

Book Review

Stewart Gordon, *A History of the World in Seven Themes, Volume One: to 1600*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022, Pp. xxvi + 182 Notes and Index. \$39.95, paper

Stewart Gordon, *A History of the World in Seven Themes, Volume Two: since 1400*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022, Pp. xxiv + 199 Notes and Index. \$39.95, paper

Textbooks are both the bane and saving grace of instructors of history; their deficits are apparent to the cognoscenti while their structure, predictability, and glossy packaging convince students of their reliability. As a faculty member who has recently been through a textbook review and selection process for a modern world history course, I can safely say that no textbook is perfect, and it makes the most sense for a department to choose a textbook that meets the needs of both its students and teachers.

Many world history textbooks seem to follow the chronological-geographic approach: let's look at this era (the early modern period) in this place (Europe, then Asia, then Latin America, etc.). This familiar structure provides readers with an accessible index and chapter list, and gives instructors an easy menu to choose from in terms of designing course modules. In this manner, most textbooks are meant as "resources" instead of providing a clear chronology that all students are expected to master, from start to finish.

Stewart Gordon's two short volumes do not easily fit this paradigm; instead, they are more like collections of case studies and methodologies that can be used by students or teachers. In the Preface, Gordon writes that the purpose of world history is "to discern common rituals, problems, and patterns that do not stop at a territorial boundary" (xv). Gordon describes his approach as "substantially new", as each volume

will investigate “seven problems that every society—historical or contemporary—must face” (xv), and that each chapter uses different methods beyond written documents. Each chapter follows a historical figure who acts as a case study for the reader, as well as an opening section, “The Big Picture” which contextualizes the topic and gives some general background, and ends with “The Bigger Picture,” which ties the topic to contemporary events, or ways in which our interpretation of the past has changed with recent scholarship. By showing connections to today, or how consensus is challenged with new research, students can see that history is a dynamic process, instead of a static truth.

On his website, stewartgordonhistorian.com, Gordon emphasizes the new approach to this book, as well its shorter length, affordability, and the teacher resources, tools, and his personal availability to help instructors adapt these volumes for their course needs. For students and teachers, both length and cost are major factors in choosing textbooks, and there is even an app to help “enrich the experience of teaching & learning.” I have not used the app, but the Oxford University Press website has supplemental course materials, including BBC videos, flashcards, note-taking guides, and quizzes, available after purchase login.

The two volumes split at the conventional break in modern history, with overlap of the 15th and 16th centuries. *Volume One: to 1600* consists of chapters on food, loyalty, slavery, gender, pilgrimage, trade, and technology. *Volume Two: since 1400* traces similar ground, with chapters on sexuality and gender, nationalism, technology, migration, slavery, human rights, and empire and the environment. As you can see, there is significant overlap between the two volumes, with both including sections on gender, technology, slavery and loyalty/nationalism. The two volumes focus on different content, for example the gender section in *Volume One* centers around Peter Abelard, a twelfth-century French scholar, and his female student Heloise, who he had a sexual relationship with, and the repercussions of their tryst. *Volume Two* emphasizes homosexuality and how different cultures categorize gender and sexuality, and sometimes stigmatize those who transgress social norms. Both chapters admirably define gender as a social construct and show how gender is a fluid concept that changes in different cultures and eras, and is not biologically determined.

World history books written by a single author often reflect her or his own research interests and background. The chapter on loyalty in *Volume One* is among the strongest in the two volumes, and references previous scholarship by the author. Another personal connection that Gordon acknowledges is his brother, a professor of chemistry and material science at Harvard; both books use glass as the focus of the technology sections, building on Gordon’s connection with his brother. The books do present a truly global approach, as the chapter guides are from Rome, Mughal India, East Africa, France, China, North Africa, Kenya, the Netherlands, Cuba, the United States, and Portugal (most of the themes have only one guide). For most students, these

will be little-known characters, and Gordon uses them to show a deeper, more human side to the historical issues he presents.

Throughout the books, one of Gordon's strengths is in presenting a nuanced, multi-faceted view of history. Students should come away feeling that history is complicated, and that simple answers about issues like gender, or slavery, should not be taken at face value. In *Volume Two*, Gordon treats his reader to stories of homosexual love in Tokugawa Japan and Mughal India, two locations that his audience might find surprising. Gordon additionally emphasizes the Christian demonization of male-male love, while also admitting that most cultures in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries "disapproved of male-male love and sexual relations" (15). He recognizes that Confucians did not see the issue as imperiling the government, and that it was rarely punished in Islamic courts. In the slavery section of *Volume Two*, Gordon uses a Cuban runaway slave, Esteban Montejo, as his guide, and emphasizes both the human suffering of plantation slavery, as well as its economic importance for Europeans and Americans. By presenting a range of examples and different societies, Gordon does illuminate the variety of world historical experiences for his audience.

The books do have their problems, namely in a lack of harsh editing and oversight. In *Volume One*, in the chapter on slavery, Gordon writes that during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution "several million of these [Chinese] died of hunger" (65), which significantly diminishes the human cost of these disasters which truly killed tens of millions of Chinese citizens. In *Volume Two*, Gordon mistakenly ascribes the idea of nations as an "imagined community" to Hayden White, not Benedict Anderson (45). Gordon and Oxford go out of their way to provide a list of reviewers and their credentials (xx) but these oversights are somewhat surprising for a publisher of this renown.

Minor quibbles aside, these books are interesting as they do provide a new approach to the world history textbook. By clearly tying historical issues to the present, Gordon reminds his readers that history matters. With shorter books, fewer chapters, and less content that needs to be known, Gordon is attempting to make the field easier to enter and less intimidating. Students should know that slavery is a global issue, one with deep historical roots and significant differences; Gordon does an admirable job of showing that slavery is not just an issue of the past, but also of the present.

In *Volume One*, in "Honor and Loyalty", Gordon clearly draws a line between ceremonies, textiles, and power, showing how rulers used ceremonial robes to strengthen ties of loyalty between themselves and their subjects. The book includes a print of Mahmud of Ghazni trying on a robe from the Caliph (33), and uses extensive documentary evidence to show how rulers like Babur had to distribute booty like robes to ensure their followers felt appreciated and rewarded (39). Even today, politicians continue to use their position to enrich supporters to elicit loyalty. Gordon closes the chapter exploring how certain groups (Uighurs, Catalans) refuse to show the loyalty

demanded by the government, as their local identity matters more than a capital hundreds or thousands of miles away (43).

Gordon has set out with a tough task: to reinvent the wheel of history textbooks. While these two volumes might not work for many teachers, as they do not contain chapters on the French Revolution, or Columbus' voyages to the New World, they could well inspire a next generation of historians who are looking to write world histories in a similar vein, one that is relevant, accessible, cheap and short. We need more history books like that in today's world.

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