

# History Viewed Long<sup>1</sup>

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Please note that this text is also available on the *Making History* website of London University's Institute of Historical Research: [www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/long\\_history](http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/long_history).

See too interview of Penelope Corfield by Danny Millum (Aug. 2008), which appears on the *Making History* website of London University's Institute of Historical Research at: [www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/interviews/Corfield\\_Penelope](http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/interviews/Corfield_Penelope).

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The big picture is returning – at last.

Historians have done very well at digging deep and probing complexities. We have also taken to big themes: the mutabilities of class, gender and ethnicity; the histories of nations and empires; the crises of what is very variously identified as 'Modernity' from the twelfth to the twentieth centuries. Yet we have, in recent decades, taken our eyes off the very long term. We don't, with very few exceptions, write about the entire human story. And having written our time-and-place-specific histories, we generally don't indicate what light these studies throw on a diachronic or through-time perspective.

This collective silence has deprived the research and especially the teaching of history of a powerful tool - the power of what is termed Grand Narrative. Such big accounts provide mental frameworks that act

as mental ‘locators’ into which people fit the detailed histories that they learn. If historians are not providing and debating Grand Narratives, then those who study history will end up confused and reliant on half-digested ideas, culled from a medley of political, religious or cultural traditions.

One major reason for the neglect of the very long term is an obvious practical one. As the quantity of research multiplies, so history as a discipline is sub-divided into separate specialisms. In Britain alone, there are over 2,000 academic historians. Worldwide, the number is probably well over 100,000. Since no one can keep up with the output of all these busy scholars, the professional answer is to specialise, either in a particular period and/or on a particular theme.

Furthermore, these subdivisions of academic history are incorporated into research, teaching, and assessment at all levels. The subject is habitually divided into broad temporal divisions, known as ‘ancient’, ‘medieval’, ‘early modern’ and ‘modern’, even though the terminology is frequently criticised as meaningless or unhelpful. Professional groupings among historians, as well as virtually all job appointments, commonly follow these categories. As a result, History students at University are invited to choose bits and pieces from the sectional expertise of their lecturers. Yet the undergraduates are rarely encouraged to create or to challenge the big picture that might fit all the separate eras together. Nor are they invited to debate the possible long-span frameworks of history, whether cyclical, linear, static, revolutionary or multi-stranded. That is a loss

British schoolchildren similarly take selected topics from the national curriculum. They may jump from (say) the Romans to Henry VIII to the Industrial Revolution, and on to the two world wars. One certainty is that they will study Hitler - that is, if they take history as an option after Key

Stage 3. Another is that they will be confused, without a framework into which to 'fix' the different periods. Such is the concern over the children's fragmented worldview that, as a result of lobbying by the historical profession, new courses at A-level are being introduced that get away from strict time periods and allow students to study concepts and controversies. But we still need to do more to provide a diachronic framework so that students can envisage and debate the big picture.

A call for historians to resume consideration of the very long term does not mean stopping what we now do. It is a plea for an addition, not a subtraction.

Especially, it is not a call for a return to over-simple models. The twentieth century witnessed the wreckage of two influential Grand Narratives. One was the inevitable 'march of progress', from barbarism to civilisation. That vision sank before world wars, tyrannies, famines, killer epidemics and genocides. The other was the Marxist revolutionary reinterpretation of the Hegelian dialectic, which posited a sequence of discrete historical stages, driven forward by the class struggle. It was scheduled to produce an egalitarian communism and the 'withering away' of the state. But that model too has fallen by history's wayside, disproved by events.

Oversimplified versions of history have led to disasters, especially when they are taken as guides to public policy-making, and oversimplifications have also stultified learning when they are taught to students and the public as infallibly true.

The abuse of past Grand Narratives does not, however, mean that there is no place for a collective human story. Instead the challenge is to produce

and to debate a more rounded and complex picture. Such big stories are likely to be pluralist accounts of quest and conflict, rather than tending irresistibly and triumphantly towards one universal goal. And understanding narratives entails debate and analysis, and even, if need be, rejection and the search for something better.

Above all, big picture accounts should not be termed ‘surveys’ or ‘outlines’. That option switches the problem from infallible Grand Narratives to dreary recitations of one-thing-after-another.

There are lots of alternatives, however, between excess grandeur and excess detail. In the secondary schools, for example, there is scope for some narrative accounts that relate to students own experiences. Something on the peopling of Britain, for example, from the Celts (or perhaps even the Basques) to the twenty-first century – explaining how we all got here. Another obvious agenda needing a long-swing approach is citizenship education, which should clearly be taught as History. Why not devise a course that covers the contests for rights (and the alternative visions to rights-based citizenship) from Magna Carta to a (coming soon?) written constitution? The framework for Key Stage 4 offers great potential for basing skills and understanding upon documented historical experience – and historians should take up that challenge.

Given the great quantity of specialist research, it is not possible that all can be expert on everything. On the other hand, historians can and do share and debate together. Some long-term projects, both for research and teaching, will be undertaken by single individuals, while other projects will involve teams of scholars, quite possibly from many disciplines. Provided that all are willing to pool their ideas, their approaches, and their disagreements, such team projects can make for exciting study. One

institution that has returned to the diachronic for its first-year BA History students is University College London, with its Core Course entitled ‘From the Ancient Near East to the 21st Century’. Similarly, Royal Holloway is actively considering a comparable global history course, to add to its first-year portfolio. These are pioneering signs of the times.

All people and peoples are living histories (to repeat my own dictum, of which I am very fond). It is part of everyone’s full education to understand and debate the complex human story in which we all participate. It’s part of being rooted into time and space. Historians, along with human geographers, archaeologists, environmentalists and all other long-span experts, are well placed to frame such long-term accounts via the worldwide wealth of our in-depth understanding. Future portfolios may well see individual scholars continuing their own individual research, while simultaneously contributing to team projects, either for research or teaching, or both.

In other words, the diachronic needs to stand alongside the in-depth courses of synchronic immersion. That is the essential new agenda. In one way, it is a return to the past, with its confident Grand Narratives. But now such big picture interpretations of the human story will have deeper and better foundations, building upon a century’s worth of research by the world community of historians.

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