John Garraty and Peter Gay, eds., *The Columbia History of the World* (1972)

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William J. McGill, Foreword

[**xv**] It is difficult to imagine a more presumptuous title than *The Columbia History of the World*. Too much has happened to the structure of human knowledge and also to our own self-esteem in recent years to permit us any ease in presumption. Our intellectual capacities are measured by a truly remarkable faculty, but even when we recognize that Columbia University is circumscribed by the incredible exponential growth of knowledge in this century. Man’s efforts to understand the universe in which he finds himself, the processes by which he evolved, and the historical context of his being are now so formidable that no university can claim omniscience. Certainly we do not.

No other title, however, suffices to describe this work accurately. Professor Peter Gay of Yale University was a Columbia historian when the project was begun in 1965. Professor John A. Garraty continues to be an eminent member of our Department of History. Together they undertook to edit a large history of the world covering “everything” of historical importance from the birth of the universe down to the present day. Their idea was that this work, amounting to nearly half a million words, would be written entirely by Columbia professors, thus demonstrating that the sum of human knowledge of the past could be brought together in an authoritative way by the faculty of a single great university.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Now their work is done and while some of the contributors have moved to other responsibilities, the stamp of Columbia is found on every page. We find a balanced and judicious distillation of historical knowledge that is the characteristic mark of open minds. These are not ideologists seeking to convert naïve readers to preordained views [as Marxists do]. We have here only wisdom and clarity, characteristics that have illuminated the various departments at Columbia University for more than a century.

The reader can peruse this volume, as I have, with the feeling that he is sitting in the midst of professional historians and other scholars as they talk to each other about their specialties. Each offers a capsule view for his colleagues without addressing the enormous wealth of evidence and detail [**xvi**] which serve as a basis for the conceptions expressed. What emerges is an authoritative view of history as the members of a great faculty would present it to one another. It is Columbia’s history of the world offered without affectation or presumption.

I confess to more than a little unbounded pride and enthusiasm for this extraordinary work. It displays a small portion of the competence of Columbia University in a way that anyone can appreciate. In the turmoil and struggle accompanying social change on campus, one is occasionally apt to forget the immense intellectual power which has been brought together with such great cost. I find it everywhere on campus and in the most unexpected places. Sometimes, as I walk by St. Paul’s Chapel, I hear the choir rehearsing and am suddenly seized by the beauty of its music. Sometimes I will listen to a member of the faculty of the College lecturing on Dean’s Day and find myself caught up by the art and clarity of his presentation. Recently I read a paper written by one of Columbia’s University Professors and was struck by the lucidity of the mind that produced the manuscript. In this book, I am caught up in admiration of the scope and power of a truly competent Department of History at a[[2]](#footnote-2) great university.

Columbia continues to be a great center of comprehensive knowledge in the western world. One of our important roles is to act as an intermediary between the academic world and the larger community of intellectually curious readers. This book displays the talent of Columbia’s scholars as disseminators as well as discoverers and organizers of knowledge.

Garraty and Gay, Introduction

[**xvii**] We live in the Age of World History, and as ages go, ours is relatively young. Until the fifteenth century, the many cultures of this earth developed in comparative isolation, their boundaries breached only by occasional traders, by border warfare, and by spectacular mass migrations, such as the “barbarian” invasion of the Roman Empire in the early centuries of the Christian Era. But after Columbus and Cortes had awakened the people of Western Europe to the possibilities, their appetite for converts, profits, and fame was thoroughly aroused and Western civilization was introduced, mainly by force, over nearly all the globe. Equipped with an unappeasable urge to expand and with superior weapons, conquerors made the rest of the world into an unwilling appendage of the great European powers; Africa, Asia, and the Americas became sources of raw materials, markets, objects of scientific curiosity, and places for the permanent settlement of Europeans. The peoples of these continents were, in short, the victims of a ruthless, unrelenting exploitation.

But then came the scientific and technological revolutions of modern times, which, in transforming the Western world, also transformed its non-Western [colonial] dependencies. We are now witnessing two simultaneous, only apparently contradictory developments. World civilization [created by European imperialism] is becoming more uniform, as the West imposes its techniques and its ideas [on the non-Western world]. And the dependent nations [of the non-Western world] are breaking away from the domination of the West, using these very Western techniques and ideas [of national self-rule and freedom] to establish their separate [national] identities, and find their places in the councils of power. Isolation has become impossible; ancient empires like China and the newly self-conscious nations of Africa alike involve the whole world in their activities. Thus both the traditional division between Western and non-Western history and the patronizing assumption that non-Western is a kind of footnote to Western history have become obsolete. This, as we have said, is the Age of World History. It is therefore supremely the age *for* world history.

World history is hard to write, but this has not discouraged historians from writing it ever since the beginning of the craft among the ancient [**xviii**] Greeks [who distinguished the Greek “West” from the Persian or Asian “East”]. Medieval monks and Renaissance scholars tied their hands at it [using the same kind of East-West distinction to distinguish Europe and Asia]. Leopold von Ranke, the father of modern scientific history [and orientalist proponent of the distinction between the dynamic West and stagnant East], rounded out his long and prolific career with an essay at world history [of several thousand pages]... [W]e may take [Ranke’s work] as a symbol of the [practical] difficulties involved in such enterprises. Today, nearly a century after Ranke, writing the history of the world has become even more formidable of a problem [because of the growing amount of sources and the difficulties involved in mastering them]. We know more than Ranke; our conception of history is larger, more inclusive, than his….

We say nothing here of cultural perspectives that limit vision; *the obstacles that biases impose upon historians have been much exaggerated of late, most especially by those who insist that only blacks can properly describe the black “experience.” That “it takes one to know one,” is, when applied to the writing of history, we believe untrue*.[[3]](#footnote-3) (If it were true, and if historians could be induced to believe it, they would have to confine their work to contemporary events in their own country, and among their own class, which would make nonsense of the whole historical enterprise.) It is, on the contrary, precisely the historian’s function to transcend his inherited and acquired perspectives for the sake of a wider grasp and a higher objectivity [which we believe we have accomplished]. No: *the difficulty in the way of writing world history is not parochialism but ignorance—not the poverty of the historian but the abundance of his materials*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Yet, hard as it is to write, and largely for that reason, world history is important, even essential, to us. We westerners need to know more about the world of which we are inextricably a part, just as the rest of the world needs to know more about us, and for the same reason….

[xix] Consider our first and most crucial problems: the preparation of an outline and the allocation of space to various regions and periods of time. How should the history of the early civilization of India be related to that of Egypt and China or, for that matter, of Mexico and Peru? How many chapters should the history of Africa occupy as compared with that of South America or Eastern Europe?[[5]](#footnote-5) As editors—one a historian of the United States, the other of Western Europe—we knew that any answer we could devise for such questions would be inadequate and surely distorted. We therefore asked our specialists to tell us how they proposed to organize their material and how much space they needed, bearing in mind the ultimate limitation imposed by our decision to produce a work that could be published in a single volume…. [W]e eventually worked out the structure of our history. *The result, as a reading of the table of contents will quickly reveal, is a global conceptualization of human history. What from our “Western” perspective are considered “exotic” areas have been allotted a fair share of our space and their histories are recounted not merely at those points where they impressed themselves on Western consciousness, but from their beginnings to the present day. This is a history of the world, not simply of “our” world*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. I am tempted to read ‘a single’ as ‘this’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I am tempted to interpret ‘at a’ as ‘at this’… [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. My italics added for emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. My italics added for emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. **NOTICE: Gay and Garraty do not ask how much space any of these regions, individually or all together, should be allocated to the space given to discussion of “the West.”** [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. My italics added for emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)