

# PATHS TO BIG HISTORY

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Everyone publishing in this anthology shares the same need to see reality as a whole. Modern educational systems do little to satisfy that need because they serve up information in disconnected chunks and rarely try to assemble those chunks into a more connected account of reality. Sometimes, the modern academy seems to actively resist the very idea that there might be a big picture. Anyone who has tried to teach or learn or research Big History has felt the push-back: ‘We’ve moved beyond grand narratives’; ‘Big History is too ambitious, too grandiose’; ‘No one person can possibly know all that stuff’; or ‘Do something more manageable’.

I am very much a product of the modern educational system. As a graduate student, I stuck to the details. I did my dissertation on a failed attempt at governmental reform in Russia just before the Napoleonic wars. The reform went nowhere and changed nothing, though, for a moment, some thought it might launch autocratic Russia on a path towards democracy. I read the documents, summarized them, put them in order, and produced a dissertation. This got me a Ph.D. (called a D.Phil. at Oxford) and a job.

In retrospect, I’m appalled at how little I did with the documents I read, which included a draft law held together by a pearl-headed pin that could only have been placed there by Catherine the Great. At the time, my other main interest was theatre. I wanted to become an actor, and – as an actor – I was frustrated by the lack of coherence and the lack

of *drama* in so much academic scholarship. From my wife, Chardi, who became a professional storyteller, I acquired a sense of the deep truths present in even the simplest stories.



*David and Chardi Christian, 2007, Blue Ridge Highway, North Carolina (USA).*

But here I was, hoping to make my way as a scholar and telling a pretty boring story about the Russia that Tolstoy described so vividly in *War and Peace*, a Russia about to get involved in the vast dramas of the Napoleonic wars. Two centuries later, Russia is still struggling to build a viable democracy. What a story that is! And what is democracy anyway? How different is it from autocracy? Why do people organize themselves in these huge systems and why, sometimes, do they change those systems? How did I manage to miss these huge and dramatic questions and the stories behind them!

Of course, there's another side to this: A vast amount of fine scholarship has been produced by the careful, sharply focussed empirical methods I was trained in, and without such scholarship the dramatic stories of human history lack credibility. Such research has built up today's vast, pointillist understanding of reality. Still, I was never really satisfied by the details alone. Even as a kid, growing up and going to school in Nigeria and then in England, I often felt teachers were handing me the pieces of a vast jigsaw, without really caring if I or anyone else ever put them together. Only now, as Big History is beginning to

flourish, can I see how strange this intellectual environment was. And now I believe it was not I who was weird, or the other students of my generation who hungered for a larger story; it is modern education that is weird.

I say that because most pre-modern human societies *did* try to teach students the big picture. They taught origin stories, tales of how the universe was created, and the land and sea, and the gods and peoples of the world. In fact, they told you how the different parts of the jigsaw fit together and that was important because eventually the origin stories told you how *you* fit into the larger scheme of things. Today, we may find traditional origin stories unsatisfactory: gods creating the world like potters or rainbow serpents carving the rivers and valleys ... such stories don't work well in a world of iPhones and airplanes and electron microscopes. Those who told them had so much less information than we have today. But at least they *did* try to explain how the information they had fit together into a larger picture. And in their time and place those stories provided rich and meaningful maps of reality.

So my own drift towards Big History was driven by the need to combine the rich detail of modern scientific scholarship with the overarching understanding of traditional origin stories. During the Cold War, I taught the history of Russia and the Soviet Union. That was a story that was both dramatic and, it seemed to me, important. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia became just one more country, like France or Britain. I married and had two children. Like all parents, I began to feel part of a continuum that reached deep into the past, to the very earliest life on earth, and might reach far into the future, through my grand-children and their descendants.

I began to look for a similar sense of continuity in my teaching, and that encouraged me to ask the naïve question: What is the whole of history? Some of my colleagues assured me the question was unanswerable, and perhaps even unprofessional. But I couldn't let it go, and, once I tried to pursue it seriously, I began to figure out how to tackle it. To grasp history whole, you have to survey the whole history of humanity, but to do that you need to understand how humans evolved from other organisms, and to do that you need to understand how life evolved from non-life, and how our earth was created and ... I began to panic, fearing this would go on forever, until I realized that with the Big Bang we hit a wall. Current science cannot reach beyond the Big Bang because it runs out of empirical data. So, to satisfy my need for a

bigger story, I simply had to string together the different stories found within modern cosmology, geology, biology and history into a single story. Easy peasy!

That epiphany has kept me going for more than twenty years. And it was powerful enough to help me push through plenty of resistance. At times, I felt pretty heroic, until I realized I was not alone. Many others (some of them fellow-authors in this anthology) felt a similar frustration with the narrow focus of modern education. And that frustration has driven them along many different pathways towards Big History. I found colleagues keen to lecture in a Big History course and keen to start building links between disciplines. I was stunned to learn how many students were also looking for a big picture of some kind. And then I found authors moving in this same direction: John Gribbin's wonderful *Genesis*, E.O. Wilson's *Consilience*, or Stephen Hawking's *Brief History of Time* were just a few of the books groping towards a more integrated account of reality.

This anthology is written by scholars who share the same sense of excitement at realizing that we can build and teach a larger and more unified account of reality, while staying true to the best traditions of modern scholarship and science. They have reached Big History along very different pathways. The many different paths to Big History represented in this volume well illustrate how the increasing entanglement of people, careers, philosophies and societies in today's rapidly globalizing world is driving more and more people towards the sort of holistic thinking that characterizes Big History at its best.

**David Christian** is founding director of the Big History Institute, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. Originally a scholar of Russian history, he wrote *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia* (1998). He became an early advocate of macro-studies in the social sciences and has provided seminal frameworks for these narratives, as in his book, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to 'Big History'* (2004). He also co-authored the text *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything* (2014). David is an active lecturer at the World Economic Forum in Davos-Klosters (Switzerland) and elsewhere. He served as founding president of the International Big History Association and was co-founder, with Bill Gates, of the Big History Project, a free online syllabus of Big History for high schools. David's e-mail contact is <david.christian@mq.edu.au>.