

# World History and the *Temple of Time*: Reconsidering Emma Willard's Signature Illustration of Human History

Upon her death in 1870, the *New York Times* dubbed Emma Willard “the best known teacher in America” after an influential career as an educator that spanned half a century.<sup>1</sup> To historians of education she is most notable for her staunch advocacy of women’s education in the United States, beginning with a “Plan for Improving Female Education” in 1819 and her subsequent founding of Troy Female Seminary in 1821.<sup>2</sup> Starting in the 1820s, Willard began publishing textbooks in the subjects of Geography and History, and quickly became one of the top selling history textbook authors of the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> To date, scholars have mostly focused on Willard’s inventive use of visual aids, especially her creative use of maps and timelines in geography, as well as the nationalist mythmaking of her American history textbooks.<sup>4</sup>

In this article I suggest that Willard should also be revisited for her contributions to world history, and that her important illustration of human history, which she called the *Temple of Time* (Image 1), can serve as an excellent teaching tool in contemporary world history classrooms. After a few brief remarks on the teaching of General History in the nineteenth century, the remainder of this article will focus on four categories of analysis that are especially relevant in a consideration of Willard’s *Temple of Time* including the nature of historical time, Eurocentricity, the choice of historical focus, as well as the relationship between world history and American nationalism. Each of these categories will end with a suggested question or questions designed to stimulate classroom discussion. Using the *Temple of Time* in the way I am suggesting is not what Willard, who was very confident that her passionately held views regarding world history would stand the test of time, might have had in mind.<sup>5</sup> But a critical analysis of this image can lay the groundwork for productive class engagement about the nature of world history, and, I hope, lead to further conversations about the legacy of the oft ignored early stages of world history education in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

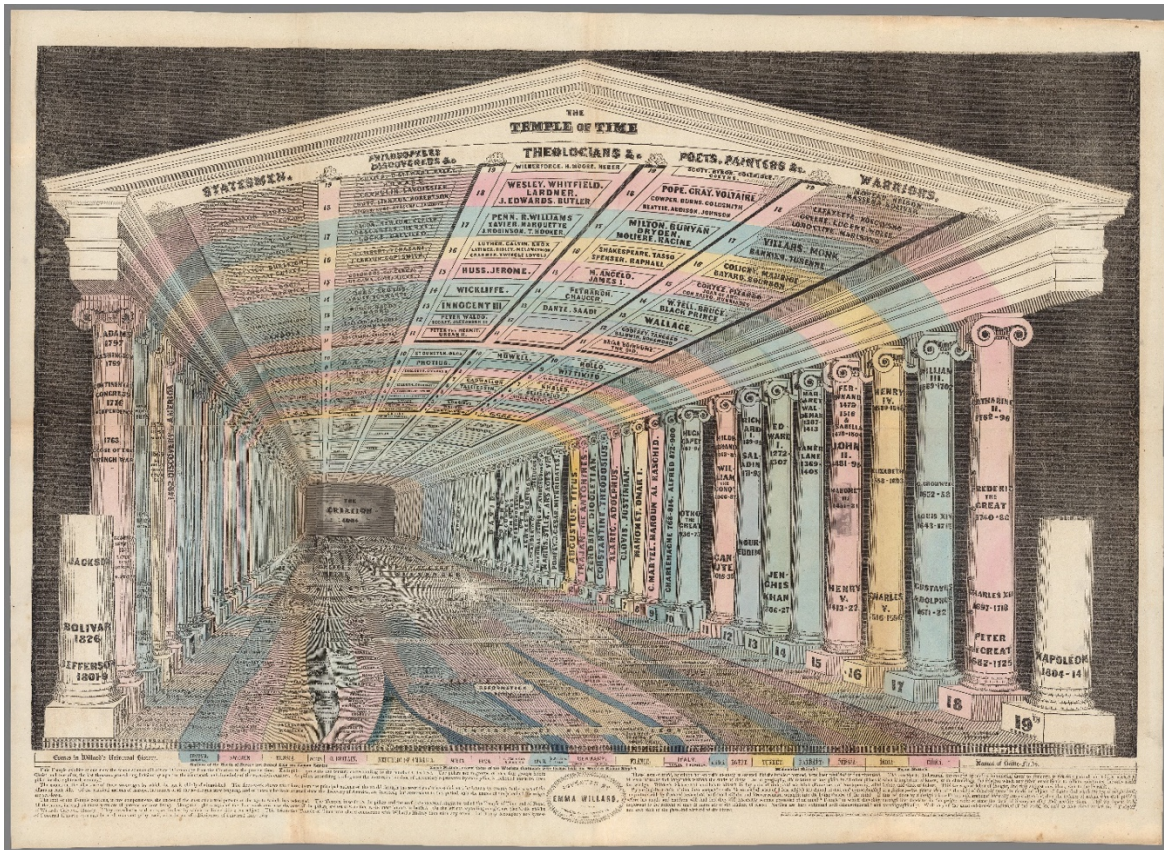


Image 1: Emma Willard, *The Temple of Time* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1846). [David Rumsey Historical Map Collection](#). (Cartography Associates: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0).

Often called either Universal or General History in the nineteenth century, world history slowly gained ground as a subject in U.S. secondary schools.<sup>7</sup> Despite its significance to the American secondary curriculum, Universal or General History has attracted only passing interest from historians of education, and even less still from world historians.<sup>8</sup> Willard published the first edition of *A System of Universal History, in Perspective* in 1835, and with each edition of her textbook she developed new and inventive ways of visualizing the history of humanity.<sup>9</sup> She first created a *Perspective Sketch of the Course of Empire* to accompany her *Universal History* (Image 2). The idea was to improve upon existing timelines by emphasizing the increased significance of the recent past, as well as relationships between nations.<sup>10</sup> But Willard continued to iterate on her original *Perspective Sketch*, culminating with the 1846 creation of the *Temple or Map of Time* (Image 1). Willard argued that the *Temple of Time*, which she alternatively called a *Universal Chronographer*, was “an invention by which time is measured by space,” providing a visual demonstration of change over time in human history that would stimulate student learning, with a particular emphasis on the progress of nations and singular leaders in history.<sup>11</sup> All in a single image. After creating the *Temple of Time*,

Willard wrote that “I was then satisfied that my thirty years’ work was done. The goal to which, step by step, I had been approaching, was at length reached.”<sup>12</sup>

Though it is problematic on several levels, Willard’s arresting depiction of human history can provide a useful ‘tool of the trade’ for contemporary world history instruction. For today’s students, the *Temple of Time* reveals much about prior conceptions of world historical time and can generate important questions regarding present-day world historical assumptions and the subject’s place in American education.

## The Nature of Historical Time

An inspection of the *Temple of Time* will reveal a set of critical assumptions, some of which will seem alien, and some that may seem all too familiar to contemporary audiences. Since the purpose was to illustrate time in the way that a map illustrates space, it is worth beginning with a consideration of the nature of historical time. Here there are two elements that are particularly striking: first, the integration of Christian ‘sacred’ time of ancient history with the secular or ‘profane’ history of the recent present. For Willard, a devout Christian, the natural starting point for her exploration of history was the Christian creation, followed by a series of epochs in ancient history that followed ‘sacred history,’ or history to be found in the Christian biblical narrative. Though she acknowledged that there was no consensus date for the creation of the world, the *Temple of Time* accepted the calculations of the influential seventeenth century Archbishop of Armagh and scholar James Ussher, who dated creation to the year 4004 B.C. Writing in the nineteenth century, Willard therefore viewed world history as stretching back in time only a little over 5,800 years.<sup>13</sup>

Willard was open with her choice to start with an origin story that would not have been recognized by adherents of the other great world religions, arguing “in ancient history we, as a Christian people, are far more concerned with the history of the Hebrews or Israelites, than with that of any other nation.”<sup>14</sup> Willard’s writing was in line with European universal histories of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but is deeply problematic for all of the people it discounts.<sup>15</sup> At the time, of course, there were many people within the United States that did not practice Christianity, and more still who did not practice Protestant Christianity, immediately puncturing the illusion that the project was in any way ‘universal.’

Secondly, the *Temple of Time* makes a powerful statement about the value of recent history. Willard uses perspective to create a sense of distance from the past. The farther back things appear in the *Temple*, the farther back they are in time. Events nearer to the present take on added importance as they are more significant to present-day concerns. This is also in line with Willard’s philosophy of history: “it is the part of wisdom for us to attend...to that which most concerns ourselves.”<sup>16</sup> A view of the past that emphasizes the increased significance of the present is open to the charge of presentism, surely, but is nevertheless widely accepted by educators today.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, one



of the reasons that World History re-entered the curriculum in the United States after the First World War was a desire by social scientists to have more of a focus on the recent past.<sup>18</sup>

**Classroom Questions:** Reflect on Willard’s depiction of historical time. How can we create world historical narratives that speak to the present while simultaneously giving a good faith effort to understand the very different perspectives held by past generations? Are our world history accounts today overly ‘presentist’?

## Eurocentricity

It likely comes as no surprise to world historians that Willard’s *Temple of Time* magnified the significance of Europe to the exclusion of all other world regions. This is easily seen in the *Perspective Sketch* (Image 2), which shows an intricate relationship between different people groups in the ancient world. Willard explained her choice of representation based on a characteristically Enlightenment-era need to classify human societies:

*Thus distinguish the nations now existing,- as Christian, Mahometan, and Pagan; then again distinguish those European Christian nations which were formed from the Western Roman Empire, from those which were formed from the Northern Hive, and never belonged to Rome. Then mention the American nations. None of these, except our own, have as yet entered much into general history.<sup>19</sup>*

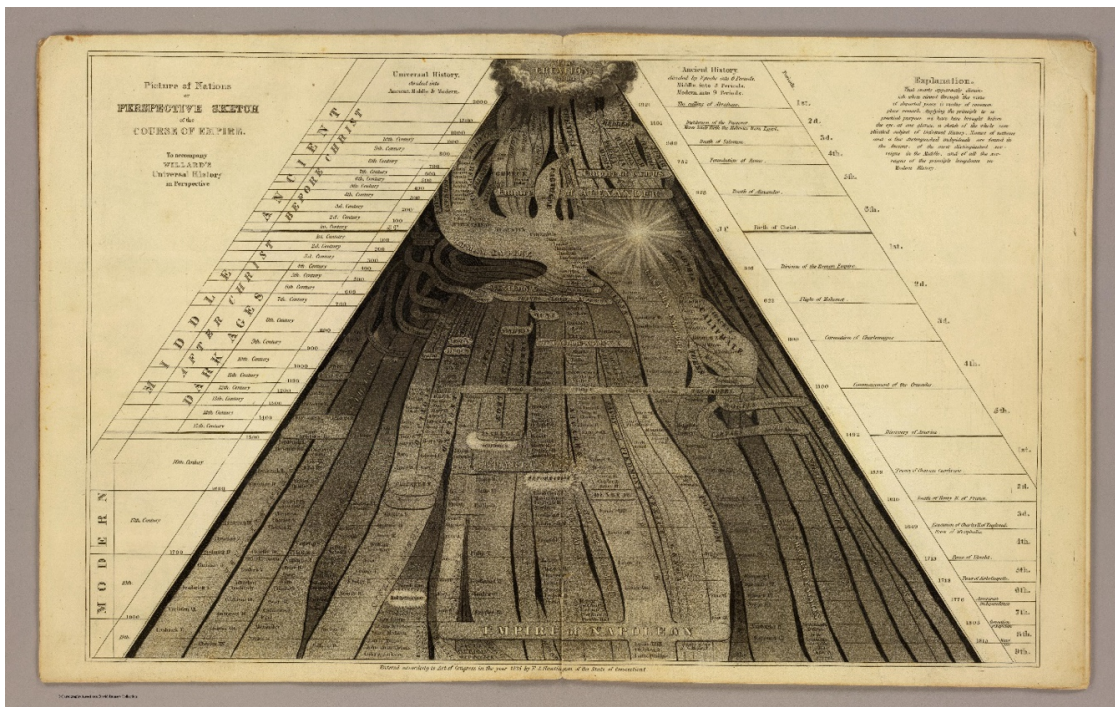


Image 2: Emma Willard, "Picture of Nations or perspective Sketch of the course of Empire." In *Atlas to accompany a system of universal history* (Hartford: F.J. Huntington, 1835). [David Rumsey Historical Map Collection](#). (Cartography Associates: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0).

Entrance into the universalizing process of history required contributions to or interactions with what Willard and contemporaries regarded as the 'civilized' world. African and Middle Eastern peoples from Assyria and Egypt are depicted in the ancient world. Other non-European peoples including the Barbary States, Persia, the 'Mogul Empire', 'Jenghis Khan', and China, are represented in the more recent profane history that Willard depicts, as is the rise of Islam. But even when they are depicted, they are not part of the mainstream of 'General History,' by which Willard means that of European and North American societies. Even more troublingly, some peoples, including Indigenous societies and sub-Saharan Africans, are simply omitted, indicating that they reside outside of historical time entirely.

**Classroom Question:** It is easy to identify the Eurocentricity of Willard's *Temple of Time*, but do our narratives of the past continue to privilege European history and worldviews over other ways of knowing? Think about both historical narratives created by professional historians as well as depictions of the human past in popular culture.

## Forms of History

In the brief references to the teaching of General History in twenty-first century scholarship, historians critique the course because it "reflected more the compilations of history by political historians than the interpretations of social change by social theorists."<sup>20</sup> This echoes earlier complaints by the first few generations of professional historians, who by the late nineteenth century had had enough of 'amateur' textbook authors such as Emma Willard. As the influential historian James Harvey Robinson wrote in 1899: "a conspicuous defect of our present text-books and manuals is a careless selection of matter and the introduction of mere names of persons and places, which are of no possible importance for the reader."<sup>21</sup>

A close inspection of Willard's *Temple of Time* complicates this picture. The roof of the Temple includes the names of significant figures in a host of categories. These include warriors and statesmen, which is to be expected given the critiques of General History, but they also include philosophers, discoverers, poets, and painters, emphasizing various elements of human society rather than focusing solely on political and military history. To a twenty-first century world historian, the more worrisome issue is that Willard embraces a 'Great Man' theory of history, in which significant leaders or geniuses (almost exclusively white and from Europe) are appropriate subjects of study rather than members of the lower orders of society. It is worth pointing out,

though, that Willard included significant women in the *Temple of Time*, including Queen Zenobia of Palmyra, Isabella of Castille, Elizabeth I of England, and Catharine II of Russia. In the *Guide to the Temple of Time*, Willard specifically mentions that “Zenobia is thus connected with universal history, as the founder of the short-lived Empire of the East, and an opponent, who, for some time, kept the great Aurelian at bay, in the battle-fields of Palmyra.”<sup>22</sup>

**Classroom Questions:** With limited space, world historians must always make difficult decisions about who to include and, more challengingly, who to exclude. If you only had a single image to depict the most important figures in human history, who would you include, and why? How would your approach compare to Willard’s?

### World History and American Nationalism

Born in the aftermath of the American Revolution, Emma Willard became a strident nationalist. Her history textbooks reflected a powerful desire to imagine a unified and expanding nation, and warned students about the dangers facing the United States. She wrote:

*In no way does the author conceive that she could better serve her country, than in awakening a taste for history, and putting its grand outline more within the power of universal acquisition, in every common school, throughout our wide republic. This, if it stands, must remain by avoiding the rocks, upon which all former republics have foundered. History must make them known; and not merely to here and there a solitary statesmen.*<sup>23</sup>

In other words, the discipline of history was central to the project of American state-building and preservation. Willard’s overall nationalist project is well documented in the scholarly literature, which normally explores her thinking as it relates to American history textbooks. However, it is clear that her universal history texts conveyed similarly powerful nationalist messaging.

Visually, the *Temple of Time* situates American history as the culmination of the modern world. Indeed, the year 1492 marked the beginning of Modern History in her text, *Universal History, in Perspective*. The *Temple* imagines the newly formed United States as a natural extension of European life. Her *Guide to the Temple of Time* also expressed support for the ethos of Manifest Destiny, suggesting a global role for the United States as it continued to expand. In part, this would be brought about by technological progress. While envisioning the possibility of a railroad connecting the United States all the way to the Pacific Ocean, Willard ebulliently wrote:

*Should all this be completed, the continent might be crossed in ten days, and information sent as fast as the sun's rays.... And what should hinder such a railway from becoming a great thoroughfare of the East India trade, which is very much composed of light and expensive articles? This view shows great changes in the world, by which TIME is made more valuable.<sup>24</sup>*

By extolling the virtues of American expansionism, Willard ignored many Americans. Notably, she viewed Indigenous peoples as obstacles on the path to progress, and mostly omitted the presence of Africans both in world history and in the story of the United States.

Today's students are likely more empathetic towards the tragedies that occurred in lock step with Manifest Destiny and American nineteenth century expansionism, but may be less aware of the relationship between the teaching of World History and American nationalism. Indeed, though many historians today view the project of world history as moving beyond the nation-state and centering humanity itself as the central category of analysis, it is undeniable that the profession of history espoused and sustained nationalist interpretations of the past for generations. Historians only rarely acknowledge this legacy of our profession.

Today, world history educators across the country justify their subject on the grounds that it is necessary for the creation of good citizens who must be armed with a general knowledge of the world that history provides, as well as with critical thinking skills to make informed decisions. And though historians and educators today create narratives inclusive of a wider variety of humanity, modern-day world historical interpretations combining Eurocentricity and American nationalism are still alive and well across the United States.<sup>25</sup> For all its alienness to the way we conceptualize world history today, therefore, Willard's *Temple of Time* may also serve to make us productively uncomfortable by revealing familiar continuities with our own time and place.

**Classroom Question:** Though likely not as dramatically as Willard, many people today continue to view history, especially in publicly funded schools, as an educational tool to bring about loyalty to one's country. What do you think is the relationship between nationalism and world history in U.S. classrooms today? What do you think it should be?

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research focuses on the historical connections between education, imperialism, and decolonization that continue to affect educational systems today. He has published two books on these topics, *Constructing National Identity in Canadian and Australian Classrooms* (Palgrave, 2018), and *Religious Education and the Anglo World* (Brill, 2020). More recently, Stephen has explored the historical legacy of Eurocentrism and imperialism in American classrooms, resulting in a third book, *The Patchwork of World History in Texas High Schools* (Routledge, 2022). Stephen has published articles in journals such as the *American Historical Review*, *History of Education Quarterly*, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, and *History Compass*. At KU Stephen teaches courses on the history of education, including on critical topics such as the culture wars. He can be reached at [stijackson@ku.edu](mailto:stijackson@ku.edu).

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> “Obituary: Mrs. Emma Willard,” *New York Times*, April 19, 1870, 8. Accessed through Proquest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of this era in the history of education which discusses Willard’s work, see Joel Spring, *The American School: From the Puritans to the Trump Era*, 10<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Routledge, 2018) Chapter 6. See also Murray R. Nelson, “Emma Willard: Pioneer in Social Studies Education” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 15:4 (1987) 245-256. Troy Female Seminary, now called the Emma Willard School, is still in operation, and their website can be found here: <https://www.emmawillard.org>

<sup>3</sup> See Susan Schulten, “Emma Willard and the Graphic Foundations of American History,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 33:3 (2007) 542-564. Willard became the subject of a fierce controversy over the quality and originality of her work by textbook-writing competitor Marcius Willson. See Peter Knupfer, “How to Write a History Textbook: The Willard-Willson Debate over History Education in the Common School Era,” *History of Education Quarterly* 59:2 (2019) 257-287.

<sup>4</sup> To date, geographers have been far more interested in Willard than historians. See Daniel H. Calhoun, “Eyes for the Jacksonian World: William C. Woodbridge and Emma Willard,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 4:1 (1984) 1-26; Susan Schulten, *Emma Willard: Maps of History* (San Francisco: Visionary Press, 2022). Nina Baym also situates Willard in the history of women authors in the United States. Nina Baym, *American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790-1860* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995).



<sup>5</sup> Willard argued that “I think I have...shown it to be full as perfect, and as scientific, as that of a map of the world, though it is somewhat more complicated.” Willard, *Guide to the Temple of Time and Universal History for Schools*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> David Warren Saxe, for instance, suggests that the modern-day social studies owe nothing to the early nineteenth century history textbook authors like Emma Willard. Saxe, *Social Studies in Schools: A History of the Early Years* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991) 2.

<sup>7</sup> Since at least the time of an influential article by Gilbert Allardyce, world historians have insisted that General History began in 1821, but though the data is not definitive, multiple studies confirm that General or Universal History was taught in academies before the introduction of the public high school in 1821. Gilbert Allardyce, “Toward World History: American Historians and the Coming of the World History Course,” *Journal of World History* 1:1 (1990) 45. For an overview of History’s place in early American secondary schools, see William Reese, *The Origins of the American High School* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) Chapter 6. See also Agnew O. Roorbach, “The Development of the Social Studies in American Secondary Education Before 1861, PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1937, Chapter 4. On General History, see Ray Elmer Kehoe, *A History of the Teaching of General and World History in United States Secondary Schools*, PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1952.

<sup>8</sup> While there are multiple histories of the development of early American history, there are only scattered references to the teaching of General or Universal History. This omission was noted in Edward C. McInnis, “History’s Purpose in Antebellum Textbooks,” *American Educational History Journal* 39:1 (2012) 129. For an example of the brief mention of nineteenth century world history education by world historians, see Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Emma Willard, *A System of Universal History, in Perspective* (Hartford: F.J. Huntington, 1835). The Library of Congress has digitized this text, and it is available on their website here: <https://www.loc.gov/item/77363735/>. In various editions the work remained in print until the 1880s.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Schulten has provided an outstanding analysis of the visual features of the maps in Willard’s histories, as well as a cogent overview of Willard’s life and times. See Schulten, *Emma Willard: Maps of History*.

<sup>11</sup> Emma Willard, *Guide to the Temple of Time and Universal History for Schools* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1849) 15. The work has been digitized by the Library of Congress and can be accessed here: <https://www.loc.gov/item/03006044/>. Describing her work as a visualization of time may seem odd, but Susan Schulten argues that this was, in fact, a creative adaptation of maps as a technology. Visualizing space in a map is also a contrived process: “mapping, in other words, was a process of abstraction that could be applied to different arenas of information.” Schulten, *Emma Willard: Maps of History*, 87.

<sup>12</sup> Willard, *Guide to the Temple of Time and Universal History for Schools*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> James Ussher, *The Annals of the World Deduced from the Origin of Time, and Continued to the Beginning of the Emperour Vespasians Reign, and the Totall Destruction and Abolition of the Temple and Common-Wealth of the Jews : Containing the Historie of the Old and New Testament, with that of the Macchabees, also the most Memorable Affairs of Asia and Egypt, and the Rise of the Empire of the Roman Caesars Under C. Julius, and Octavianus : Collected from all History, as Well Sacred, as Prophane, and Methodically Digested* (London, 1658). Willard, *Guide to the Temple of Time and Universal History for Schools*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> Willard, *Guide to the Temple of Time and Universal History for Schools*, 42.

<sup>15</sup> For an important overview of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century ideas on universal history, see Marnie Hughes-Warrington, “Coloring Universal History: Robert Benjamin Lewis’s *Light and Truth* (1843) and William Wells Brown’s *The Black Man* (1863),” *Journal of World History* 20:1 (2009) 99-130. For a strident critique of the entire project of universal history, see Brett Bowden, “The ‘Idea’ of Universal History: What the Owl Heard, the Angel Saw, and the Idiot Said,” *New Global Studies* 11:3 (2017) 197-209.

<sup>16</sup> Willard, *Guide to the Temple of Time and Universal History for Schools*, 42.

<sup>17</sup> For a recent work on presentism in history education, see James Miles & Lindsay Gibson, “Rethinking Presentism in History Education,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 50:4 (2022) 509-529.

<sup>18</sup> For more on the crucial post-World War I years of world history education, see Stephen Jackson, *The Patchwork of World History in Texas High Schools: Unpacking Eurocentrism, Imperialism, and Nationalism in the Curriculum, 1920-2021* (New York: Routledge, 2022) Chapter 2.

<sup>19</sup> Willard, *Guide to the Temple of Time and Universal History for Schools*, 39.

<sup>20</sup> Manning, *Navigating World History*, 30.

<sup>21</sup> James Harvey Robinson, “Medieval and Modern History in the High School,” *The Fifth Yearbook of the National Herbart Society for the Scientific Study of Teaching*, 1899, 46.

<sup>22</sup> Willard, *Guide to the Temple of Time and Universal History for Schools*, 64.

<sup>23</sup> Willard, *Guide to the Temple of Time and Universal History for Schools*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Willard, *Guide to the Temple of Time and Universal History for Schools*, 98.

<sup>25</sup> One need look no further than the overtly nationalist curricula of the conservative National Association of Scholars. See National Association of Scholars, *American Birthright: The Civics Alliance’s Model K-12 Social Studies Standards*, 2023.