

[Kauffeldt on Popkin, 'From Herodotus to H-Net: The Story of Historiography'](#)

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Jeremy D. Popkin. *From Herodotus to H-Net: The Story of Historiography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. xv + 251 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-992300-7.

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Commissioned by Donna Sinclair

Historiography is without question one of the more challenging areas in the professional field of history. It encompasses both a consideration of the skills that historians must learn and practice, as well as an evaluation of how individual historians have applied those skills to their craft. The study of historiography is therefore rich in the nuances of approaches, perspectives, and, most importantly, perhaps, the challenges to existing conventions that have helped to ever develop the field of history. Coming to grips with all of these ideas, not to mention the many debates about them, is a difficult task for any student of history, but Professor Jeremy D. Popkin of the University of Kentucky has helped to make this challenge much more manageable through his recent book, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, which constitutes a wonderful introduction to the study of historiography. Characterized by scholarly command of the most relevant literature, thorough and clear discussion of those sources, and an impassioned endorsement of the contributions of the field of history, *From Herodotus to H-Net* is resoundingly successful in achieving Popkin's stated aims.

The effectiveness of the book is particularly evident through the efforts to trace the history of the writing and study of history. Popkin provides over the initial five chapters, constituting part 1 of the text, a very clear but thorough discussion of the field from the ancient Greek and Chinese historians up through the middle decades of the twentieth century. The evolution of the field over those millennia was considerable, with each age often making contributions to reassessing what history should be and adding new dimensions to its study. However, novices in the field will probably be taken aback by Popkin's assertion that history as we know it today, as a professional and academic discipline, is actually quite young and rooted only in the 1800s. Tracing those modern beginnings to the German Leopold von Ranke, the author emphasizes von Ranke's contributions to shaping what we today consider hallmarks of the field: archival research, rigorous educational training via seminars, and the establishment of history as a separate discipline. Moreover, it is in this modern form that history has come into its own as a vibrant field of ideas, diverse perspectives, and impassioned debates. Such complexity is both fascinating and challenging, but students of the field often find this reality to be quite confusing and so very different from the popular perception that history is simply about facts and set knowledge. As Popkin conveys through the title of chapter 6, "Glorious Confusion," history has become a much richer but ever nuanced discipline in the last handful of decades. The "new ways of thinking about the past," he stresses, "resulted from changes in historians' notions of how individuals and societies worked, and that there might not be any single criterion by which historical truth could be defined" (p. 135). What constitutes truth, in other words, is today recognized as multilayered and understood through an appreciation of a range of pertinent perspectives. It is, however, these added complexities, asserts Popkin, that have bolstered the

relevancy of history and, “intellectually speaking,” he continues, “there is no question that history remains a vital and creative discipline and that historiographic analysis continues to have a vital role to play” (p. 191).

But perhaps the greatest quality that pervades Popkin’s book is his passion for the field of history and the study of its history. On almost the first page he asserts that “thinking about history can be a deeply stimulating and rewarding activity” (p. 14) and that “one is truly fortunate if one can find and pursue a career ... that truly engages one’s mind and one’s passions” (p. 15). History is obviously that profession for Popkin. And by inserting himself into this process of becoming a historian, tracing his own experiences from being an undergraduate to his time as a graduate student, from serving as a junior faculty member to the later years as a seasoned professor, he conveys an intellectual journey to which all historians, whatever their pedigree, can relate. His comments throughout the book of his experiences and growth as a professional help to personalize the specific process of coming to grips with historiography and its myriad phases of development over the years.

In its full scope, Popkin’s study of historiography constitutes a most accessible and clear analysis of the topic. *From Herodotus to H-Net* will serve students well as an introduction but should also represent a useful resource for more knowledgeable readers. The perspectives Popkin offers help to clarify the vibrancy and full breadth and nuance that the field encompasses, and he should be commended for having taken on the challenging task of writing this book. It promises to become widely read, particularly by members of the contemporary academic community of professional historians and their students.

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