

BOOK REVIEWS

Peter Burke, ed. *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991. 254 pp. Index. Hardcover, ISBN 0-7456-0501, \$32.50; Softcover, ISBN 0-271-00834-2, \$13.95

New Perspectives on Historical Writing, a book edited by Peter Burke of the United Kingdom, consists of eleven chapters by ten different writers (Burke himself wrote two chapters). Collectively, the authors present a fascinating survey of some of the thinking and methodology behind modern historiographical practices. The purpose of this book is to assess the strengths and weaknesses of a few "relatively recent movements," or approaches, to what Burke and his fellow authors call the "new history" (p. 2).

In the opening chapter, Burke defines the traditional historiographic paradigm as "Rankean history," after the work of the highly influential nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke. He states that Rankean history "has often—too often—been assumed to be *the* way of doing history, rather than being perceived as one among various possible approaches to the past" (p. 3). The "new history" is difficult to define because it is more about what it opposes than what it does. However, Burke describes seven principal differences between the old and new approaches.

First, traditional history is concerned mainly with politics, including church and military affairs, with the arts and sciences treated only marginally. The new history, on the other hand, is concerned with almost every imaginable aspect of "human activity." The Burke notes that "[t]he philosophical foundation of the new history is the idea that reality is socially or culturally constituted" (p. 3). From 1900–50, the new history dealt primarily with the history of ideas. Since about 1960, historians have tackled such diverse topics as the history of "childhood, death, madness,

the climate, smells, dirt and cleanliness, gestures, the body . . . , Femininity . . . , reading . . . , speaking, and even silence” (p.3).

The second difference between the old and new paradigms is that traditional historians view history as a “narrative of events” (p. 4), whereas new historians deal more with the structure of events. The third difference, related to the second, is that traditional history takes a view from “above,” that is of great men—such as statesmen, generals, and the like—whereas the new history tends to look at events from “below.”

Fourth, traditional historians rely heavily on official documents, whereas new historians utilize a wide variety of materials, including numerical sources, to gain insights into the “below” aspects of history. Similarly, traditional history focuses on the thinking and actions of individuals, whereas the new history deals more with collective movements and trends.

Sixth, when historiography became the province of professional, largely university-based historians during the nineteenth century, its practitioners adopted the notion of objectivity from their scientific university colleagues. The new historians, on the other hand, believe that cultural relativism prevents unbiased accounts by any historians, traditional or new. Finally, although the new history is not really new, during the 1970s and 1980s “its practitioners” became “extremely numerous and . . . they refuse[d] to be marginalized” (p. 8).

After attempting to define the new history, Burke proceeds to discuss four major problem areas encountered by its practitioners. First, he discusses problems of definitions, such as the fact that Westerners used to treat world history as Western culture on the one hand and all other history on the other. As another example, he asks whether “a history of medicine from below” should “concern itself with folk-healers as opposed to professional physicians, or with the patients’ experiences . . .” (p. 10).

Next, Burke treats “problems of sources,” which he deems the new historians’ “greatest problem” (p. 12). He declares that the use of quantitative sources has been “[t]he greatest—and the most controversial—innovation in method in the last generation” (p. 14). Indeed,

quantification has "polarize[d] the profession into supporters and opponents" (p. 15).

Explanations for historical happenings constitute the third set of problems confronted by new historians. Burke notes that economic and social historians of the 1950s and 1960s were attracted to "determinist models of historical explanation" (p. 16), such as those Marxist scholars and researchers in the fields of geography and population movements proffered. He suggests that elites and ordinary people face different choices and act from different motivations. He believes that "the most attractive models" today, unlike Marxism and other early models, are those that "emphasize the freedom of choice of ordinary people" (p. 8). The new history also includes psychohistory and its analyses of unconscious motives, as opposed to traditional historical accounts of leaders, which "overestimate the importance of consciousness and rationality" (p. 16). He believes that perhaps a "way out" of the difficult question of whether people act as groups or as individuals would be to "recognize the extent of individual freedom within certain limits set by the culture" (p. 17). Finally, Burke discusses problems of synthesis caused by the proliferation of subgroups of historians and the expanding field of inquiry.

In the second chapter, "History from Below," Jim Sharpe traces the origin of that term to a 1966 London *Times Literary Supplement* article written by a Marxist-influenced historian. He then discusses problems of evidence historians face when attempting history from below, such as the fact that, in general, sources for ordinary people are sparse before the late eighteenth century. Sharpe also says that notions about "the people" as a unitary group are not valid because since the sixteenth century they have tended to be "a rather varied group" (p. 27). Essentially, history from below can be accomplished from quantitative sources and from in-depth accounts of individuals such as those found in diaries and memoirs. He concludes that history from below has been attempted on a wide variety of geographical regions from the thirteenth through the twentieth centuries, and that is "has proved unusually fruitful" (p. 35). In the end, though, Sharpe states that "history from below has so far had comparatively little impact on mainstream history or on altering the perspectives of mainstream historians"

(p. 37), whose history he defines as political history, at least as practiced by British historians.

In the chapter on women's history Joan Scott uses the term "movement" because during the past two decades women's studies have taken on a "dynamic quality" that is "cross-national" and "cross-disciplinary" (p. 42). She notes that although the United States provides much of the leadership, this movement is international in scope. Scott tackles the difficult issue of the political nature of the women's movement in general and of the women's studies movement in particular. She states directly that both are innately political and center on issues of power. For example, she says forthrightly that:

Many of those writing women's history consider themselves involved in a highly political effort to challenge prevailing authority in the profession and the university and to change the way history is written (p. 43).

Scott notes further that "we need to think about women's history as a dynamic study in the politics of knowledge production" (p. 44).

Henk Wesseling's chapter, "Overseas History," traces the origins of the term to post-World War II British and European studies of colonial history. Despite Wesseling's best efforts, this chapter betrays the parochial, Euro-centric attitudes still held by most mainstream historians. He lists problems with periodization, sources, and synthesis in world history approaches, in addition to overcoming traditional views to the effect that non-European peoples have no real history.

"Microhistory," the subject of the next chapter, arose in the 1970s as a reaction against the perceived failure of social science paradigms to explain group behavior. In attributing this failure to the inadequacies of positivist research, Giovanni Levi seems to equate positivism with scholarly Marxist models, when in reality the latter is but a subset of the former. The alleged failures of past positivist historical explanations should be attributed more to ideology-driven Marxist research than to positivism *per se*. Nevertheless, Levi makes clear and convincing arguments for in-depth studies of particular aspects of history, an approach called "microhistory," to

compensate for the shortcomings of social history deterministic models that miss the specifics, and those of anthropological approaches (qualitative) that rely so heavily on relativistic notions that they miss the generalizations.

The strong chapter on microhistory precedes a relatively weak one on oral history. Gwyn Prins does make the case that oral history could and has been used as a means of overcoming traditional historians' biases against non-literate cultures as being "history-less" because of their failure to record significant events in writing. Indeed, prominent historians, even some in the second half of the twentieth century, have stated, essentially, that African and Native American Indian tribes are without history and therefore unworthy of study. In the end, Prins agrees with those who criticize oral history for being "trapped in the small scale" (p. 134). She fails to describe a wide enough array of successful cases oral history applications to convince the reader of its efficacy, something that could have been done readily. Instead, Prins seems to view oral history mainly as a means for checking the validity of other sources, an approach that still does nothing for non-literate cultures, including *de facto* non-literature subcultures within larger literate ones.

The next four chapters deal, respectively, with scholarly work on the history of reading, images (mainly visual art), political thought, and the human body. It seems curious that the chapter on overseas history was not included, with these other four chapters on relatively specific topical areas of historical study and the remaining chapters of the book grouped together in a separate section on historical methodology. Regardless, the uninspiring chapters on reading by Robert Darnton and political thought by Richard Tuck deal with the failure of historians of reading to develop a synthesis of some of their voluminous statistical studies on reading habits, particularly across cultures, and of the temerity of political historians with regard to their beliefs in the strengths of their own political theories—which the author deems a sacrifice to deconstructionist tendencies.

Roy Porter's chapter on the history of the body develops the important idea that these histories are not really about the body as a physical entity, but rather histories of the way various religious and social "value systems" (p. 212) viewed the body at different times in history. In other words, ". . .the

'body' cannot be treated by the historian as a biological given, but must be regarded as mediated through cultural sign systems" (p. 215). This theme might sound familiar to those familiar with the literature on musical aesthetics, as opposed to the literature on structural music history and theory. However, the author goes on to state that:

The apportionment of function and responsibility between body and mind, body and soul, differs notably according to century, class, circumstances and culture, and societies often possess a plurality of competing meanings (p. 215).

Indeed, music aestheticians to date have been far less successful in identifying similarities and differences in aesthetic and other musical values across and between cultures and time periods than in developing theories about a particular type of music produced in Western Europe during a relatively brief period of time.

Perhaps the chapter of most interest to music educators is the excellent one on the history of images. Ivan Gaskell notes the increasing criticism (in some circles) of art historians for focusing on works of arts, as well as their "perception of qualitative hierarchies" (p. 169) within this body works. He then presents some thought-provoking questions about the practice of canonizing works of art and the artists themselves, and how such canons can shift, often as a result of "factors . . . not necessarily primarily to do with artistic issues" (p. 180).

This same chapter might be the most interesting one for music education historians as well. The author deals with such difficult questions as the extent to which, and in which ways, a work of art significant in its own time can remain significant to later generations. He suggests that art "criticism which openly engages with current cultural and social concerns and which does not claim unprovable access to universal and perpetual 'truths' may be less likely to mislead . . ." (p. 185).

In the book's final chapter, Peter Burke notes that "The so-called 'opera-house' definition of culture (as high art, literature, music, and so on) was narrow but at least it was precise" (p. 10). This also relates to

music education history, whose practitioners have tended to examine outstanding individuals and the activities of professional organizations, but not ordinary music teachers and students or informal, non-school modes of music teaching and learning.¹

An article on certain demographic aspects of membership of the Music Educators National Conference (MENC) is an example of a "new history" approach in music education. It deals with history from below in that it focuses on regular, or ordinary, members of the MENC, and it relies primarily on a quantitative approach. Historians might employ such approaches with other aspects of music education history.²

This book will be of interest to scholars interested in new approaches and subject matter in music education history. It is a thought-provoking book that deserves serious attention from professional historians.

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