

**LIKE SO MUCH WORK ON HISTORIOGRAPHY, JOHN BURROW'S *A HISTORY OF HISTORIES* IS A DISAPPOINTMENT, ARGUES JEREMY BLACK: *A HISTORY OF HISTORIES* - JOHN BURROW**

Posted by Jeremy Black

***A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century***

**by John Burrow**

**Pp. 553. London: Allen Lane, 2007**

**Hardback, £25**

Like so much work on historiography, this is a disappointment. First, as also pointed out by David Bodanis in the *Financial Times*, the tone and writing are poor. He referred to a stodginess and lack of vividness, and I would add a failure to write in a sufficiently concise fashion to appeal to those, such as students, who are short of time, or think they are short of time.

Secondly, this is very dated as an account of intellectual history and historiography. The focus is Western, and very traditional at that. Thus we have the Classics and the Bible and move on, via a conventional cast, to the Enlightenment, Macaulay, Ranke and an overly brief account of a few twentieth-century themes. This is unimpressive. As Felipe Fernandez-Armesto pointed out in the *Sunday Times*, there is no real attempt to engage with the non-Western world, even if only for the parochial motive of throwing comparative light on the West.

In addition, the political thought and historical views of political actors are downplayed in favour of those of political thinkers, which is a mistake. Like the previous point, this is a problem not solely with this book but, more generally, with the entire field in Britain. Given the nature of academic patronage, this has become a self-sustaining problem with the teaching of political thought and historiography.

Moreover, the account of the West is very much that of an intellectual historian - Burrow's background - and there is scant attempt to incorporate the dynamics of public interest which, in fact, have played a much greater role in the development of the subject than academics generally allow.

While reading this book, I was working in the Manuscript Room at the British Library, and came across a letter of Peel to Aberdeen, written in 1829 (BL. Add. 40312 fol. 81), in which he doubted the wisdom of allowing American students unrestricted access to the State Papers as their study might exacerbate anti-British feeling in America. The many uses of history do not match the constraints of conventional historiography, and it would help if the latter could be transformed to take note of this.