

**Professor Geoffrey J. Giles**

## **Guidelines for BOOK REVIEWS**

*Updated January 2009*

There are a number of features that you should look out for, when you are reviewing a book, which are discussed below. I often prefer to call these "reaction papers", in order to stress that it is your thoughts and reactions to the book which are important, not simply a summary of its contents. The reaction paper should NOT exceed the page limit, typed and double-spaced, in no smaller than an 11 font size. Editing your comments into a fixed length is one of the writing skills that are exceptionally valuable for you to acquire.

These guidelines refer principally to scholarly monographs written by academic historians. If you are writing about a collection of essays, or an autobiography, or a textbook, then the suggestions below may not all apply, or may need to be modified. For example, an autobiography will probably not have a thesis, beyond the author's wish to cast himself/herself in the best possible light in all his/her actions that are reported.

Your paper should give your reaction to the piece in question in terms of identifying the historian's goals, his/her methods for approaching them, and success in achieving them. When writing book reviews, you *may* find it useful to address your thoughts to some or all of the following areas:

1) **TOPIC.** What precisely is the subject of the book or article? Sometimes this is encapsulated in the precisely formulated title or subtitle, e.g. *Students, Society, and Politics in Imperial Germany: The Rise of Academic Illiberalism*. Here the topic of the book is the growth of illiberalism in late nineteenth-century German universities. Often the title is broader or vaguer, e.g. *The German and Politics* (this is the title of a book in German), and even the subtitle does not help much: *Observations on German history from the foundation of the empire to the collapse of the empire, 1848 to 1945*. Here you need to read into the book, in order to obtain a better idea. Clearly the topic is politics in Germany, but from what angle, and who is "the German"? Is it a book about ordinary Germans, or about a political elite? We cannot guess from the title.

2) **THESIS.** What argument is the author propounding about the subject-matter? Note that the topic and the thesis of a book are entirely different things. The thesis is a proposition, or set of propositions, that the writer is advancing *about* the topic, for example:

*Topic--*The First World War

*Thesis--*The outbreak of the First World War was caused by King Ferdinand of Bulgaria.

If it should become clear to you in reading the work that this novel and bizarre thesis is incorrect, then it is appropriate for you to comment on why the author fails to convince you.

3) **METHODOLOGY.** What kind of history is this? Is it a work of political, or social, or diplomatic, or economic history, and so on? Does it come under the heading of the history of sexuality, or the social history of alcohol, to name two of my own areas of interest? A biography or autobiography may be none of these, the latter being more a primary than a secondary source. If you are reviewing a work of scholarship, how does the author approach his/her task? To what difference in the outcome of the argument does a particular approach lead? Are certain questions left out because of it? Old-fashioned diplomatic history used to concentrate on high politics, and sometimes omitted the role of the mass of people and public opinion. That gives a skewed approach.

4) **ORGANIZATION.** Has the author simply dealt with the subject-matter in chronological fashion, or is the focus more on topics and issues? One is not necessarily better than the other, but each can have its strengths and weakness? What does this contribute to the success of the study.

5) **SCHOLARSHIP.** What sorts of sources has the historian used for this study. Are they primary as well as secondary? What can you say about their credibility? Describe any noteworthy primary sources unearthed by the historian. As with every scholarly book, you need to have a close look at the footnotes and bibliography. Does the author show skill in using the sources as a professional historian should? Or can we criticize the way he manipulates them to advance his/her argument?