

*Migration: A World History*. Michael Fisher. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780199764334

The stated goal of Michael Fisher's *Migration*, part of the larger Oxford New World History series, is to move away from "old" ways of approaching world history. As the editors of the series clearly state in the preface, world history was until recently western history, or else the history of world civilization with the United States and Europe set aside. This series, by contrast, attempts to analyze the "total human experience", the history of humanity writ large, from the vantage point of the moon. Fisher is an historian eminently qualified to handle this challenge. His previous works, notably *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1858* (2004) and *Visions of Mughal India: An Anthology of European Travel Writing* (2007) have been explicitly concerned with the problem of physical human movement on a global scale, and the various kinds of exchange across vast geographic and chronological expanses which caused or were consequences of migration.

*Migration: A World History* is divided up into five chronological categories which telescope in span as human history wears on. Chapter One, "Earliest Human Migrations, 200,000 BCE to 600 CE" follows humanity's exodus out of Africa and, using a variety of archaeological evidence, centers largely on the key role that climate played in encouraging early humans to spread out across Eurasia, develop farming and cities, and eventually coalesce around regional centers of power in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Italy. Juxtaposed with the following chapter, "Mixing and Clashing Migrations, 600 to 1450," the chronological expanse covered appears wildly out of balance. The second chapter's approach is revealed in one key word: "clashing." Fisher begins the chapter with the

foundation of Islam and its rapid expansion across the Mediterranean basin into Africa and Asia. Fisher uses the peripatetic journeys of historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun to explore effectively what the *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb* meant in this historical context, thereby creating perhaps one of the most engaging parts of the book. The title of the third chapter, “Migrations Start to Reconnect the World, 1450 to 1750” is problematic. In this section, Fisher primarily explores the ways in which western Europe “reconnected” with human populations in North and South America, though it is questionable whether reconnection is the best way to interpret Western Christendom’s discovery (or rather, rediscovery?) of the New World. As Fisher himself points out, the process was largely based on forced migration and slavery, bloodshed and the fracturing of indigenous communities. This section represents the chronological crux on which humanity is supposed to have turned, the period in which the seeds of modernity were sown, and in that it bears much in common with the older approaches to world history that the editors of the Oxford series mention in the preface. The novelty of this section lies in Fisher’s choice to lead in with a discussion of the history of the Roma people, a fascinating and understudied topic that high school and undergraduate students are not likely to have covered. Furthermore, Fisher’s detailed treatment of Ottoman, Safavid, and Chinese state building helps keep the reader’s focus balanced across continents just as the west was reconnecting with the new.

The last two chapters of *Migration* treat global human movement in modernity, chapter four covering 1750 CE to 1914, and chapter five covering 1914 to the present. The latter chapter does a particularly good job of detailing the important role colonized people played in the two world wars, and closes with an important discussion of the development

of the United Nations and the manner in which genocide has become part of our modern parlance.

Using the theme of migration is one way that historians have recently tackled the problem of teaching world history. Migration is currently a subject that is very present in the minds of educators and non-educators alike, as the problem of emigration from Syria and other war-ravaged states will likely become more widespread and chronic in the future. Teaching the history of human migration, then, presents both an opportunity and an obligation to historians. It furnishes us with a chance to underline the fact that humanity has always been very much in flux, and tasks us to examine why we are—and presumably always will be—a mobile species. Regrettably, Fisher's treatment of the subject fails to capitalize fully on this opportunity, if only because the book attempts to do too much in too little space. Fisher's slim, 150-page volume includes notes, an index, a list of useful web sites, and suggestions for further reading, making it a particularly terse treatment of the subject. As the book juggernauts through the global movement of humanity from 200,000 BCE to the present day, one thought recurs to the academic instructor: how can educators best adapt this book for its audience, which is presumably university undergraduate or advanced placement high school students?

Fisher's approach is most effective in his use of the stories of specific actors in history to illustrate a larger point about the nature of human movement across great chronological and geographic expanses. He begins the book with a vignette from the life of an Icelandic woman, Gudrid, who, along with her Norse companions, settled in eastern Canada circa 1000 CE. Fisher's writing, which is vivid and crisp throughout, is particularly evocative when recounting these personal stories. Fisher's engaging style manages to retain

the reader's attention despite the sheer quantity of information expressed in each chapter. Fisher also makes good use of the way that new breakthroughs in DNA research are revealing our mobile, hybridizing, inter-connected past. Another appealing aspect of the book is that it is one of the most affordable textbooks currently on the market that uses migration to study world history.

The book's greatest problem lies in a lack of effective signposting. The theme of migration is a good place to start, but the question follows: what prompted these migrations? Fisher's all-encompassing chronological approach is both the greatest strength and greatest weakness of the book, recounting notable historical events in great detail but generally leaving theoretical analysis to readers and educators. In the attempt to cover such an intractable topic, Fisher's account often becomes an inexorable timeline, a dizzying succession of dates and historical figures in which it becomes very difficult to discern unifying sub-themes or to chart change over time. This makes the text particularly problematic as a teaching tool for undergraduates or high school students who are apt to be overwhelmed and unable to discern how to weigh the relative importance of various migrations in history, much less to retain the knowledge of such an outpouring of human evolution. This book would have benefitted from a more explicitly thematic as well as chronological organization. Educators who have selected this book for their courses may consider drawing students' attention to the common themes—violence, faith, and the like—that have prompted the migration of peoples throughout the course of human history.

Overall, Fisher's *Migration* successfully completes the Herculean task of distilling millennia of human movement across the planet into a pithy and informative volume. This

text will doubtless be a useful teaching tool for educators and make for an interesting and instructive read for students.

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