

This work of “popular” history was published in 1978 to much general acclaim, and resounding critique from the historical profession. After all, Tuchman was not a PhD certified historian. Perhaps even more egregiously she had already published books on a wide variety of fields ranging from the Bible, to the First World War, to China, etc. By contrast the mode of the academic discipline of history has been to specialize ever more narrowly in time and place, especially as it concerns areas of research focus. There might be room for broad and eclectic teaching of undergraduates, but certainly not for scholarly output.

Now that you have read the book for yourselves, and can compare it with both the work of “real” historians and with selections from the sources Tuchman herself employed to write the book, can you assess for yourself what all the fuss was about?

The following questions might be helpful in thinking about this:

1. What does a historian do?
2. Who gets to be a historian, and why? -- this is a credentials question
3. What are legitimate sources, and how should they be used?
4. To what purpose do we engage in this stuff anyway? or Why bother studying history?
5. What are the 'legitimate' subjects (or topics you might say) of historical enquiry?

Now some specific questions for A Distant Mirror:

1. How is Tuchman's history of the 14th century different from your textbook's? (We already thought about this a bit with the Cambridge Medieval Textbook on the 100 years war.)
2. And the big one.... Given what we know about what it means to "be medieval", was it inevitable that the various disasters of the 14th c. would spell the end of the middle ages? that is, that they would so disrupt the mental and cultural worlds of Europe that communities (of intellectuals and regular folk alike) would be forced to understand themselves in new ways, ways that we now understand to be “early modern”? Or is our periodization of the middle ages (merely) an artifact of our backwards reading of events?