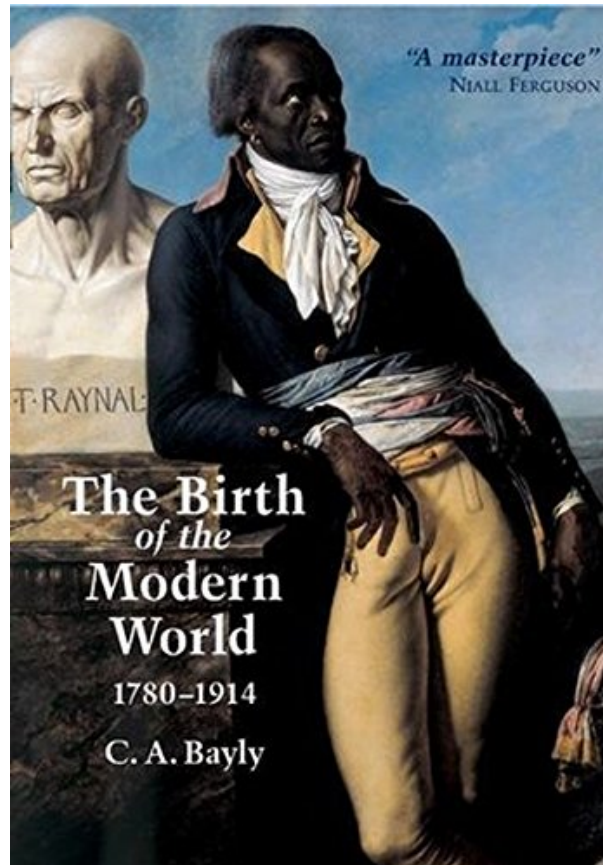
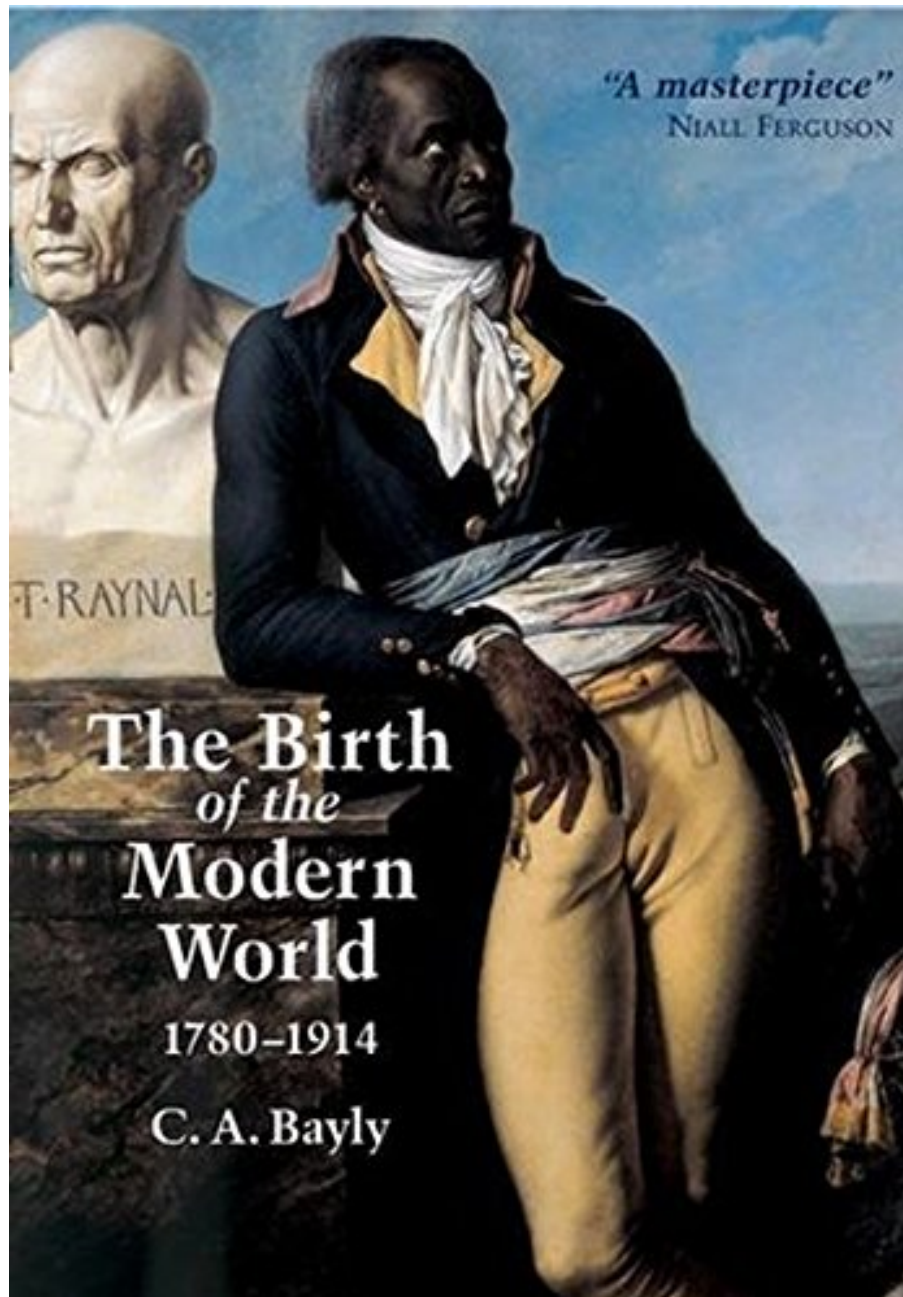


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On the virtues of biting off more than you can chew

By greg taylor

(A note on my three star rating-When reading and thinking about this book I wavered between a three to a five star rating. I believe it to be on balance superb where it succeeds and somewhat flawed where it does not. I settled on the three star rating to drive the overall rating down a bit. Hopefully my review will explain the issues I have with this book).

Sir Christopher Bayly has given us a masterful, complex, polemical, flawed and mostly satisfying book on the history of the whole bloody planet during the period from 1780-1914. During its 487 pages of text and 25 pages of footnotes we are introduced to a variety of historiographical debates, more than a few snarky remarks about other historians, economists, sociologists and the histories of a variety of countries. This last is both the most impressive part of the book and the part I found the most flawed. Bayly is one of the foremost historians of the British Empire and of India. His expertise in those histories, in the histories of the Ottoman Empire, Southeast Asia, Iran, Egypt all strike this reader as subtle and complete. On the other hand, I frequently found myself questioning his grasp of the history of the United States which is a subject in which I have read widely for many years.

However, I want to do this book justice. So my plan is to tell you some of Bayly's main themes and to discuss the organization of his book. Then I will go over why I think the Bayly misses the boat on the U.S. and one area where I found his argument unconvincing.

If Sir Bayly has one overall theme, it is to put an end to the idea that modernity (however that is understood) was born in Europe/the U.S. and then diffused out to the rest of the world. He is very resistant to the idea expressed in the phrase, "the West and the rest". To develop this broad theme, Bayly defines modernity as a mix of economic, political, religious, social and intellectual movements that changed the way that people across the globe dressed, ate, thought, prayed, governed themselves as well as how they made money. Some of the processes did have their origin in Europe, some actually started in other parts of the world first and spread from there, and many seem to have arisen simultaneously. Even the processes that were first started in Europe, when they began to impact other cultures, did so in a way that was adapted to the needs and cultures of those people. The tendency has been to see the West during this period as being the main actor on the world stage. Our squabbles became the squabbles of the world. Bayly will allow for very little of that. In Bayly's history, the entire world is full of cross-influences, full of peoples adapting to similar processes of change and acting upon each other. In particular, Bayly wants us to recognize how important India, the Ottoman Empire, China and Japan were during this period.

Bayly's second great theme is directed toward historical method. The only way to make his point is to make it globally. We have the resources to write global history now that is focused on all of the world's peoples and by doing so we deepen our understanding of our national and regional histories.

His final great theme is to deny to history a singular or even two or three major causal forces. He is not a

Marxist. His history could readily be seen as an alternative to Hobsbawm's Age Of...series. Economics plays a large role in Bayly's history but so does religion, nationalism, science, politics, war, industrious revolutions and disease. None of these causal forces can be reduced to one of the other or to any group of the others. In Bayly's history things could have gone differently.

So much for his major themes in my reading. Overall, I found myself in agreement with them. I wish I could say the same for the structure of his book. Bayly offers us his history in five separate narrative sections. The narrative sections focus on the Ancient Regime prior to the period in question and then four sub-periods. These narratives are interspersed with essays on various of Bayly's components of modernity. There is a great essay on the rise of the city during the early part of the nineteenth century and how that was impacted by and impacted the beginnings of industrialization. He has a very insightful essay on the changes that occurred in the major religions during this period. He makes the argument that one of the ways that Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism all reacted to the Christianity being imposed by the West was to tighten up their doctrine. Scripture became standardized, doctrine became more uniform. This in turn led the Christian churches to do the same. The major religions all experienced a period of growth in the number of adherents and some of the smaller religions died out or became less common.

I have mixed feelings about this structure. It results in occasionally confusing reading in that I was not really sure what period was being discussed. On the other hand, the focused essays sometime allow for points to be made more powerfully than they would in a flowing narrative. Just be prepared to have to go back and reread sections to get the timeline straight.

So what are my problems with Bayly's book? My first problem is in regards to his section on science. He explains how some cultures were able to incorporate scientific theories into their own heritage. But he never deals with the ultimately corrosive impact of scientific practice/theorizing. And this is one area where I would argue that Western influence does follow the diffusionist model. Bayly makes some fair arguments for how non-Western countries adapted science to their culture but never really makes an argument for how that then worked back to effect Western countries in return.

Secondly, as I mention above, I have read a fair amount of U.S. history. I found many of his statements about that history to be questionable or off by about 30 or 40 years. When it comes to U.S. history, Sir Bayly has a tin ear.

For example, on p.190, Bayly states that "the 1880s and 1890s seem to have been a period when racial awareness and segregation on the grounds of race became more obtrusive in almost all societies." That is a very debatable proposition in terms of U.S history. I could argue for almost any other decade from 1820 on as being as good a candidate for that statement.

In part, I think it has to do with his reading in U.S. history. I took a close look at his bibliography and several things struck me. Outside of the books listed that speak to his specialties, it is somewhat (Enter Irony!) parochial. It is otherwise very English both in the sense of the language and the country of publication. There are approximately 560 entries listed and only 12 are in other languages (all European). He tends to lean a lot on certain books for countries that are not his specialty. His American history is largely a mix of Bailyn, Pocock and the single volume Penguin History of the United States. That hardly cuts it.

This, of course, speaks to that part of my title about biting off more than you can chew. I do not believe it is possible anymore for one person to know the history of all the cultures and countries of the world as well as Bayly knows England or India. Largely, I think Bayly would agree. I am sure he would agree that his global history is a work in progress- that others will expand on it, tighten it and change in ways that speak more forcefully to the actual experience of all people worldwide. In the meantime, his book is full of insights about many different cultures and historical technique. It is not the final word but it is a good beginning.

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Superb

By Enigma

This is the best book I have read on the history of globalization. It is superb. It is well written. It is sweeping in its vision. And the scholarship that undergirds the book is remarkable. Bayly has read widely in disparate fields like African, Chinese, Mughal, and British history, nationalism, economic development, the state, military history, and globalization.

Bayly appeals to the professional historian, interested in historiographical debates over nationalism, colonialism, economic development, and many other matters. He brings these debates into his narration in a judicious manner. But historiography does not overwhelm the narrative. This is a book that can be savored by the professional historian and educated layperson alike.

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As good as history gets

By Malkauns

This book is going to revolutionize how we think about the history of globalization. To the traditional gaze from the West Eastward, it gives equal relevance to how the East influenced the West. For instance, it makes the important argument that nationalism was not just a western concept but arose relatively independently in many non-western countries. By looking at exchanges in both directions, with a masterful understanding of recent historical scholarship, it provides an authoritative corrective to existing understandings of imperialism, colonialism, trade, development and other globalizing phenomena. Besides being an important, even profound, work of history, it is also characterized by Bayly's encyclopedic knowledge of social and economic theory. As Nial Ferguson says in his blurb - this is a masterpiece.

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