Peter Burke, *The Polymath: A Cultural History from Leonardo da Vinci to Susan Sontag*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020. Pp. 352. $39.00 (cloth).

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Peter Burke's most recent contribution to the history of knowledge is a curious artifact. *The Polymath: A Cultural History from Leonardo da Vinci to Susan Sontag* is a book about people who exhibited erratic, superficial, and incomplete proficiency in many disciplines. It is written, however, by an author who is apparently committed to a deep, systematic, and authoritative mastery of a single discipline. *The Polymath* is best understood in light of Burke's *oeuvre* as a whole. His first work of cultural history appeared in 1972, and since then he has contributed prolifically to the field, especially to the history of knowledge. Nominally an early modernist, his research has made forays into the twentieth century, as in his 1990 book on the Annales School,[1] and even up to the present, as in his two volumes on the social history of knowledge.[2]

The Polymath is principally a survey of polymathy's development over time, and as such favours gentle guidance rather than provocation in its argument. Since the historiography of polymaths is limited, there are few debates that Burke could engage with even if he were inclined to. Of the book's ten chapters, six are mainly chronological and three mainly conceptual, with a mix in the final chapter. The first chapter, "East and West," is an acknowledgement of polymaths' existence beyond Burke's chronological and regional areas of expertise. He notes a number of classical and early medieval Europeans, as well as several Asian and African scholars, whose broad learning would have to be encompassed by any definition of polymathy. The second chapter on "the renaissance man" opens with pre–printing press efforts to master all available knowledge — an endeavor helped by the smaller volume of information and hindered by the logistics of transmitting it — and closes with the famous Italian cohort of polymaths: Alberti, Leonardo, and Brunelleschi, among others.

The third chapter covers eight early modern "monsters of erudition": Alsted, Comenius, Peiresc, Caramuel, Rudbeck, Kircher, Bayle, and Leibniz. In these scholars Burke sees the high point of the polymathic project. The next two chapters trace polymathy's decline in the face of social and intellectual pressures. He first covers the rise of the "Man of Letters," whose diverse knowledge was tempered by decorum and civility, before turning to the disciplinary territoriality of nineteenth century academia. In the final chapters, Burke discusses the experience of contemporary polymaths, which he suggests is characterized by interdisciplinarity and the challenges presented by the internet's mass of information.

Burke's chronology of the European polymath is logical, clear, and generally hard to dispute; it is certainly well evidenced by his lists of polymaths and their works. The book's most compelling elements, however, are its three conceptual chapters: "Introduction: What is a Polymath?," "A Group Portrait," and "Habitats." As Burke notes, polymathy as a phenomenon has been understudied, despite individual polymaths' popularity with biographers. He offers three typologies of polymathy as an organizing schema and as a set of tools for future scholars. First, he distinguishes "simultaneous" from "serial" polymaths. Simultaneous polymaths develop skills concurrently and amalgamate them freely, as in the case of Leonardo's artistic and anatomical interests. Serial polymaths successively, and successfully, pursue careers in multiple disciplines, each time neglecting the earlier line of work. Vilfredo Pareto, for example, transitioned from

[1] Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-89* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
[2] Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge: From Gutenberg to Diderot* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000) and Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge II: From the Encyclopédie to Wikipedia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

engineering to economics, and Jared Diamond from ornithology to history.

One can further divide polymaths into “centrifugal” and “centripetal” types. Centrifugal polymaths acquire disparate knowledge, often for the sake of diversity, sometimes leading to expertise spread so thin that a great many projects are left incomplete or unsuccessful. Centripetal polymaths seek to synthesize their broad knowledge into a universal theory, a pursuit characterized by Johann Alsted as “the beauty of order.” The final distinction is Isaiah Berlin’s Fox-Hedgehog division: “foxes” will have many small insights while “hedgehogs” will have one big one. For example, the collector Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc was fox-like, coming to ideas via various items in his collections. Economist Hebert Simon, on the other hand, claimed to be a hedgehog with a “monomania” for the study of decision-making.

Surveying over five hundred polymaths, this book is currently the most exhaustive account of change over time in the experience and manifestation of polymathy. It successfully drags this obscure topic into the spotlight of scholarly analysis, even if it can be tryingly dense in its desire to illustrate each point exhaustively. For anyone wishing to work on the topic, *The Polymath* is indispensable; and for intellectual and cultural historians in general, it is certainly a useful guide, especially for the list of polymaths in the appendix. The book’s real merit is Burke’s competing typologies of polymaths — serial vs. simultaneous, centrifugal vs. centripetal, fox vs. hedgehog — and his evenhanded analysis and lucid explanation of each paradigm. These typologies offer new tools with which scholars can begin to examine polymaths more systematically. This is a promising topic for further study, to be developed further by comparative intellectual and cultural historians as they consider polymaths and their practices across regions, periods, and cultures.