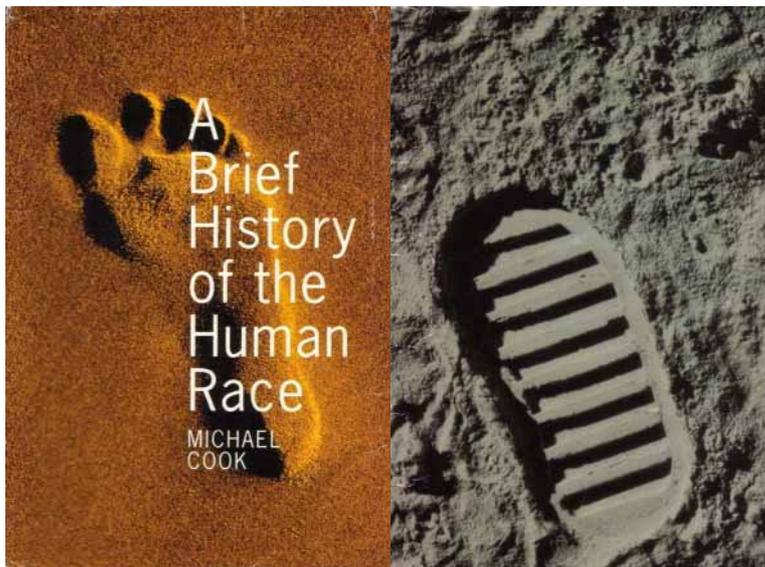


Cook, M. 2004 (January). A brief history of the human race. – London, Granta Books

Book review by A.J. Veldmeijer



I have been given the opportunity to review an uncorrected proof. This means that the illustrations are only copies of the originals and still some alterations are possible (for instance, the contents page did not include page-numbers yet). Nevertheless, the contents of the book will be the same.

The book is divided in four parts, starting with the prehistory. The second part relates the history of the people on the smaller continents (Australia, the Americas and Africa) whereas the third part considers the Eurasian landmass. The fourth part considers the more recent times, among others the European expansion.

Cook makes clear that the mild climate of the last several millennia gives humans the opportunity to develop the revolutionary act of farming and he also emphasizes that this appeared the prerequisite for civilization. In dealing with these civilizations, Cook first gives a geographical and linguistic summary, after which some specific developments are given special attention. In some cases it is difficult to find out what exactly the meaning of a chapter is in the context of the book; one instance is the chapter 'Attic black- and red figure', which is very interesting in itself but adds nothing to the overview the book is ought to give. Instead, the short account is the beginning of a case study, but not a detailed one; the artistic conventions for instance are not discussed.

The question rises after reading this book whether it is possible to give a brief history of the human race. Of course, such an account can only be discussed from one point of view, for instance the political or, as Cook did, from a material and cultural point of view, because otherwise it could not be named a 'brief' history anymore. And in doing so, one wonders if not too many important events and parts of this material and culture are being left out. And also what the value of such a book is, besides being a nice summary of years of scientific research.

In short, the book is a summary of the history of the human race and serves this purpose quite well; a more suitable title for the book however would be 'A brief summary of the history of the human race'.

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