

Good Books about History, 2010
Reviews by members of the OLLI-GMU History Club
Compiled by Tom Hady

[There are two changes, one major and one minor, in this year's edition of the History Club's annual list. The major change: For the first time, we include some historical novels. The minor change: Having concluded that names of publishers are not really needed to find a book in this computer age, I have dropped them from the listings.—TFH]

Gustavus Adolphus the Great, Nils Ahnlund (1940). Reviewed by Tom Hady

Gustav Adolph is one of the few Swedish kings who merit much mention in general European histories, but he is still treated as a bit actor. This book is a biography, rather than a history of the time, but nevertheless the reader comes away with a much better understanding of issues like the forces that led to Sweden's intervention in the Thirty Years War.

The Big Spenders. The Epic Story of the Rich Rich, the Grandees of America and the Magnificoes, and How They Spent Their Fortunes, Lucius Beebe (1966). Reviewed by Tom Hady

Beebe was a journalist who had a column, "This New York," for many years, chronicling the doings of the rich and famous. He is credited with inventing the term, "Café Society." The book was written shortly before his death, and its title describes its contents accurately. If you have an interest in the doings of the rich in the late 19th Century and early-to-middle 20th that matches modern fascination with football quarterbacks and popular singers, this is the book for you. If, like me, you do not, it's still worth reading for tidbits such as the description of (Unsinkable) Molly Brown at the sinking of the Titanic. Molly came into the lifeboat with *a suit of woolen unmentionables, a pair of heavy walking bloomers that she had purchased in Switzerland and which fastened at the knee with elastics, two woolen petticoats, a walking dress of Scotch cashmere, heavy woven golf stockings, a pair of sensible flat-heeled shoes, knitted mittens, and a \$4000 Russian sable muff in which reposed her automatic pistol. Over this ensemble she chose to wear a \$60,000 chinchilla evening cape.* Gradually, her garments went to other women who had not come so well prepared and were freezing. Not, however, the pistol. "Row, you sons of bitches," she thundered at the cowering occupants of [lifeboat] No. 6. "Row or I'll let daylight into you."

For the Soul of France: Culture Wars in the Age of Dreyfus, Frederick Brown (2010).
Reviewed by George Heatley

A great look at the 19th century part of the French Revolution that has been going on for 200 years. The course of French history fluctuated wildly depending on whether the Catholic-oriented conservatives or the non-religious egalitarians were in control' The fluctuation is most clearly reflected in the two great monuments of the 19th century: the Eiffel Tower, built by a socialist government to recognize modern science and technology, and the church of the Sacre-Coeur that

looms over Paris from Montmartre, built by a church-dominated government. It has also resulted in 25 different constitutions since the 1789 revolution.

The Norsemen in the Viking Age, Eric Christiansen (2006). Reviewed by Tom Hady

Most general histories of the Scandinavian countries trace kings back to Gorm the Old of Denmark (d. c.950) and his contemporaries, and discuss the raids of the Vikings on the British Isles and perhaps Normandy. They have very little on the economic and social life of the region during the period. Christiansen summarizes the available scholarship to fill this gap. I was left with two, somewhat conflicting impressions: (1) writing history of this period is often an exercise in “taking a button and sewing a vest on it.” The sources are so few and hard to interpret that conclusions are necessarily very tentative. (2) The Scandinavian economy and society of the time were far more vibrant and complicated--“advanced”-- than most people think.

A Brief History of the Vikings, The Last Pagans or the First Modern Europeans?, Jonathan Clements (2005). Reviewed by Tom Hady

There are a number of books that explain the history of the Viking era, but few that try to describe “the personalities of the Viking era, who made up that remarkably small handful of families and interlocking dynasties who were the prime movers of the Viking expansion,” as Clements does. He does it well. I have read extensively about the Vikings. (Sven Forkbeard was among my ancestors). This is one of the better books I have read.

The Long Fuse: How England Lost the American Colonies 1760-1785. By Don Cook. (1995). Reviewed by Bob Bohall

How was it that Great Britain at the height of its eighteenth-century power, victorious around the globe after the Seven Years War with France, politically mature with a stable government in a free-speaking democracy, made such a remorseless succession of blunders that ended in an unnecessary and unwinnable war and lost King George the greatest of his empire's possessions? Cook tells us the story of the uncompromising king, a great Empire and little minds that resulted in a lack of statesmanship to know the time and manner of yielding what it was impossible to keep. It was the times of William Pitt, Edmund Burke, Lord North and Benjamin Franklin and many others. This is an enjoyable history, of 400 well written pages, well developed and especially interesting given the orientation to England's side of the American Revolution. Cook was a newspaper correspondent in London, covering Parliament, politics and the Foreign Office.

Empires of the Sea, The Siege of Malta. The Battle of Lepanto and the Battle for the Center of the World, Roger Crowley (2009). Reviewed by Tom Hady

The 16th century conflict between the Ottoman empire and its North African tributaries, and the Christian countries of Europe--Spain especially-- tends to be overlooked in American history classes. In fact, Mediterranean coastal communities were raided by "corsairs" of both persuasions, the "Grand Turk"--Suleiman--had designs on all of southern Europe, and successive Popes had continuing designs on the Holy Land. Crowley provides a very readable and complete

coverage. He is especially good on the siege of Malta. He also supplies needed context: Ferdinand II of Spain could not concentrate only on the Ottoman threat. He had to worry about France and his rebellious possessions on the Low Countries. When I went on to read Susan Ronald's "Pirate Queen", though, I found Ferdinand also had growing English sea power to worry about, a problem given scant mention by Crowley.

100 Decisive Battles: from Ancient Times to the Present: The World's Major Battles and How They Shaped History Paul K Davis (1999). Reviewed by George Heatley

The title says it all.

The Worst Hard Time, Timothy Egan (2006). Reviewed by Tom Hady

"The untold story of those who survived the Great American Dust Bowl," the book concentrates on several people and communities in the panhandle of Oklahoma. The first 3/4 of the book is history in the "if it bleeds, it leads" manner of our local television news and the sepulchral voice of Pat Collins. It covers the trials and tribulations of these people at great length, far greater than is needed to make the point that this was, indeed, the worst hard time. Not until the last quarter does it get to a rather sketchy, but interesting, description of the policy responses. The description of Hugh Bennett filibustering a Congressional hearing on the proposed Soil Conservation Service while an aide whispered updates in his ear of the progress of the remnants of the Black Sunday dust storm toward Washington is classic. The stories of the Farm Security Administration still photographers and of the making of the classic documentary of the dust bowl, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, also help to make up for the tedium of the first part of the book.

The Vikings, A History, Robert Ferguson (2009). Reviewed by Tom Hady

Unlike the Christensen volume, Ferguson takes a more traditional tack in describing the history of the Viking era, describing the doings of kings and earls, and the Christianization of the Scandinavians. He does a better than average job, though, of describing the entire range of Viking activities, from North American to the Mediterranean.

Civilizations Culture, Ambition, and the Transformation of Nature Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, (2001). Reviewed by George Heatley

A highly praised new look at world civilization by a prolific historian.

Pathfinders: A Global History of Exploration Felipe Fernandez-Armesto (2006). Reviewed by George Heatley

A very readable account of mankind's expansion around the world since ancient times until the present. It has especially interesting accounts of ancient voyages and the importance of understanding wind and sea currents.

Hell in the Heavens, by Capt. John M. Foster, USMCR, (1961). Reviewed by Don Ferrett

Foster's approach to describing the Marine Corps air war in the Pacific is to add well-researched asides to his autobiography for the period. He was deep into the action from Munda in the Solomons (just after Guadalcanal), to the attacks on Japanese strongholds at Rabaul and Truk. The action can be intense as Foster and his buddies, mostly in Corsairs, are greatly outnumbered by enemy planes, and many of his friends are shot down. Although many are killed, a surprising number ditch at sea and are picked up to fight another day. This book does for the USMC fliers what Leckie and Sledge did for the ground troops - it gives the reader a sense of what it felt like to be there. My only real complaint is the lack of maps.

Rendezvous at Midway, Pat Frank and Joseph D. Harrington, (1968). Reviewed by Don Ferrett

This book tells the story of the U.S.S. Yorktown in World War II. Many of the events described are taken from interviews with participants, on both sides, in the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway. There are forwards from the Admiral in command of Task Force 17, whose flagship was the Yorktown, and from the former Commander of the Imperial Japanese Navy. The story is both exciting and frustrating, as the authors describe some of the SNAFUs encountered in those early stages of the war. It is a good read, even if the authors take several exceptions to conditions described by Morison in his *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*. Two quibbles with the book are the author's attempt to include the name of every sailor and aviator involved, and the marginal quality of the maps.

Coal, A Human History, Barbara Freese (2003). Reviewed by Tom Hady

Freese gives us an interesting history of the use of coal, primarily in Britain and the U. S. She does a good job of illuminating the interrelationships—coal mining on any scale would not have been possible without the steam engine, fueled by that same coal, to power the pumps to keep the mines dry and run the locomotives to deliver the coal to customers. She also discusses London's aversion to coal, and the consequences for the atmosphere when that aversion was overcome.

Leaders of the Lost Cause: New Perspectives on the Confederate High Command edited by Gary W. Gallagher & Joseph T. Glatthaar (2004). Reviewed by Bob Persell

Gallagher and Glatthaar have compiled a nifty little book that provides a chapter that deals with each of the Confederate full (four star) generals. The chapters are each written by different authors with specific interest and expertise in that particular general. For example, Gallagher himself wrote the chapter on Lee which was titled "'A Great General Is So Rare.'" (The biases of the writer are often evident in the title.) For those of us who have difficulty recalling all eight, they were: Robert E. Lee, P. G. T. Beauregard, Braxton Bragg, Samuel Cooper, Albert Sydney Johnston, Joseph E. Johnston, Edmund Kirby Smith, and John Bell Hood. For a quick read about some very interesting aspects of some very interesting and prominent characters of the Civil War, this book is an excellent choice.

Japanese Destroyer Captain: Pearl Harbor, Guadalcanal, Midway – The Great Naval Battles as Seen Through Japanese Eyes, Captain Tameichi Hara (1961). Reviewed by Bob Persell

Naturally, as a Tin Can Sailor (that is someone who served on destroyers) I was drawn to this account by a member of the Imperial Japanese Navy. The book did not disappoint. The author at times surprisingly made revelations that portrayed him as less than an admirable character. For example he explained how, after a battle in the Java Sea, he drove his ship past allied sailors struggling in the sea after their ship had been sunk. He explained this action by saying that there were about 140 survivors. Since he had room for only about half, he decided not to pick up any because he did not want to play God by deciding who should live and who should die. Not too many pages later he describes how he rescued 300 sailors from a Japanese carrier. Captain Hara's description of night actions is vivid and dramatic. As the leading torpedo tactician in the Japanese Navy, he was chagrined to admit that in the heat of action he fired torpedoes at a US cruiser from a range of 300 yards. Only later did he remember that the torpedoes had arming mechanisms that prevented detonation at ranges less than 500 yards. (He also admitted to having forgotten he had turned on his searchlights; a mistake that led to allied ships singling him out as a target. This mistake cost 41 lives.) On the strategic level Hara makes a very interesting observation. His belief is that the Battle of Midway was not the critical turning point in the Pacific, but that Admiral Yamamoto's decision to return the fleet to home waters instead of Truk was a major mistake. It prevented the Japanese from effectively supporting the operations on Guadalcanal. A very interesting book, on a very interesting topic, told from a very unique perspective,

Murder at Manassas (2000); ***A Killing at Balls Bluff*** (2001); ***The Ironclad Alibi*** (2002,); ***A Grave at Glorietta*** (2003); ***The Shiloh Sisters*** (2004); ***Antietam Assassins*** (2005) All by Michael Kilian. Reviewed by Don Ferrett

These books constitute a series of mystery stories centered on key events of the Civil War. The protagonist in the series is a Virginia gentleman who is caught up in the war and becomes a somewhat unwilling spy for the Union. His adventures take him to all of the critical areas of the war, and his assignments bring him into contact with everyone who is anyone on both sides. Kilian passed away in 2005, leaving *Antietam Assassins* as the final work in this series. That is very unfortunate, since his technique of weaving the culture and personalities of the Civil War era into a mystery story was both engaging and educational. I have read the first five books and always looked forward to the next.

Helmet For My Pillow, Robert Leckie (1957). Reviewed by Don Ferrett

This book chronicles the author's enlistment in the Marines, training, and battle action on Guadalcanal and Peleliu, following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. I first read the book in 1960 when I was in junior high school, and was shocked by some of the things Leckie did as a young marine. Fifty years later, and I hope a little more mature, I decided to read it again. My father, who served as a Navy corpsman with the 1st Marines on Okinawa, passed away in 2008 and took a hatred of the Japanese with him to the grave. Leckie is more forgiving, but does not hold back from the brutality and miserable living conditions the troops endured. For anyone unfamiliar with how front-line troops feel, this is an excellent introduction.

Okinawa: The Last Battle of World War II, Robert Leckie (1995). Reviewed by Don Ferrett

Leckie wrote this book almost 40 years after *Helmet For My Pillow*, and it is written from a completely different perspective. This is a scholarly work, as opposed to personal reminiscences, and has been researched from the American Army, Navy, and Marines, and Japanese perspectives. It details American and Japanese preparations for the battle, and highlights the strategic importance of the island from both sides. Much emphasis is placed on the *kamizake* program by which the Japanese expected to sink a large portion of the U.S. fleet and relieve pressure on their homeland. Though otherwise well written, a major weakness of this book is the lack of maps, which, I believe, seriously detracts from the reader's ability to fully comprehend the actions described.

The End of Barbary Terror, America's 1815 War Against the Pirates of North Africa, Frederick C. Leiner (2006). Reviewed by Tom Hady

"The shores of Tripoli" are a staple part of American patriotic imagery, but the details of our confrontation with the Barbary "pirates," actually the principalities of Algiers, Tunisia and Tripoli, seldom gets much attention in American history survey courses. Leiner fills the gap, describing the actions of Decatur and his flotilla, but providing the context, as well.

Benjamin Franklin: The New American, Milton Meltzer (1988). Reviewed by Don Ferrett

Although this book is written for a young adult audience, and does not compare for scholarship with Isaacson's *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (2003), there is much to recommend it. Meltzer addresses all of the key turning points in Franklin's life and points out the major influences of each turn. The book does not hide Franklin's faults, as might be expected in a book targeted at a junior high school audience, but does end up with a highly favorable view of his life. As demonstrated in this book, Franklin emphasized conciliation and compromise in a volatile time in American history. Given the divisiveness of the current political landscape, this is a book that could be profitably read by most Americans today.

The Time Traveler's Guide to Medieval England, A Handbook for Visitors to the Fourteenth Century, Ian Mortimer (2008). Reviewed by Tom Hady

What? Had no breakfast? Welcome to the 14th century! That's the way we live; only two meals a day. You're in luck, though. Dinner is the main meal and it is next. Maybe our host, a peasant, will have pottage of peas, herbs, some bacon and white beans. Tomorrow we are invited to dinner at a lord's house. By law, he can't serve more than five dishes at a meal, but a meat course might start. Venison perhaps? Then, roast, exotic meats, delicately carved. The third course? Perhaps small, delicate birds. With these, fruit: baked quinces, damsons in wine, and a fruit pottage. Then a cheese course and a drink of hippocras, a spiced red wine. We will not leave hungry!

That sample illustrates the kinds of information in Mortimer's book. He also tells of the people, clothing, traveling and lodgings, health & hygiene and other essentials. I found it fascinating reading.

The History of White People Nell Irvin Painter (2010). Reviewed by George Heatley

It was only in the mid-1700s, with the growing awareness of the multiple number of species of plants and animals on earth typified by the Linnaeus system of taxonomy still in use today, that Europeans began to think in racial terms. A German scientist, Dr. Blumenbach, in 1775 invented the idea of race and assigned all humans to be members of particular races, like Caucasians or Mongoloid, of the Linnaeus species named Homo Sapiens. The idea became wildly popular and was expanded to encompass the idea of a “Saxon race”, a “French race”, an “Aryan race”, a “Celtic race”, and on and on. The author investigates the use of the idea of race by intellectual and other thinkers for the two hundred years since the idea was invented. It is useful to remember, when looking at recent history, that no educated person in the 19th century doubted the racial theory of human history.

To Keep the British Isles Afloat, FDR's Men in Churchill's London, 1941, Thomas Parrish (2009). Reviewed by Tom Hady

When World War II started, FDR had two problems in deciding whether to send aid to the British. First, he had to take account of the large and vociferous neutrality group. But he also faced a practical problem. If he sent aid to Britain and the British surrendered, resources which could have helped the nascent American rearmament program would be wasted. Harry Hopkins went as FDR's personal representative to assess this risk, and his report led to mounting US aid. Averell Harriman was sent to coordinate in London when the aid started to flow.

Interestingly, Parrish concludes that FDR was not, as many current histories suggest, leading the country steadily into war. Instead, Parrish believes he was genuinely trying to keep US boys out of battle, and saw massive aid to the British (and later the Russians) as the best way to avoid full American participation in the war.

Victorian London, Liza Picard (2005). Reviewed by Tom Hady

Who knew? Victorian gentlemen wore pocket protectors! These, however, were designed to foil pickpockets, not hold pencils, and “usually involving reinforcing the pocket with steel sheet, with a spring holding it shut,” a contrivance that Picard remarks “must surely have disturbed the smooth hang of the trousers.” Picard furnishes a very complete discussion of Victorian life: birth, education, work, death, entertainment (two chapters on the Crystal Palace), sanitation and medicine, crime and death.

Putin's Russia, Anna Politkovskaya.(2004). Reviewed by Jo Browning Seeley

This is a riveting piece of contemporary history. Anna Politkovskaya, who was gunned down in her apartment elevator in 2006, was among a growing number of government critics who have been attacked for exposing corruption and malfeasance at all levels of the Russian government. Describing the country's economy as "gangster capitalism," she also takes on what she calls Russia's "dirty war" in Chechnya. She was not a political analyst, but her very human stories convey the plight of those ordinary Russians who have to deal with the consequences of what she

terms a decaying society. While most of us are aware of some of these developments under Putin's reign, Politkovskaya's moving account makes them more vivid.

North America from Earliest Discovery to First Settlements: Norse Voyages to 1612, David B. Quinn (1977). Reviewed by Don Ferrett

Quinn begins this work with the entry of humans into North America over the land bridge with Asia, some 40,000 years ago. After giving a brief summary of the distribution and condition of Amerindians in the pre-European era, he covers as many voyages of discovery to the continent as had been verified by 1977 (as well as information on several unverified voyages). Viking, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch, and English efforts are all addressed in some detail. This comprehensive, easily readable effort includes many maps and illustrations. Though it covers approximately the same time period as Morison's *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages, A.D. 500-1600* (1971), there is much material here that is either new or is treated differently. They make a good pair!

Lydia Bailey, Kenneth Roberts (1947). Reviewed by Bob Persell

An exciting adventure story by Kenneth Roberts was set in the turbulent times as the new United States entered the 19th century. You may remember Roberts as the author of *Northwest Passage*. I thoroughly enjoyed reading his novels when I was a kid. I picked it up again while preparing to teach a course on the Haitian Revolution. This book is an exciting tale of Americans swept up in the terrible events as Haiti struggled for its independence. While the sweep of the book goes beyond Haiti a good half of the book is set on that tragic island. Roberts historical research is meticulous so besides being a fun read it is educational and provides a feel for the era. As an aside, it's interesting to note that good hardbacks in 1947 only cost three dollars.

The End of War, David L. Robbins, (2000). Reviewed by Jo Browning Seeley

This novel, by the author of *War of the Rats*, takes place in Berlin in the last months of World War II. It centers on four intertwined stories: that of a German mother and daughter who try to survive air raids, the Gestapo, and brutal treatment by Russian soldiers; the meetings, discussions, and disagreements among Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Josef Stalin--based primarily on historical records and quotations; the predicament of two Russian soldiers who are portrayed more sympathetically than most of the Red Army; and the experiences of Life magazine photojournalist who endeavors to portray the human aspect of the epic events that are unfolding. I found the characters and events to be highly credible--as well as gripping--reflecting the thorough research carried out by the author.

The Pirate Queen, Queen Elizabeth I, Her Pirate Adventurers, and the Dawn of Empire, Susan Ronald (2007). Reviewed by Tom Hady

Why did Elizabeth tolerate the activities of Drake and other "gentlemen adventurers" that amounted to piracy? Ronald says, in effect, that she needed "plausible deniability" (suggesting

again the usefulness of knowing history to understand the present). On the eve of the Armada. "[Philip II of Spain] remembered that Elizabeth often claimed no knowledge of her adventurers' undertakings, while counting her third of the cash they had plundered."

England was too weak to risk war with Spain when Elizabeth came to the throne. She could use her pirates to harass the Spanish and deny any connection if it was expedient. Above all, she could use the revenue--more than the annual budget of her government from Drake's famous Pacific raid. Her "gentlemen adventurers" served Elizabeth, and England, very well for most of her reign. By the end of the 16th century, though, it was becoming apparent that she needed a standing navy that could be relied upon to follow orders and not be diverted by opportunities for plunder. Thus came the development of the British Navy and the diversion of the adventurers to more normal commercial pursuits.

Justinian's Flea, The First Great Plague and the End of the Roman Empire, William Rosen (2007). Reviewed by Tom Hady

As the title says, this is a history of the plague and its effect on Justinian's empire. It's really more than that, though. It covers the Roman empire from the viewpoint of Constantinople from before Justinian's time to the battle of Tours in 732 and Talas, twenty years later. The latter battle, by logic which escaped this reviewer, Rosen says led to the survival of China as a coherent nation.

A History of the World in 6 Glasses, Tom Standage (2005). Reviewed by Tom Hady

This popular history doesn't really live up to its "history of the world" title, but it is a very interesting history of beer, wine, whiskey, coffee, tea and Coca Cola.

That Sweet Enemy: Britain and France: The History of a Love-Hate Relationship Robert and Isabelle Tombs (2006). Reviewed by George Heatley

A dense, 600 page account of what the Brits and the French thought of each other from the time of Louis XIV to the present. Even in times of bitter warfare, the two neighboring countries always saw many positive elements on the other side of the channel, from the British opinion of French high fashion and cooking to the French interest in Parliamentary democracy.

The Glorious Revolution, 1688-Britain's Fight for Liberty, Edward Vallance (2008). Reviewed by Tom Hady

A history of the political and military events in England during the fall of James II and the rise of William and Mary. Vallance is a 1999 Ph.D., now at the University of Liverpool, and the book fits a scholar at that stage of his career: meticulously documented, carefully reasoned, very thorough, dry and hard to read. This is a book written more for other historians than for the general public.

The Secret History of the Mongol Queens: How the Daughters of Genghis Khan Rescued his Empire Jack Weatherford (2010). Reviewed by George Heatley

This book follows Weatherford's well-received *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* of a few years ago. There is more interest in the Mongols these days than ever before—I note the Washington Post analysis that Genghis Khan was the most important leader of the last thousand years. In his new book, the author studies the history of the Empire for the hundred years or so after the death of the founder and finds that the females of the dynasty were critically influential in keeping the Empire going while the males were off fighting and drinking themselves to death. His research dispels the often held idea that the Ming Dynasty in China, that threw out the Mongols, was foolish to give up ocean exploring in order to re-build the Great Wall of China. Indeed, the Mongols under the guidance of the Queens, were poised to again invade China.

The Industrial Revolutionaries. The Making of the Modern World, 1776-1914, Gavin Weightman (2007). Reviewed by Tom Hady

As the title suggests, this is a history of the development and application of technology from the late 18th Century through the early 20th. It concentrates on Europe, especially, and the U. S., but Weightman also covers the development of Japan as an industrial power and has some coverage of China.

Particularly interesting to me was the interplay of technological development and social, political and economic forces. For example, the chemical manufacture of dyes was a major activity in Britain in the 1860's. By the turn of the century, the Germans had taken over most of the production. The reason, according to British manufacturers, was that Britain did not turn out a steady supply of trained chemists. Further, the British did not give the same status to "pure" research, and a lack of that research limited their ability to innovate.