Jürgen Osterhammel, translated by Patrick Camiller

The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. Pp. 1192. Hb, \$39.95.

To review Jürgen Osterhammel's *The Transformation of the World* is not to read it. Published to acclaim in Germany in 2009, the book has now been translated into English and republished by Princeton University Press.

The result is a 1,167-page doorstop, an effort by a determined lone scholar to chart the total history of the nineteenth century. Its appearance reflects and further propels the most powerful current in the contemporary historical profession, the attempt to chart a more global analysis of the recent past. The impulse is salutary, an effort to decenter nationalist narratives. Such narratives make sense for schoolchildren and citizens, but less so for scholars. If the great historians of the nineteenth century began with their own, often newly formed, nation-states, many of the great historians of the twenty-first century are attempting larger canvases.

But will you read it? The prose is clear, with much credit, presumably, to Osterhammel himself and his translator, Patrick Camiller. Laudatory blurbs compare *The Transformation of the World* to Fernand Braudel's famous mid-twentieth century history of the Mediterranean world (Paris: Armond Colin, 1949). The comparison is apt, in that Braudel's three-volume magnum opus is more cited than read. But most comparisons with Braudel actually work in Osterhammel's favor since his range is even more all-encompassing. Capsule histories of topics as diverse as the proliferation of opera houses, the creation of time zones, and the subjugation of aboriginal peoples from the Great Plains of North America to Australia and Argentina, enliven the book. Entirely fluent in English and, of course, German, Osterhammel's initial training as a historian of the British empire in China allows him to integrate an often-neglected East Asia into broader discussions. I have modest familiarity with a few of the topics touched on by Osterhammel and noticed not a single significant error.

Still, the cumulative effect of *The Transformation of the World* is less than the formidable sum of its parts. I found myself dipping into the book over a period of days, browsing through topics of interest—religion, nationalism, schooling—without understanding why one topic followed upon another. The stolid organizational structure, with sections entitled “panoramas” and even, redundantly, “themes” has a soporific effect. The great recent achievement in the genre of global history is the late C. A. Bayly's *The Birth of the Modern World* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), also on the nineteenth century and generously cited by Osterhammel. Bayly is more argumentative, more willing to claim that this mattered more than that, with World War I as a natural, even inevitable con-

clusion to his story. By contrast, it is a bit discouraging to stagger to the end of *The Transformation of the World* and learn that “history is not a theater where the curtain suddenly falls” (918). Or even, on page 902, that the conclusion will only be a “final comment” and not a “summation.”

The usual art of crafting a historical narrative rests on appreciation for change over time, vivid characterization, and a willingness to see certain events as decisive. Much of this is absent from *The Transformation of the World*. Great figures from Charles Dickens to Napoleon dash onto its pages for a cameo appearance and then disappear until their next appearance on an entirely different topic. The Crimean War appears thirteen separate times in the index, but only for hurried one- or two-sentence references.

Readers of the *Journal of Jesuit Studies* may wonder about the book’s relevance to their subfield. Surprisingly, the Jesuits appear eleven times in the index, twice as often as, say, Abraham Lincoln. But every reference is to pre-suppression Jesuits, and how new knowledge created in the nineteenth century superseded their scholarly and linguistic achievements, especially in China.

In itself this is not unfair. But having just finished a book on global history and the modern Jesuits, I think it suggests an imbalance between what historians know of the pre-suppression Society and the actual achievements of the Jesuits after 1814. Religion is at the center of Bayly’s account of the nineteenth century, perhaps the most important piece of his analysis. Osterhammel, too, stresses that “there are strong reasons why religions and religiosity should occupy center stage in a global history of the nineteenth century” (873). But his placement of the chapter on religion, nestled toward the back of the book and covered in under thirty pages, works against that premise. Nothing in the chapter is exceptionable. All of it is lucid. But the relationship of religious actors and ideas to the larger story remains hazy.

A different tack—one that might lead to the inclusion of the Jesuits in the next scholarly generation’s version of Osterhammel—might be to ask a simple, even blunt question: what role did the Jesuits play in the development of the Roman Catholic Church, the single most important global organization of the modern period?

John T. McGreevy

University of Notre Dame

john.t.mcgreevy.5@nd.edu

DOI 10.1163/22141332-00301005-03