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Among the ruins of ancient civilizations in Turkey, the early-twentieth-century geographic determinist and popular writer Ellsworth Huntington found clear evidence of progressive desiccation and historical climatic changes or, as he called them, “pulsations.” The result was his first book, The Pulse of Asia (1907), where he argued for the power of physiography, especially climate, to mold the habits and even character of peoples, concluding that “geography . . . is the basis of history in a way that is not generally recognized; and that climatic changes have been one of the greatest factors in determining the course of human progress” for all nations of the world (Huntington, p. 359). John L. Brooke’s book, Climate Change and the Course of Global History: A Rough Journey, follows this tradition, without citing it, by depicting on the cover a desiccated landscape with ancient stone works in the foreground, and by promising “a venture into history on a grand scale” (p. 1) with historical support for punctuated evolution driven to “epigenetic rupture” by episodic tectonic and cosmic upheavals (p. 36).

Practitioners of so-called big history claim to be providing a framework for all knowledge by incorporating cosmological, geological, biological, anthropological, and historical insights into a blended narrative of the universe and humanity’s place within it. Such historians think telling all-inclusive “just so” stories will increase the reach and relevance of history; most historians however, trained to eschew grand narratives, see such practices as little more than interdisciplinary and rather undisciplined forays into the secondary literature of other fields, potentially doing more harm than good. Grand narratives based on what we now know and value are fragile constructions at best. For example, Huntington’s synthesis of climate and civilization was very much a product of its era, and its author, drawing as he did on the latest deterministic and eugenic theories for support, had no recourse to today’s climate dynamics. Imagine a historian of a much earlier era, say 1542, setting out to write the big history of a geocentric universe. We need to remember that today’s science will soon be tomorrow’s history of science.

The book at hand tells an important story, but its execution leaves much to be desired. Brooke’s 579-page narrative spans the past 4.6 billion years of earth history (the timing is approximate) to our current situation. It incorporates insights gleaned mainly from archaeology, anthropology, and environmental history, but in such a grand sweep there are, notably, no protagonists. While most histories are written in the past tense, Brooke frequently employs the conditional tense; for example, when discussing sudden glacial vicissitudes: “One of these climate whiplash sequences might have marked an abrupt shift from Neanderthal to modern humans in Europe” (p. 103), or, in a claim containing three conditional phrases: “If the general consensus that [the ancient city of] Uruk began toward the end of the fifth millennium is right, it is possible that a sudden drought . . . may have been the tipping point” (p. 207).

The volume contains numerous small and (overly) complex diagrams—squiggles really—depicting paleoclimatic data as reconstructed and drawn by the author. It is disconcerting to see an obviously sincere historian working so far out of his depth, grasping at straws in the contingent secondary sources: there are no primary, archival sources in the book. The search for a “prime mover,” or the cause-and-effect forcing of a complex system like the climate, with billions of moving parts, is, as the author admits, “a matter of considerable debate” (p. 37); it is also an impossible quest, and has been so since Aristotle formulated the Meteorologica of the sublunar realm.

There are inevitable errors in such a vast tome, such as that “the human role in forcing climate was first proposed as far back as 1896” (p. 476). In fact the French philosophes and the American colonists of the eighteenth century “knew” that clearing the forests, draining the marshes, and settling the land was warming the climate (David Hume, “Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations,” in Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary [1875]). Nor is Brooke much of a wordsmith: “The fifth phase was the Second Great Super-Cycle Expansion of the 1950s to the 1970s” (p. 554). However, the greatest disappointment of the book, among many, is how the author drops us off in the present with two very sketchy “global solutions” to our climate problems: the mere mention of the very dangerous idea of “geoengineering” (p. 574) and the possible hope for mobilizing an unspecified “informed political will” (p. 579). Better not to end a global macrohistory by invoking the extremely narrow American political spectrum. A revised edition, if there is to be one, might include works like F. Biermann, et al., “Navigating the Anthropocene: Improving Earth System Governance,” Science 335, no. 6074 (2012): 1306–1307. The path ahead may be a rough journey, but it does not need to be a “big history.”

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