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Antony Hoyte-West

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Book review of *The Polymath: A Cultural History from Leonardo da Vinci to Susan Sontag*

Antony Hoyte-West

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

antony.hoyte-west@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4410-6520

Abstract

This is a review of *The Polymath: A Cultural History from Leonardo da Vinci to Susan Sontag*, by Peter Burke (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2020).

Keywords

polymath, Peter Burke, cultural history, Renaissance man, multitalented individuals

Peter Burke. *The Polymath: A Cultural History from Leonardo da Vinci to Susan Sontag* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2020). ISBN 978-0-300-25002-2.

In this age of specialisation, the lives of historical and contemporary polymaths continue to be a source of fascination for many. In *The Polymath: A Cultural History from Leonardo da Vinci to Susan Sontag*, Peter Burke, emeritus professor of cultural history at the University of Cambridge, has provided a wide-ranging overview of these multitalented individuals. This is undertaken through analysing the biographies and the relevant historical context of 500 selected Western polymaths, chosen for their contributions to two or more scholarly disciplines, and who are listed in full in the work's Appendix.

The novelty of the book is highlighted in the work's Introduction, which delineates its scope and also defines Burke's notion of the polymath, which interestingly does not necessarily include aspects such as writing literary fiction or sporting prowess. As such, the opening chapter anchors the work by examining the concept of the polymath in ancient and medieval times. This notion is explored in Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, as well as in ancient China and the early Islamic world, before returning to early medieval Europe and the high Middle Ages.

This panorama precedes the second chapter, which focuses on the two centuries between 1400-1600. In outlining the ideals and myths of universality, Burke notes that this is the era of the so-called 'Renaissance man', those prominent multitalented individuals of whom Leonardo da Vinci is the most famous exponent. The author also lists several other versatile individuals from the period, noting however that only a few of these adhere to the criteria of polymathy. Finally, Burke also devotes attention to the lesser-known concept of the 'Renaissance woman'.

The period analysed in Chapter 3 (1600-1700) focuses on those so-called "monsters of erudition", and this century was arguably the zenith of the polymath. The widespread uptake of the printing press and the corresponding publishing boom increased the numbers of books published and the amount of knowledge available. Here, polymathic luminaries such as Jan Amos Comenius and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz are profiled and discussed, but Burke also mentions more minor polymaths whose contributions have been obscured by the passing of history.

As a time of profound social, economic, and political change, which also had repercussions on the way polymaths were received by the wider intellectual community, Chapter 4

examines the years between 1700 and 1850. Here, Burke discusses the notion of the man (or woman) of letters, and also outlines the influence of the Enlightenment. This is enriched with geographically-focused case studies which mention notable individuals such as Samuel Johnson, Voltaire, and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Yet the author does not limit the examples to polymaths only from Britain, France, and Germany, but also includes cases from further afield, including the Americas.

Entitled “The Age of Territoriality”, Chapter 5 covers the years from 1850 to 2000. In this section, Burke highlights the various emergent factors – many recognisable to the modern-day scholar – which discouraged the development of polymathic traits. These included issues relating to the sheer volume of knowledge produced, as well as institutions becoming ever more fragmented in their administrative and intellectual structures, thereby reflecting wider moves towards ever-increasing specialisation. However, the author also highlights the new opportunities that this period of time brought, including the establishment of new areas of scientific activity such as psychology and computer science. The chapter concludes by profiling six ‘serial polymaths’ who were born in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Pavel Florensky, Michael Polanyi, and Michel de Certeau.

In Chapter 6, the author departs from the chronological focus of the previous sections to focus on some characteristics apparently shared by the selected polymaths. With examples to support each notion, Burke advances that these common features include intellectual curiosity, high levels of concentration and motivation, an excellent memory, a capacity for hard work (and even overwork), as well as an awareness of the importance of time management. In a similar vein, Chapter 7 explores the places that one might find – or have found –

polymaths. These include establishments such as schools and universities, as well as institutions such as libraries and museums. In addition, this chapter also explores the importance of practical aspects, such as the role of funding sources, patronage, and relevant scholarly networks in developing polymathy,

The eighth and final chapter bears the title “The Age of Interdisciplinarity”, and here Burke highlights various crucial aspects salient to recent times. Over the last six or seven decades, these have included the formation of interdisciplinary research projects and the broadening of core educational offerings in the university environment, as well as the foundation of Area Studies programmes and even the creation of new institutions (such as the universities of Sussex and Bielefeld) which from the outset had an interdisciplinary remit.

The book ends with a coda which provides some perspectives on the digital era in which we now live, including on changing attitudes to books and to the practice of reading. Taking the example of the vastness of Wikipedia, Burke outlines how the internet has ensured that knowledge is more widely available than ever before. However, at a point in time where specialisations are growing ever more niche, it is also clear that individuals who are able to adopt broader and more holistic approaches remain necessary and crucial.

Though the book outlines many of the positive contributions made by the numerous polymaths featured, it is also important to note that at various points the author mentions certain criticisms that some of these individuals received, both during their lifetimes and posthumously. This includes contemporary opinions that many were spreading themselves too thinly across various topics and disciplines. Indeed, some demonstrate the symptoms of the so-called

‘Leonardo syndrome’, with many projects started but few seen through to completion.

Given the work’s analysis and contextualisation of the lives and oeuvres of 500 leading Western polymaths, it would have been easy to make this book read like an encyclopaedia, yet this is certainly not the case. In a compelling and highly readable manner, Burke masterfully teases out the diverse strands and weaves them into a composite whole that provides an excellent study of polymaths and polymathy over the course of recent Western history, with each case study presented in its relevant historical and cultural environment. In short, *The Polymath: A Cultural History from Leonardo da Vinci to Susan Sontag* represents a landmark contribution to an important yet understudied domain.