Introduction

Simon Ditchfield | ORCID: 0000-0003-1691-0271

University of York, York, UK

JEMH Editor-in-Chief 2010–2021

simon.ditchfield@york.ac.uk

Abstract

After a discussion of the twentieth anniversary issue, the author of the book which is the subject of our “round table” review of this twenty-fifth anniversary issue: Merry Wiesner Hanks’ *What is Early Modern History* (2021) is introduced. This is followed by a brief account of the rationale behind the foundation of the JEMH in the 1990s and how, from the very first issue, the journal has tried to decolonize our understanding of the period 1300–1800, as exemplified by Antony Black’s warning that: “we should stop selling off second-hand concepts to unsuspecting non-European cultures.” Passing comment is made on the chronological (as well as geographical) breadth of the coverage of the JEMH which accords well with the recent merger of the Centers for Medieval and Early Modern History at the University of Minnesota (to form the Center for Premodern Studies). At a time when the advocacy of the study of pre-modern history is vital as never before, this situates the JEMH very well. The introduction closes with a series of acknowledgements and thanks not only directed to the editorial team both in Minnesota and Leiden for the support they have given me, as editor-in-chief, since July 2010, but also to the numerous authors and readers of manuscripts who have made the journal what it is today.

Keywords

anniversary issue – Merry Wiesner Hanks – decolonize – Antony Black – breadth of coverage – advocacy – Center for Premodern studies – acknowledgements

Anniversaries are difficult to get right, since they must strike a balance between celebrating what has been achieved, while also looking forward to what the agenda for the future might be that is neither self-important nor hubristic. For

our twentieth anniversary issue in 2016 three scholars, who had all made significant contributions to trying to understand early modernity from a global perspective, Anne Gerritsen, Giuseppe Marcocci, and Luke Clossey, were tasked with considering what changes there had been in the last twenty years in our understanding of the role played by, respectively, Trade, Empire, and Religion. These three essays were accompanied by a review article by me as the editor of the non-themed issues of the JEMH, a role I had filled since July 2010. My article considered three different ways of approaching the history of the world in the early modern period. The first book under review, by Giuseppe Marcocci, examined how contemporaries themselves tried to explain the expanding world to their readers and themselves. It has now been revised for an English edition with an evocative title: *The Globe on Paper: writing histories of the world in Renaissance Europe and the Americas*, 2020. The final text considered the microcosm of what was arguably Europe's first World City: Lisbon (in the form of the catalogue to the exhibition: *The Global City: on the streets of Renaissance Lisbon*, co-edited by Anne-Marie Gschwend and Kate Lowe, 2015). However, the most substantial work considered was volume six (in two parts) of the multi-authored *Cambridge World History: the construction of a global world, 1400–1800* (2015). Although the whole enterprise had been the brainchild of Jerry Bentley (1949–2012) in collaboration with an editorial team which included our very own long-standing board member, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Jerry's untimely death led to the involvement of his friend Merry Wiesner-Hanks, who expertly shepherded all seven volumes (in nine parts) of the project through the press as editor-in-chief.

So, it is particularly appropriate that the twenty-fifth anniversary issue should have as its centerpiece a Round Table review of Merry Wiesner-Hanks' latest book, which is a clarion call for the continuing significance and contemporary relevance of the period to which the JEMH is dedicated: *What is Early Modern History?* (2021). Merry has, of course, shaped the field of early modern history for several decades, particularly through her own numerous, distinguished publications for use in the classroom, both single- and jointly-authored, one of which, *Discovering the Western Past*, first published in 1988, is now in its seventh edition. Her pioneering textbook, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (1993), was issued in its fourth edition in 2019. But more than that, she has enabled and encouraged the research of so many early modern historians of (not only) women and gender by means of both her personal example and her tireless editorial work – first, for many years on the *Sixteenth Century Journal*, of which she is now senior editor and then, more recently, as editor of the *Journal of Global History*. In addition to this, she sits on the National Advisory Board of the Society for History Education as well as the

World History Association Book Prize committee. As even this highly abbreviated summary of her numerous achievements and service to the profession should convey, Merry has been one of the very greatest champions of early modern history, particularly that of women and gender, and its teaching in the classroom, not only in North America but also throughout the world, by means of the translation of her work into numerous languages. These include (to date): Turkish, French, Spanish, Italian, Greek, Portuguese, Korean, and Chinese.

Looking back on the twentieth anniversary issue, which was completed in August 2016, now, in the definitely not “post-Covid” summer of 2021, I detect a degree of satisfaction (even self-satisfaction) in the assured, almost elegiac tone of five years ago. There was palpable pride at what the JEMH had achieved in its first two decades, building on the visionary foundations of Jim Tracy and Heiko Oberman (1930–2001), as Jim recounts in his own contribution to this anniversary issue. The Journal really did seem to have come of age by providing scholars with the space to explore early modernity not only from a global perspective, but also comparatively in a way that not infrequently transcended the Eurocentric limitations of so much that was still being written. However, it should also be acknowledged that this intent was baked into the JEMH from the outset, with an article in the very first issue entitled “Decolonization of Concepts” by the then book reviews editor, Antony Black, who was at the time writing the first edition of his book, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: from the Prophet to the Present* (2001). Black’s final paragraph, which follows on the imaginative suggestion that we might look to borrow terms coined by the North African philosopher and historian, Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406 CE) to help us interpret histories of the non-Islamic world, is worth restating in full in this introduction to the twenty-fifth anniversary issue:

No one can legislate for language, which is almost the paradigm of human socio-personal action and interaction: every individual, family, and group creates its own little artifices within parameters set by wider society, and contributes minutely to a general development. But we may at least take pains to avoid the implication of unsubstantiated univocity that things are more or less the same whenever we happen to use the same word to describe them. And we should stop selling off second-hand concepts to unsuspecting non-European cultures.

A special role in this ongoing attempt to decolonize our understanding of the period 1300–1800, including, of course, reminding ourselves that we need to acknowledge the degree to which “Early modernity” itself relies on a specifically European self-understanding of history, has been played by the JEMH’s

special, themed issues, many of which have arisen out of conference panels and workshops.

These special issues have been looked after since I took over as editor in 2010, first by my colleagues Giancarlo Casale and Nabil Matar, both executive editors of the *JEMH* and then, since 2019, by Giancarlo with his colleague Katharine Gerbner, who succeeded Nabil. After their first appearance in volume 10, no. 1 in 2006, with a double-issue dedicated to travel narratives, these themed issues – which became a regular feature, with a single and double issue each year from 2012 – have identified the *JEMH* with some of the finest work currently being produced that explores early modernity in a global and comparative perspective. Such is their popularity that the next available slot for one of these issues is currently 2025. A complementary role has been played by the book reviews section, which from the beginning has been curated by high profile and creative scholars: initially, the distinguished historian of ideas Antony Black, with the assistance of his colleague from the University of Dundee, the Hispanist Chris Storrs, later by the equally distinguished and well-known historian of Venice and the Mediterranean, Eric Dursteler. Most recently, the job has been taken on by the leading scholar of the Portuguese Empire, Zoltán Biedermann, whose plurilingualism is ideally suited to the task.

Now, five years on from 2016, the pride at what the *JEMH* has achieved is still there, fully justified in my view by the continuing high quality of the exciting work being published in the journal. However, there is now definitely present a sense of embattled defensiveness which was absent in 2016. That the academy is under attack by populist philistinism is something of a cliché makes it no less real. However, the so-called “culture wars,” which have been unhelpfully amplified into a cacophony by the echo chamber that is social media, is in danger of becoming a trope that discourages reflection and analysis. Similarly, the increasingly narrow, wholly instrumental view of education taken today by university managers all over the world, though unwelcome, should not be seen as a novelty by readers of this journal, since university education in early modern Europe, in stark contrast to China (which prized the Confucian classics), was almost entirely vocational: with medicine, theology, and law enjoying pride of place. Finally, the steady erosion in the number of universities, colleges, and schools offering students the option of studying pre-modern history is itself a historical phenomenon associated with the disappearance of a Cold War inspired faith in the history of “Western Civ” as what makes Western Europe and North America distinctively democratic. Although undoubtedly a matter of immediate concern to those early modernists now setting out on their careers as researchers and teachers in Higher Education, this should not be

understood as something over which students and researchers in the field have no control or agency, but as a contingent and reversible set of circumstances which can and must be challenged. Readers of this journal should not need persuading that the history of globalization begins before 1800 CE, or that our understanding of today's interconnected world needs to take account of pre-modernity. With this in mind, the recent decision taken at Minnesota to merge the Center for Early Modern History with that for Medieval Studies to form the Center for Premodern Studies seems well timed and presents an opportunity. We need to make common cause to convince our students first, our colleagues second (and then our managers) that pre-modern history is not only relevant but also fun. This is where the role of the JEMH as advocate for the global and comparative study of the period 1300–1800 CE has never been more timely and important. (Yes, the especially broad chronological remit that the founders gave to this journal looks prescient today.)

Although my personal experience as an historian, who has spent over thirty years studying the follies of my species (most frequently in the context of religious intolerance, mutual hatred, and incomprehension), has undoubtedly fed my innate intellectual pessimism; my experience as editor of the JEMH for over a decade has also nourished considerable optimism of the will. The privilege and pleasure of working with my co-editors, Giancarlo, Nabil, and Katharine, and with our book review editors, successively Eric Dursteler and Zoltán Biedermann, has been unalloyed. Moreover, the community and networks of scholars I have engaged with as authors and readers of manuscripts for the JEMH over the last decade has immeasurably enriched not only my understanding of early modernity but also shown me how generous my busy colleagues are as both scholars and human beings. Last but by no means least, the succession of supremely professional, unflappable, and good-humored assistant editors (at UMN), most recently the estimable Hannah Smith, and production editors (at Brill), lately the ever-courteous Robert van Gameren, who have both saved my skin on more occasions than I care to remember, deserve my fulsome recognition and gratitude. I would also like to pay special tribute to Arjan van Dijk, the senior history editor at Brill. For over a decade he has been a tireless advocate for and friend to the JEMH, offering invariably wise counsel and valuable support: his numerous kindnesses will not be forgotten.

Ever mindful of the essential and enduring value of the community of academic historians and their readers (as well as those behind the scenes), who make it all possible, I invite readers of this twenty-fifth anniversary issue of the JEMH to read and enjoy the intellectual exchange that follows between Merry Wiesner-Hanks and her fellow early modernists as well as to learn about what

Jim Tracy thought he was trying to achieve when setting up the journal with Heiko Oberman in the 1990s. Finally, I would like to thank all the contributors for their time, energy, and collegiality spent making this special anniversary issue possible, especially at this challenging time of pandemic. Let the conversation continue: our future livelihoods (and the enhanced capacity of our students to make sense of the world at a time of unprecedented challenges) depend on it.