Book Reviews

A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World.

Gregory Clark, an economic historian in the economics department at the University of California, Davis, has published significant analytical and quantitative papers on, among other topics, British economic history and comparative economic development in today’s world. These have been based upon some imaginative primary research and a thorough knowledge of the relevant literature. In A Farewell to Alms, Clark has written ‘A Brief Economic History of the World’, covering the period from about 100,000 BC to date. While there seems a tendency to want to seem highly novel and to revise what he regards as the current scholarly opinion—which of the diverse views is to be considered the standard opinion is seldom made clear—in many ways the book is a very useful and straightforward presentation of standard views, if not only of today’s, but also in some cases a return to the views of 50 years ago before pioneering work in economic and demographic history.

There are two main aspects to Clark’s work. The first is his description of the long-persistence and accuracy of the Malthusian interpretation of the past, concluding that there were basically no changes for 100,000 years, since basically unchanged fertility and mortality meant that each society would reach the same equilibrium over time. This permits him to claim that living and economic standards did not change over time, and indeed, that the more people who died the better-off were the survivors (p. 101). The use of the extreme Malthusian model does pose some questions which Clark notes, almost in passing, but does not consider in detail, treated more as aberrations than as central issues. First, like most economists and historians concerned with long-term equilibrium, insufficient attention is given to how long after any shock will it take for the new equilibrium to be reached and what happens over the period in which it is achieved. Population in Europe took several hundred years to recover after the Black Death, and the recovery for Native Americans seems to be about five centuries. One of the greatest contributors to Clark’s increased incomes via very high mortality, Genghis Khan, does not merit a mention, and little is said about colonial and other interactions between nations. Second, while Clark is not a strict Malthusian with a belief in a universally fixed subsistence income, he does point out that the equilibrium levels of income, as well as fertility and mortality rates, are not the same in different parts of the world. This aspect of differing living standards may have significant implications for subsequent economic changes (pp. 69–70). And it is unclear why climate and other possible changes over these 100,000 years have only limited effects upon mortality and fertility, nor apparently do changes in disease patterns lead to some significant, if temporary, changes in per capita incomes.

The basic departure from this Malthusian ‘stagnation’ comes with the Industrial Revolution in Britain after 1800, based upon increased growth in the efficiency of the economy and a sudden burst of innovation. Clark refers to the great importance of innovation—no doubt more sophisticated than an earlier generation’s ‘wave of gadgets’. Some methodological puzzles persist in Clark denial of a central role for the currently fashionable discussion of the role of institutions in economic growth. His argument is really not to deny the importance of appropriate institutions, but rather to argue that they were established earlier and these changes could thus not play an originating role in economic change. This argument reminds one of Max Weber’s claims that the Protestant Ethic let to capitalism, but only when the appropriate preconditions were there, so that which factors were to be regarded more essential may seem unclear. Based on a rather small sample for a limited span of years,
Clark does raise the question of the role of differences in fertility rates by class, and their possible long-term impact on growth. The argument could have been helped if we knew exactly what these offspring did, whether they became major contributors to economic development and also whether this fertility pattern was new at this time, and, if so, why.

While I am somewhat sceptical about several claims, some parts of the numerous pieces of data presented by Clark will stimulate some readers. The use of data on heights to argue about long-term differences (or lack of same) in living standards, the examination of the social consequences of economic growth, and the study of the importance of appropriate labour

discipline in permitting economic development, whenever they may have begun, even when capital and entrepreneurship are allowed for, are important questions and these are quite well laid out by Clark. In short, this is a book many will enjoy reading, even with a frequent raising of eyebrows.

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So any book review should consider whether the tome is accurate, up-to-date and clearly written, with appropriate coverage by writers who know their stuff. Here they should be dealing with the epidemiological ‘Who? What? Why? When? Where?’, as the back cover asserts. There is consideration of gastrointestinal and hepatic disease epidemiology in 35 chapters where the first 16 are devoted to general matters including public health and methodological issues, and the remainder to specific disease groups. The text is clear, logical and contemporaneous. The editors describe the authors as recruited from around the world, although 37 of the 46 were United States-based and 20 of these came from the Mayo Clinic. Nothing wrong with that, but as a result there is a distinct US accent, for instance, but not only in, the chapter on career development, and that on chapter on funding opportunities at the National Institutes of Health. Is the latter needed anyway, it must go back cover asserts. There is consideration of gastro-intestinal and hepatic disease epidemiology in 35 chapters where the first 16 are devoted to general matters including public health and methodological issues, and the remainder to specific disease groups. The text is clear, logical and contemporaneous. The editors describe the authors as recruited from around the world, although 37 of the 46 were United States-based and 20 of these came from the Mayo Clinic. Nothing wrong with that, but as a result there is a distinct US accent, for instance, but not only in, the chapter on career development, and that on chapter on funding opportunities at the National Institutes of Health. Is the latter needed anyway, it must go rapidly out-of-date and the web must be a better starting point. All the illustrations of hepatitis B incidence and prevalence come from the United States, although this is a world-wide disease with enormous impact in the tropics. The chapter on large databases for epidemiologic studies is similarly long on US sources and short on others, with a notable paucity of possible non-North American sources in the references. One, therefore, has the feeling that the source is/was a Mayo Clinic epidemiology course.

All that said, the text is well-marshalled and thoughtfully with clear subheadings supplemented by a well-constructed index, and the authors have maintained a good, mainstream standard, to a consistent and helpful programmatic pattern.

Inevitably there are areas that one might argue about. The referencing, again mainly US in source, seems to be to a median of some two dozen per chapter. This can lead to scanty coverage, such as one only to diet and lifestyle in colorectal cancer. The inclusion of a chapter on clinical trials seems odd. The methods of trials are usually focussed on examining the importance of a possible or actual therapeutic agent upon disease behaviour, with randomization as the tool for excluding the influence of other known or unknown variables. Epidemiologic methods have been a means of bringing possible new treatment modalities into view, but not for their definition, unless trials are impractical. Elsewhere there are good chapters on gall stones, faecal incontinence and non-alcoholic fatty liver. The possible role of diet in gastric cancer causation is thoughtfully discussed, but the possible role of the intraluminal flora in colorectal cancer is not mentioned, whilst consideration of polyp prevention could have been more detailed. The section on peptic ulcer explores well the secular trends in disease frequency, but links poorly into the discussion of drugs inhibiting prostaglandins two chapters on. Protozoal diarrhoeas are little considered, amoebiasis deserves more emphasis, and Clostridium difficile acquisition in health care facilities needs coverage.

Gastrointestinal epidemiology, is seldom discussed adequately in general gastrointestinal texts, and this book is soundly put together and makes a good starting point. If a second edition is produced then thought should be given to enlarging its North American focus, some of the chapters could do with less skeletal referencing of focal areas and tropical disease could do with enhanced coverage.

As Dr Sandler’s foreword reminds this reviewer, what is ‘comprehensive, readable and authoritative’ and a ‘landmark’ can or will become ‘quaint’ with the passage of time. It is the fate of most scientific writing, to pass, if we are lucky, from fresh and interesting to embedded, but perhaps démodé in style. Would I recommend this book? Yes, it serves well as an introductory text, currently of course.

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