub-Saharan Africa; and (7) the Indian civilizations of the ancient Americas, later folded into Latin American civilization.

The seven-civilization framework is especially useful as a way of organizing the often confusing "middle period" of world history, which Stearns dates from A.D.

600 to 1400.¹ As Stearns sees it, three key developments can be emphasized to bring clarity to these centuries. First, the four oldest centers of civilization centered in the Middle East, India, China, and the Mediterranean widened their influence: Middle Eastern ideas radiated outward with Islam; Indian culture was carried to Southeast Asia; Chinese influences greatly affected Japan; and Mediterranean-based Christianity moved into western and eastern Europe. Second, monotheistic religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity emerged as major forces across Eurasia, often providing important links between various civilizations. Third, three new centers of civilization emerged in Russia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Americas (Mexico and Peru), bringing the total number of civilizations to seven.

For the centuries from 1400 to 1900 Stearns emphasizes, as do the two other books under review, the growing connections between civilizations and the rise of the West to world dominance. While he does not claim to break new ground here, Stearns's account of these centuries is valuable because he does not allow the story of the West to obscure the histories of the six other civilizations; the development of Russia, for example, is particularly well handled. In addition, Stearns has some insightful pages on the rise of the new global economy, pages that suggest the impact of Immanuel Wallerstein's thinking.

Stearns's treatment of the twentieth century is the longest of the four parts into which the book is divided and is worthy of special note. Departing from the traditional framework that structures the first half of the century around the two world wars--an approach that can lead to neglect of the colonial world--Stearns instead devotes a chapter to each of his seven civilizations during the entire century. The result is a more genuinely global picture of the contemporary era than is often the case in world history texts. A final chapter offers the student some judicious and thought-provoking speculations about the future of humankind.

On the downside, the Stearns text is marred somewhat by a scattering of minor errors that will undoubtedly be removed in later printings. A more serious issue is the length of the book. At somewhat less than 600 pages, this book may be best suited for a one-semester course in world history. On the other hand, I have used it successfully for the past two years, in conjunction with other readings, in a course on the world since 1400. All in all, the Stearns volume is a noteworthy addition to the growing corpus of world history texts.

¹For Stearns's most recent thinking on the issue of periodization in world history, see his rich and suggestive article, "Periodization in World History Teaching: Identifying the Big Changes," *The History Teacher*, 20 (August 1987), 47-62.

The Esler text also has much to recommend it. The author is a very talented and engaging writer. He has clearly attempted to write a book that students will not only read but also enjoy. Comments from my students on volume one, which I have been using for the past two years, indicate that Esler has often succeeded in this regard. In addition, Prentice-Hall is to be congratulated for publishing the book in an attractive 8 x 11 format; the illustrations are very good and the maps are excellent.

Like the Stearns volume, Esler's book is genuinely global. There is ample coverage of developments in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, although this is not as true of the second volume as it is of the first. Still, this is not a Eurocentric work. Indeed, one of the interesting aspects of Esler's book is the attention he pays to "the peoples beyond the pale": hunter-gatherers, preurban agriculturalists, nomads, Pacific island peoples, etc. These sections give the book an ecumenical, inclusive character that is to be commended.

Despite the many strengths of this book, I have some reservations about it. Volume one frequently skips back and forth from region to region and this can be confusing to students. For example, in this volume there are three separate chapters on India, including one on the period 2500-200 B.C., a second on the classical centuries, and a third on the millennium from 500 to 1500. Each of these chapters is quite good. But between them come chapters on all of the other regions and peoples of the world. My experience has been that, from the point of view of student learning, this organizational framework leaves something to be desired.

There is less jumping around from region to region in volume two. The theme of the rise of the West and growing global interrelatedness is well done. Esler's 200 pages on the twentieth century include good chapters on the world wars and an excellent chapter on western culture. The final hundred pages on the "globalization of history" (the world since 1945) contain interesting chapters on "the skyscraper age," "the global village in ferment," "planetary culture," and "the global drift." These chapters should go a long way toward helping students to see the contemporary era as history.

However, Esler has a tendency to try to include too much political history in volume two. The sections on political events in Europe in particular seem less imaginative than the rest of the book. In this volume I sometimes sense a tension between the wish to do innovative world history and the need to chronicle the traditional facts. Nonetheless, despite these reservations, I think that, overall, Esler has written a remarkable book. It is intellectually sound and often a pleasure to read (even for students!). Many teachers of world history will find the Esler volumes to be very valuable resources for their courses.

The McNeill text is a revised edition of a work first published in the early 1970s for use in high schools. Elegantly written and containing a wealth of outstanding maps, the book illustrates the vast learning and creative mind of the historian who has done the most to awaken the current generation of scholars and teachers to the importance and feasibility of world history.²

As in McNeill's classic, *The Rise of the West* (1963), the principal thesis of this text is that "contacts between different cultures . . . [are] . . . the main drive wheel of history."³ Thus McNeill is at his best when discussing the impact of one culture or civilization on another as, for example, in volume one, when he examines the shifting relations between the nomads of the steppe and the four great "stem" civilizations of Eurasia (China, India, the Middle East, and the classical Mediterranean) or, in the same volume, when he argues that Mahayana Buddhism, which first developed in northwestern India, was a result of the mixing together of Greek and Indian ideas following the opening of the Silk Road.

McNeill is particularly interesting on the subjects of technology and epidemic diseases. Both volumes contain, in addition to the basic narrative line, four brief essays on, respectively, the use of plants and animals in agriculture, diseases and their social effects, transportation and communication, and the use of energy and fuel. Each of these pieces is a lucid and informative discussion of the subject from earliest times to the present.

I found volume two to be most interesting on the nineteenth century. McNeill devotes a full chapter to "the decisive years" from 1850 to 1865 which he sees as crucial in launching the beginning of modern global cosmopolitanism. This chapter vividly demonstrates how the Crimean War (1853-56), the Sepoy Mutiny (1857), the Taiping Rebellion (1850-64), and the opening of Japan (1854) all illustrate the enormous impact of the West on the great civilizations of Asia during the middle of the nineteenth century. These events, McNeill argues, plunged Asia into a prolonged "time of troubles" that has not yet ended. This is world history at its best!

While I would urge that the McNeill text be seriously considered for adoption by teachers of world history, I also have some concerns about the way it is organized. Volume one does not leave the ancient Middle East until page 117. This may be too much on this region for some teachers (although it must be said

²For a succinct statement of McNeill's approach to world history, see his valuable collection of essays, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), especially chapters 3-5.

³*A History of the Human Community*, I, p. xi.

that these chapters, especially the one on the "chariot revolution," are extremely well done). A more serious problem arises in the second half of the same volume where McNeill devotes two full chapters (about 60 pages) to medieval Europe, while spending only parts of two chapters (about 20 pages) on the extraordinary developments in China from the Sui through the early Ming dynasties. In addition, sub-Saharan Africa receives very little attention in this volume.

I am also uneasy about the large amount of space given to Europe as opposed to the rest of the world in volume two. Of the nine chapters that trace developments from 1500 to 1914, the first one discusses the European overseas discoveries and four others deal exclusively with European events. The remaining four chapters are given over to the rest of the world during successive time periods (although there is very little space devoted to either Latin America or, as in volume one, to sub-Saharan Africa). I am not convinced that this organizational scheme will provide students with sufficient understanding of the world beyond Europe. However, the numerous strong features of the McNeill volumes will make them attractive, and rightly so, to many instructors of world history.

Has the survey course in world history come of age? Can courses in genuinely global history be taught effectively? The appearance of the Stearns, Esler, and McNeill texts gives one cause to be optimistic about the answers to these questions.