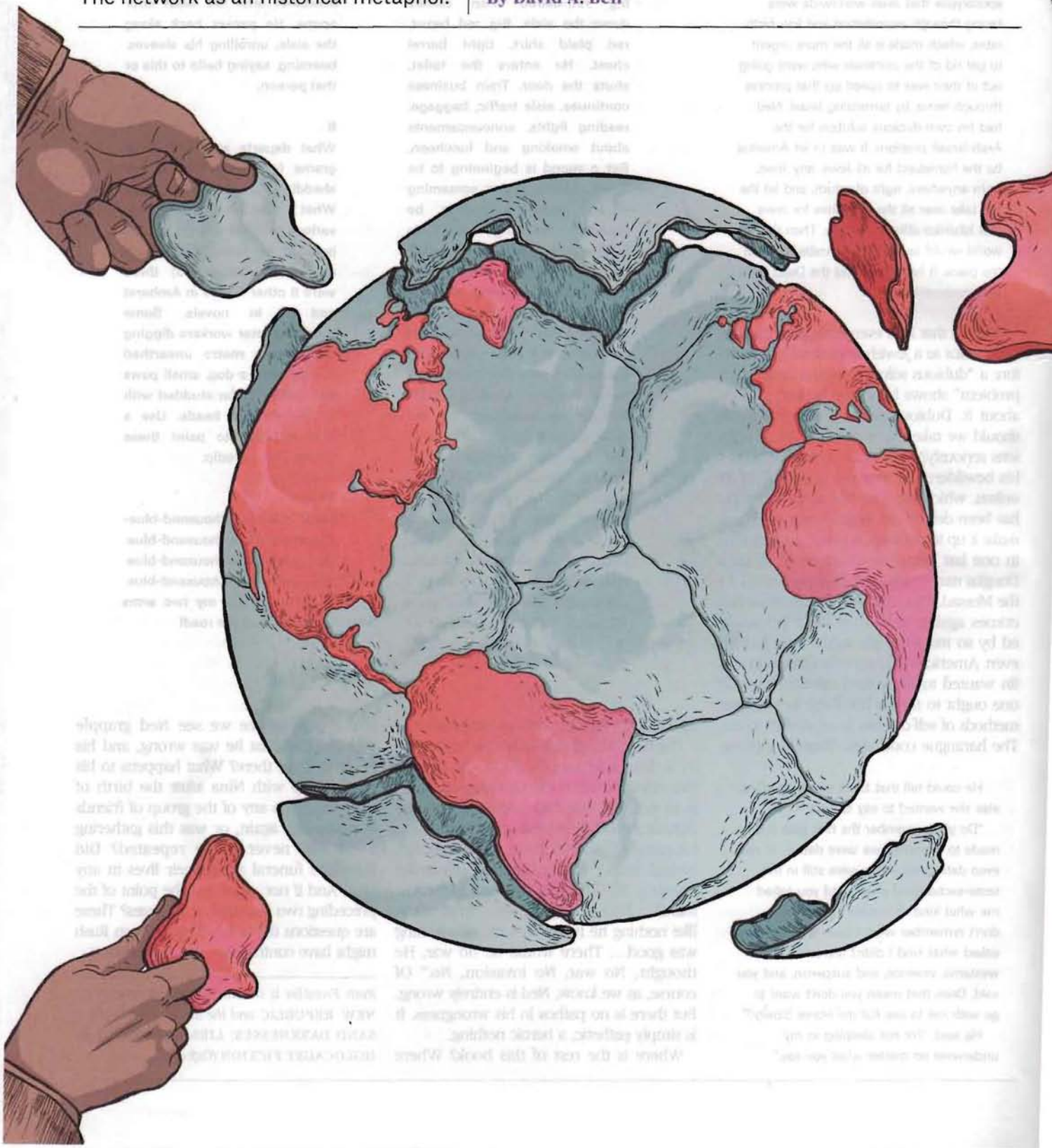
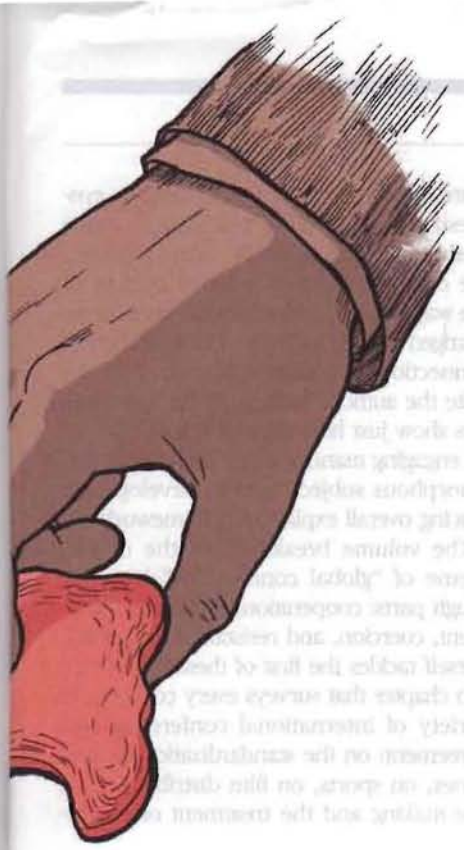
ILLUSTRATION BY Joanna Krótka

The Global Turn

The network as an historical metaphor. | By David A. Bell





SHERLOCK HOLMES, THAT MOST ENGLISH of fictional characters, would not seem an obvious icon of globalization. Yet the novel in which he first appeared, *A Study in Scarlet*, begins with the exploits of Dr. Watson in Afghanistan. In the four novels that Arthur Conan Doyle wrote about Holmes, two of the plots hinge on Americans pursuing vendettas in Europe, and two on fortunes acquired (in one case stolen) in British overseas colonies. As for the fifty-six short stories, fully three-quarters of them have a significant foreign dimension, most often extending beyond the European continent. Holmes's London is a predictably exotic metropolis bustling with Indians, European radical exiles, wealthy Americans, and sundry foreign aristocrats, sailors, and spies. But even the crimes that draw the detective into the deceptively tranquil countryside most often seem to involve an estate purchased with Australian gold-mining profits, or a grudge among soldiers dating back to the Indian Mutiny. *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, although set in deepest Devon, revolves around the efforts of an Englishman born in Costa Rica to steal a fortune made in South Africa from a Canadian cousin.

For many years now, it has been the rage among historians to uncover past global connections of this sort. In the so-called "global turn" in contemporary historiography, it has not been enough simply to study the way Western powers have affected the rest of the world–a venerable subject. The task has also been to show how the rest of the world affected the West; how ideas and practices flowed back and forth in a constant flux of appropriation, transformation, and resistance; how the oppression of the strong met the "weapons of the weak"; and how history's repressed "subaltern" can be made to speak. In other words, it is not simply a matter of debunking claims of a Western "civilizing mission," which most people in the West ceased believing in decades ago. It is also a matter of restoring "agency" to non-Western peoples, to ensure that they are not treated as the passive objects of Western activity. It has been a matter of showing how, even in the relatively distant past, global patterns of movement, exchange, exploitation, and aggression shaped phenomena that historians once saw as purely local. And it has been a matter of applying, even to quite distant historical periods, the controlling metaphor of the digital age: the "network."

The initial impulse behind the turn was strongly, if often inchoately, political. Revealing how even early patterns of globalization extended, iceberg-like, far beneath the visible surface of politics and trade seemed an effective way to heighten sensitivity to the persistence of long-term patterns of inequality and exploitation today, particularly in regard to the "global south." Demonstrating the myriad ways in which particular peoples either resisted forms of globalization, or appropriated them for their own uses, allowed them to serve as inspirational paragons. To take one prominent example, historians such as Laurent Dubois have interpreted the massive slave revolts in the French Caribbean in the 1790s neither as a simple explosion of rage against horrific oppression nor as a mere echo of European revolutions. The revolts have emerged instead as a complex process in which rebellious slaves took European ideas of rights and liberty and blended them with Caribbean and African ideas and practices to create something entirely new.

Over time, the ordinary operations of academic life have blunted the political message. Quarrels have taken their toll. Does too strong a stress on the "agency" of indigenous peoples naively downplay the brutal realities of imperial exploitation? Or, by contrast, does an excessive focus on this exploitation end up making indigenous peoples seem like nothing more than passive victims, thereby keeping the West itself at the center of the story? Cautious of venturing into such minefields, many "global historians" now encase every hesitant assertion in a suffocating gauze of hedging and qualification. Meanwhile, the hope of taking part in a powerful and exciting intellectual trend (coupled, perhaps, with the prospect of winter research trips to Barbados or Goa) has drawn in many scholars with little concern for the original political stakes.

STILL, THE TREND HAS ONLY GAINED strength and breadth. What social history was to the 1960s and 1970s, and cultural history to the 1980s and 1990s, global history has become in the first decades of the new century. Forty years ago, a young historian interested in the era of the American Revolution might have undertaken a dissertation on how independence affected daily life in small-town New England. Twenty years ago, she might have traced discourses of masculinity in the newspapers of the early republic. Today, a typical topic is more likely to involve the impact of "global" commodities such as tea and wine on American cities, or the role of foreign sailors on American merchant vessels, or the establishment of correspondence networks between slave-owners in the American South and the Caribbean. As with previous "turns," advocates of this newest one insist on the need to apply its insights

A World Connecting: 1870–1945 Edited by Emily S. Rosenberg | Belknap Press, 1,161 pp., $39.95

to all manner of familiar subjects. There is even a growing literature from this perspective devoted to, yes, Sherlock Holmes. (A recent article in *Critical Review* bears the title "Sherlock Holmes, Crime, and the Anxieties of Globalization.")

At its best, this new work opens up remarkable new perspectives on the past. It used to be possible for historians to devote entire careers to French Revolutionary studies (my own field) without paying the slightest attention to the fact that revolutionary France possessed Caribbean colonies. Yet the pre-revolutionary growth in the French economy was largely driven by the spectacular expansion of sugar production in these colonies. This production in turn depended upon massive numbers of slaves working under some of the most brutal conditions ever seen on the planet. In 1789, the three small French colonies of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti), with a combined surface area roughly equal to that of Massachusetts, held as many African slaves as the entire United States (roughly 700,000). Most of them had been born in Africa, and they survived, on average, for little more than a decade after their arrival in the New World. In 1791, these slaves rose up in the largest slave rebellion ever seen in history. In 1794, revolutionary France became the first European empire to abolish slavery (although Napoleon later re-established it). The "global turn" has very rightly insisted that histories of the French Revolution take these events fully into account. It has done similar things for many other subjects.

IT HAS PROVED LESS SUCCESSFUL, however, at providing new, overall narratives with which to make sense of past human experience. A classic of the genre such as C.A. Bayly's *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914*, which appeared in 2003, brilliantly drew connections and parallels between far-flung parts of the globe, highlighted the growth of communication and transformation networks, and concluded with a trenchant meditation on the "great acceleration" of the years from 1890 to 1914, when the entire world seemed to be careening toward dramatic conflict, amid the eclipse of earlier liberal hopes. Yet even as superbly confident a writer as Bayly found it difficult to bring whole continents and oceans together into a coherent story. And when it came to explaining "the motors of change," he could offer only two and a half pallid pages that proposed, as key, nothing more than "the concatenation of changes produced by the interactions of political, economic and ideological changes at many different levels"–a statement vague and abstract enough to apply to virtually any historical situation anywhere.

Despite this problem–or, perhaps, because of it–proponents of the global turn have developed something of an obsession with synthesis. Publishing houses churn out encyclopedias, manuals, handbooks, and dictionaries of global history faster than anyone can keep track of, let alone read. Learned journals bristle with forums, discussions, and online debates about the "state of the field." And particularly ambitious authors have produced individual overviews, the more voluminous the better, so as to do the fullest possible justice to what is literally the largest human story. Some years after Bayly's relatively svelte 540-page volume, the German scholar Jürgen Osterhammel weighed in ("weighed" being the operative word) with a 1,568-page history of the nineteenth century titled *The Transformation of the World*. And now Osterhammel has teamed up with Akira Iriye to edit a massive six-volume history of the world, to appear in both English and German, of which the 1,161-page tome under review, covering the years 1870 to 1945, is the first to see print. It consists of five "chapters," each of which, if published separately, would already have occupied a respectable length of bookshelf.

This tome, edited by Emily Rosenberg, provides an excellent illustration of what the global turn can and cannot accomplish. Each of its five chapters draws on a massive range and quantity of source material. Each manages not only to synthesize this material, but also to make fresh arguments about it. Taken together, the chapters provide a broad picture of the way certain sorts of global connections changed between 1870 and 1945. But other connections go oddly neglected. And despite the authors' valiant efforts, the chapters show just how difficult it is to write in an engaging manner about such a vast and amorphous subject, and to develop convincing overall explanatory frameworks.

The volume breaks down the overall theme of "global connections" into five rough parts: cooperation, exchange, movement, coercion, and resistance. Rosenberg herself tackles the first of these, in a virtuoso chapter that surveys every conceivable variety of international conference and agreement: on the standardization of time zones, on sports, on film distribution, on war-making and the treatment of prisoners, on banking and currency and trade, on international telegraph and railroad lines, on artistic and scientific and professional exchanges, not to mention the League of Nations. She looks at failed attempts at internationalism such as the Esperanto movement, and shows how forms of entertainment developed worldwide audiences. The period comes off in her pages as one of frenetic global networking. (Of all the authors, Rosenberg is most enamored of the "network" image, although her metaphorical cup overflows with invocations of "currents," "interwoven pathways," "connecting flows," and "the fluid realm of the 'trans-.'") Most interestingly, she argues that the cataclysm of World War I ended up interrupting the process surprisingly little.

Dirk Hoerder strikes a more somber tone in his chapter on migrations and movement. The first image that comes to American minds, when considering migration in

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this period, is generally one of shipboard huddled masses gazing up in wonder at the Statue of Liberty. Hoerder shows, with statistics to spare, just how small a part of the overall picture this image captures. Carefully distinguishing between different sorts of migrants–free migrants, labor migrants, indentured workers, refugees, displaced persons–he points to the vast flows of humanity that steamships and railroads made possible all across the globe. Indians moved out across the British empire, to Africa, and even to South America. Russians spread eastward into Siberia, Chinese downward into southeast Asia. Reverse flows sometimes mattered almost as much as the original ones. And in the story of migrations, international conflict had an increasing impact, with refugees taking up a larger and larger share of overall movement. Steven Topik and Allen Wells also stress discontinuity and unequal power relations in a more narrowly focused contribution on commodity flows. Industrial processes, they argue, may have made themselves felt in agriculture as much as in more "advanced" sectors of the world economy, but the distribution of benefits remained tremendously unequal, and the promise of worldwide prosperity largely unkept.

Coercion and resistance dominate the contributions by Charles Maier, on the state, and Antoinette Burton and Tony Ballantyne, on empires. Maier's splendid chapter, the longest in the volume, also has the clearest thesis: to demonstrate what he terms "a decisive intensification of state ambition and governmental power" across the world. (The essay has the inspired title "Leviathan 2.0.") Maier is particularly good on the ways that improved communications and transportation could facilitate new forms of state power, but also help to provoke revolution everywhere from Mexico to China to Russia. He also waxes lyrical on the ruthlessness with which expanding territorial states subjugated and incorporated peoples with more nomadic patterns of settlement and political organization, from the American Great Plains to Central Asia. Burton and Ballantyne, meanwhile, take on the formidable task of discussing both imperialism and anti-imperialism in just under 150 pages. Their chapter seeks, above all, to debunk the commonly held notion that decolonization movements only really reached critical mass with the disruptions of World War II. To the contrary, they argue that these movements took shape in tandem with imperialism itself–and, crucially, that they took shape between empires, not just within them. They hold up W.E.B. Du Bois, who called for the worldwide solidarity of African and Asian peoples, as a prime example of anti-imperialist networking, noting that this African American opponent of American overseas ventures "compared the streets of Shanghai to those of Mississippi and challenged Chinese bankers to resist 'the domination of European capital.'"

IN SUM, THE CONTRIBUTIONS BRING together a remarkable body of insights about global connections and networks. And yet a remarkable amount is absent as well. For a start, readers of the book will learn far more here about postal systems, telegraphs, and telephones than about the ideas transmitted through them. Perhaps nothing in the period between 1870 and 1945 created more intense international solidarities than socialist ideas–"workers of the world, unite!" was nothing if not a call for global connection. Thanks to socialism, nearly identical arguments about means and ends, stages of historical development, capital and industry were taking place simultaneously in Santiago and Beijing, London and New York. (Not for nothing did Lionel Abel famously call New York's City College in the 1930s "the most interesting part of the Soviet Union ... the one part of that country in which the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky could be openly expressed.") Yet Rosenberg's chapter has barely four pages on the subject. The book as a whole mentions dozens of international organizations, including the International Council for Bird Preservation and the Inter-American Price Coffee Board, but it can spare exactly three sentences for the First and Second Socialist Internationals. It does not do a much better job with

Still-Born

By Michael Marberry

My mother never forgave. My father
made plastics at a factory. Mid-forties,

she was pregnant with their sixth child,
and it showed: the roundness of her belly,

the buttons at the bottom of each shirt
left open, her stiff rising from the couch,

her slowness that was once a shimmy.

It was lunch when she said she'd lost it:
lost the baby somewhere inside of herself.

***It's for the best,* I said. Her eyes glazed dark**
like blown glass in an old brick building.

I was young and arrogant then. I knew
life was just and metrical; I knew so little

of the periphescence of skin and skin.

Later, I learned they named their boy
Samuel*—meaning, *God has heard us.

They never told me where, or even if,
they buried him, and I didn't think to ask.

the transmission of religious ideas, and on the ways new forms of "global connection" sometimes built on older ones developed by that most successful of international organizations, the Roman Catholic Church.

For all its copious statistics on commodity flows, the book also has surprisingly little to say about how commodities were actually used, and about daily life in general. One of the most striking features of the period between 1870 and 1914 was the emergence of closely related middle-class cultures throughout much of the West–and increasingly outside it as well. The emerging bourgeoisies of the day placed a huge premium on well-ordered, cultivated home lives, with "companionate" but sharply restricted roles for women. It was, to a very large extent, the (male) products of these homes who created the international organizations discussed by Rosenberg; staffed the national and imperial bureaucracies charted by Maier, Burton, and Ballantyne; and of course consumed the commodities studied by Topik and Wells, from old standards such as sugar and tobacco to new arrivals such as petroleum and rubber for pneumatic tires. Burton and Ballantyne have a revealing anecdote about the way an Indian nationalist leader appropriated and adapted Western notions of middle-class domesticity, but the book otherwise leaves such subjects largely untouched.

THE SINGLE GREATEST ABSENCE from the volume, however, is war. Military conquest, of the sort undertaken by Germany and Japan in World War II, is the most direct form of "global connection" imaginable. Moreover, the two world wars, with their unfathomable levels of slaughter and destruction, arguably did more to disrupt global networks than anything else in history. Charles Maier has much of interest to say about the way war contributed to the shaping of his "Leviathan 2.0." Yet nowhere do the authors of this book offer a systematic overview of war in this period, which included the thirty-one most sanguinary years in human history (1914-1945). The authors could have argued collectively, as Rosenberg does singly with reference to international organizations, that even the world wars actually did surprisingly little to disrupt the long-term growth of global connections and networking. This would be an interestingly provocative thesis, if perhaps a difficult one to sustain. But the book as a whole never makes the case. And oddly, while the authors offer potted summaries of events they assume their readers will find unfamiliar, such as the Mexican Revolution of 1916, they do nothing similar for the world wars. The "Amritsar Massacre" of Indians by British troops in 1919, with a death toll of perhaps one thousand, appears three separate times in the book, but Stalingrad and the Somme, with their millions of dead, go unmentioned. Yes, Stalingrad was a "European" battle in one sense, but it represented the key moment in a struggle for the bulk of the Eurasian land mass across which Hoerder learnedly traces so many migrations. Stalingrad also brought in, on the Soviet side, combatants from all across Eurasia, while the Somme involved colonial soldiers from global empires. Also of note is that Winston Churchill, arguably a figure with more than a passing relevance to the theme of "global connections," has precisely three references in the book–less than his compatriot David Livingstone (of "Dr. Livingstone, I presume," fame).

Many of the most interesting historical phenomena have started with rapid changes that took place in very small spaces.

These problems might have been addressed–at the risk of stretching an already massive volume to the literal breaking point–by the addition of other essays. The absence of Churchill, however, points to a more general problem that has plagued the writing of global history: how to bring individuals into stories told on such vast scales, for in fact few individuals from the period do much better than him in *A World Connecting*. Some practitioners of "global history," in a turn to the techniques of micro-history, have produced remarkably effective narratives centered on the experiences of otherwise obscure individuals caught up in global currents of migration, imperialism and trade. Linda Colley's *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh*, for instance, brilliantly used the odysseys of an eighteenth-century Englishwoman between four continents as a window into an earlier period of globalization. But it is one thing to "see a world in a grain of sand," as Blake put it, and another to tell the story of the world as a whole. The authors of *A World Connecting* have to cram so much information into such a small space that individuals tend to disappear from view, even when their particular personalities and actions had a decisive effect on events. Maier at least manages an incisive short sketch of Stalin. But three hundred pages later, while Hoerder acknowledges the vast scale of coerced migration in the Soviet Union, he attributes it to faceless "Soviet bureaucrats," even though Stalin himself personally ordered the largest and most brutal "population transfers."

The general absence of individuals is just one thing that makes *A World Connecting*, like so much global history, at times difficult to read. The need to illustrate every argument with a long string of examples drawn from across the globe also contributes to the problem. A typical paragraph of Burton's and Ballantyne's leaps from Taiwan to the Russian steppe to southern Africa. One of Hoerder's includes references to North America, Australia and New Zealand, South Africa, East Africa, Manchuria, and the Andes. Rosenberg, meanwhile, is a devotee of lists: "in Western Europe, in the old Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires, in Egypt, Turkey, India, Japan, and Latin America." The authors are not bad writers, but the very nature of the book compels them to jump about in this manner, and carefully to note exceptions–

sometimes very numerous exceptions–to almost every general pattern they discern.

Is it possible to write global history in a more vigorous manner? I suppose it is, but doing so generally requires that the authors come armed with strong, overarching theses, not just about how things changed, but why. An earlier generation of Marxist historians, at least those who managed to crawl out from under the carapace of historical materialist jargon, could write with exceptional verve about events on a global scale, because they saw these events as driven above all by a single set of Western economic processes. But in *A World Connecting*, a Marxist historian such as Eric Hobsbawm finds himself chided for his "Eurocentric perspective." As Rosenberg puts it in her introduction, "the volume avoids any claims about some single motive-force of history." Instead, like Bayly with his multi-layered "interactions," she explains that the book emphasizes "change as processual and uneven, forged within exchange and relationality rather than by one-way, overarching forces." Each of the authors return, at many points, to the decisive effects of new transportation and communications technologies between 1870 and 1945, and the book teems with amazed contemporary observations about the ways railroads, steamships, and the telegraph seemed to annihilate time and space. But the overall vision of "exchange and relationality" forbids bringing this material together into a single, overarching argument. It also has unfortunate effects, to say the least, on the prose: "the reciprocal relationships between impulses of flux and of stabilization foreground both the commonalities and the differentiations that emerged in the period" (Rosenberg); "to trace this imperial globality in both its temporal and its spatial dimensions, seeing it as the interplay of multiple regimes that were simultaneously, but unevenly, distributed across the surface of the world" (Burton and Ballantyne); and so on. Statements such as these proliferate in the book like so much deadening Styrofoam.

The motivations for those statements, and for the avoidance of strong narratives, are in one sense admirable. The authors wish to avoid reductionism, and to acknowledge the very real complexity of the global processes that they have traced. But the fact that "currents" flowed in multiple directions, and that "networks" had multiple nodes, should not mean that we cannot trace an underlying logic to the way they developed. The authors are also rightly sensitive to post-colonial criticisms of an earlier iteration of global history, which too often reduced non-Western peoples to "primitives" or mere passive victims standing outside "real" history. Yet sometimes they take such sensitivity to an extreme. "Each perspective or positioning," writes Hoerder, "implies a point of view, particular or partisan, and marginalizes others of the many viewpoints available." Well, yes. But not all viewpoints are equally important and accurate, and surely it is possible to make distinctions among them without falling into prejudiced Eurocentrism. Alas, when a dread of reductionism mates with a horror of political incorrectness, the offspring is all too often simple banality: "Over the period from 1870 to 1945 the world became both a more familiar and a stranger place." Didn't we know this already?

Certainly we should not expect from global history the tidiness and narrative drama of a Sherlock Holmes story. ("And so, Watson, the evidence shows indubitably that the culprit is Western imperialism." "But Holmes, that is what you said last time.") Yet if it is so difficult to do global history in a satisfying and engaging manner and without doing injustice to the story's manifold actors, then perhaps historians should not be investing quite so much effort and resources into syntheses such as this volume. Perhaps the "global turn," for all its insights and instruction, has hit a point of diminishing returns. The fact that contemporary technology, economics, and politics have made us so acutely aware of global connections in our own day does not mean that past events are always best dealt with by setting them within a similarly vast context. "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space," said Hamlet. Many of the most interesting historical phenomena–think only of the origins of most major world religions–have started with rapid, incredibly intense changes that took place in very small spaces indeed. Perhaps it is time to turn back to them. ●

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Public Speaking Contest

By Adam Zagajewski

Or when she told us, for the tenth time maybe,
about the public speaking contest that, as a young
law student, she'd won, nearly won, even though
she faced serious competition, and like everyone
was stunned that a woman had won, nearly won,
and not a man, a future judge or lawyer,
she came out the best, nearly the best, although technically
speaking someone else took home the prize—
and that was her greatest success,
and when we listened to her story, later, much later,
amused, a little bored, thinking: "you're still
caught up in a contest, invisible this time,
like most such occupations,
and you want us to give the laurels
they refused you then,"
and how I wish I could hear
her tell the story again
about the contest she nearly won,
and in which, I think, after decades
of her memory's unceasing labor,
she finally carried the day.

Translated by Clare Cavanagh