Crymble, Adam: *Technology and the Historian. Transformations in the Digital Age*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2021. ISBN: 978-0-252-08569-7; IX, 241 S.

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In recent years, several scholars have highlighted the need for histories of what we now call digital humanities or digital history. This need is acute because, as Julianne Nyhan, Andrew Flinn, and Anne Welsh forcefully argued in 2015, without an understanding of the history of computing in the humanities, „we are condemned to repeat the revolutionary trope ad infinitum."[1] The trope refers to what Adam Crymble, in his timely and important new book *Technology and the Historian*, diagnoses as a „blind spot of digitally inclined scholars toward their own past" (p. 3) and their focus on an „eternal present."

Crymble aims to uncover „how technology has influenced practitioners of historical studies in the information age" (p. 1) by exploring five areas, „historical research, the archive, the classroom, the self-learning ecosystem, and scholarly communication channels" (p. 9), and he does so by building upon a wide array of sources (archives, interviews, blogs, web archives, and websites). He also proposes a common vocabulary, which might help unite historians as they confront the „digital," in the form of a helpful glossary at the end of the book. His ambitious aims notwithstanding, Crymble acknowledges the strong Anglocentric bias of his book, explaining that, since he worked in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, his focus on these locations allowed him to „write with confidence from experience" (p. 10). This insistence might go some way in explaining the rather impressionistic, and at times anecdotal, quality of the book which, it should be said, is not always convincingly grounded in the available literature.

In his first chapter, „The Origin Myths of Computing in Historical Research," Crymble discusses two distinct origin stories from 1949: the punched card enabled quantitative work of American historian Frank Owsley and the linguistic data processing work of Roberto Busa. Crymble asks which of the two „led historians into computing" and ventures that digital history is neither the intellectual brainchild of the quantitative movement, as represented by Owsley, nor solely the product of humanities computing, which sees Busa as its pioneer, but is best described as the child of both. The story then moves to the mass digitization of historical sources of the 1990s and 2000s before arriving at the current era of digital history (with a visualization of the entire scheme on p. 45). Along the way, any mention of the non-Anglophone international, indeed *transnational*, contexts and dimensions of the history−computing encounter from the 1960s to the present, including its non-quantitative aspects, is conspicuously absent, despite the availability of seminal English-language literature.[2] As a result, the reader is left with only a part of what was a much broader and richer story than Crymble suggests. Particularly glaring is the omission of any discussion of the International Association for History and Computing (AHC, 1987) with its many national member associations. Yet despite its demise in the early 2000s, the AHC's history, activities, and many publications highlight the transnational outlook and intellectual breadth of the „history and computing" period and could have served to more incisively probe the transition

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[1] Julianne Nyhan / Andrew Flinn / Anne Welsh, Oral History and the Hidden Histories Project. Towards Histories of Computing in the Humanities, in: Digital Scholarship in the Humanities 30 (2015), pp. 71–85, here pp. 72–73, https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/fqt044 (23.08.2021).

[2] The exception is a single sentence on the *Annales* school on p. 29. Important English-language literature includes: Daniel Greenstein, Bringing Bacon Home. The Divergent Progress of Computer-Aided Historical Research in Europe and the United States, in: Computers and the Humanities 30 (1996/97), pp. 351–364, <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/BF00054018.pdf> (23.08.2021); Onno Boonstra / Leen Breure / Peter Doorn, Past, Present and Future of Historical Information Science, 2nd ed. Amsterdam 2006, <http://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/34839> (23.08.2021); Manfred Thaller, From History to Applied Computer Science in the Humanities. Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung, Supplement 29 (2017), <https://www.gesis.org/hsr/volltext-archiv/2017/suppl-29-from-history-to-applied-computer-science-in-the-humanities> (23.08.2021).

to and (dis)continuities with our current era of „digital history.“

In the second chapter, „The Archival Revisionism of Mass Digitization,“ Crymble explores the „mass digitization movement“ in the United States and the United Kingdom and its effect on historical practice. Inspired by English historian E.P. Thompson's „history from below“ approach, Crymble argues that several historians began to use the potential of new technologies, such as the CD-ROM and later the Internet, to offer direct access to primary sources and thereby challenge existing master narratives. Most of the focus in the chapter is on what Crymble, using Serge Noiret's phrase, calls „invented archives“ as they were conceived by historians, although the role of commercial players like http://ancestry.com, governmental funding schemes, and archives and libraries in heritage digitization receive some, if rather scant, attention. The author discusses the well-known Valley of the Shadow and Old Bailey online projects[3] and includes sections on the rise of the participatory web, highlighting the emergence of „memory banks“ and the use of crowdsourcing, as well as a brief section on mobile technologies.

The third chapter, „Digitizing the History Classroom,“ charts the course of digitally influenced history teaching between the 1980s and 2010s and largely revolves around an analysis of a corpus of 130 digital history syllabi from the period 2002–2017. Crymble distinguishes four different waves: from a „history-first“ approach in the 1980s–1990s, to a more audience-focused approach in the late 1990s–2000s, to a tool-driven „data analysis“ approach in the 2010s, and back to a focus on historical analysis in recent years. This chapter convincingly shows how technological change prompted curricular change and transformed not only how „digital“ was taught in the (Anglophone) history classroom but also how it led to the development of new learning spaces.

In the fourth chapter, „Building the Invisible College,“ Crymble presents an overview of various forms of self-learning, from 1970s textbooks to workshops, (summer) courses, and a variety of online resources, including the seminal *Programming Historian* online

tutorial website in which he was involved as editor, highlighting an often ignored but crucial means of becoming a computing or „digital“ historian.[4] The discussion of software in this chapter could have been better contextualized, however[5], and one wonders why the transformative role of software such as Zotero, Omeka, and Tropy is left out of the discussion.[6]

In chapter five, „The Rise and Fall of the Scholarly Blog,“ Crymble turns to changes in scholarly communication as brought about by discussion groups/mailing lists, blogs, and social media. Most of the focus in the chapter is on blogs, which Crymble views as most characteristic of these „new virtual communities of historians“ and the challenges they posed to disciplinary boundaries and hierarchies. Crymble discusses several phases here, including „anonymous ranting, confident scholarly expression, and shameless self-promotion“ (p. 138), before postulating the decline of blogging's importance in the 2010s under the influence of new social media such as Twitter. One wonders how that decline is measured, though. As it has become a more accepted form of scholarly communication, blogging might have lost its earlier disruptive character, but it is still alive and well, as evidenced by the many hundreds of history blogs on the quadrilingual *Hypothèses* scholarly blogging platform (which goes unmentioned).[7]

In the concluding chapter, „The Digital Past and the Digital Future,“ Crymble proposes a model that moves away from overarching narratives about „digital history.“ Instead, he proposes a „parallel streams“ model (p. 164) and argues for the recognition of subcategories of digital history work, such as „digital public history,“ once more inspired by Serge Noiret's use of the term. He also draws attention to the variety of impacts that „digital“ has had on the manifold activities of which

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[3] See: <https://valley.lib.virginia.edu; https://www.oldbaileyonline.org> (23.08.2021).

[4] See: <https://programminghistorian.org> (23.08.2021).

[5] Boonstra / Breure / Doorn, Past, Present and Future, pp. 28–35.

[6] See: <https://www.zotero.org; https://omeka.org; https://www.tropy.org> (23.08.2021).

[7] See: <https://hypotheses.org> (23.08.2021).

the field of history is composed, making technology's impact more haphazard than in any way coherent. Regrettably, these thoughts are not further developed; in a more elaborated form, however, they would have fit well in the introduction and could have helped explain the thinking behind the book's structure. This would have also gone some way in addressing what might be the book's weakest point: the absence of an overarching conceptual framework through which to view the encounter between „history" and „technology."

In addition, Crymble includes a plea for more global awareness and cooperation that, laudable as it is, paradoxically and unintentionally reinforces the book's already parochial (and mostly a-political) purview (pp. 167–168). His suggestion that some historians in „that part of the world" (South Africa is the example) see history as a path to „evidence-based activism" seems not only essentializing but also ignores the very real battle over the past in post-colonial and post-apartheid South Africa and the ways in which this affects, *inter alia*, heritage digitization.[8] Moreover, many historians in the Global South *and* North confront different degrees of political pressures, government interference, and entrenched master narratives, and we should be careful not to create simplistic binaries and disregard African historians' responses as mere „activism."[9]

On balance, then, there is a gap in *Technology and the Historian* between its stated ambition and goals and what it achieves. As the first comprehensive attempt to probe the intersection of historical practice and technology since the late Peter Haber's *Digital Past*[10], it offers an important contribution to current and future debates. As such, it is required reading for any historian with an interest in how technology has shaped and will continue to shape historians' practices. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that it tells only a very partial, and exclusively Anglocentric, story. It is to be hoped that Crymble's book can serve as an inspiration for and steppingstone toward a more global history of „digital history" and further conceptual exploration of the intersection of technology and historical practice.

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[8] For an excellent overview of the relevant debates of the past 15 years, see this introduction to a special issue of *History in Africa*: Fabienne Chamelot / Vincent Hiribarren / Marie Rodet, Archives, the Digital Turn, and Governance in Africa, in: History in Africa 47 (2020), pp. 101–118.

[9] See the website of the Network of Concerned Historians: <http://concernedhistorians.org> (23.08.2021).

[10] Peter Haber, Digital Past. Geschichtswissenschaft im digitalen Zeitalter, Munich 2011; reviewed by Ingrid Böhler, in: H-Soz-Kult, 11.09.2012, <https://www.hsozkult.de/review/id/reb-16865> (23.08.2021).