un véritable amour de la science”. C’est ne pas se voiler la difficulté » (p. 97). Le début du livre se centre sur l’itinéraire de Michel Bréal, sur la fondation de l’École des Hautes Études et de la Revue critique d’histoire et de littérature en 1868, sur les années parisiennes de Saussure, son départ et le recrutement de ses successeurs (p. 4-137). La plus grande partie de l’ouvrage (p. 138-366) est consacrée aux auditeurs de Ferdinand de Saussure à l’École des Hautes Études, et l’essentiel de cette partie est occupé par la liste nominative et les biographies de ces derniers (p. 166-366). Il y a les auditeurs les plus connus : Arsène Darmesteter, Paul Passy, Antoine Meillet, Ferdinand Lot, Sylvain Lévi, Georges Guieysse, Maurice Grammont, Louis Duvau, Marcel Schwob, pour lesquels on est heureux de découvrir des détails biographiques (par exemple le voyage de Paul Passy en Amérique où il rencontre les Tuskaroras et son ouvrage sur le Far West, ou la triste fin de Georges Guieysse, ami de Marcel Schwob avec qui il coécrit l’Étude sur l’argot, et qui avait devant lui un avenir prometteur en linguistique). Mais on est retenu de manière égale par les autres portraits et biographies, par exemple Lionel Radiguet « le vieil Archidruide d’Ouessant », ou Pierre Quillard ami de Jarry et défenseur des Arméniens, etc. La provenance des élèves est aussi un fait d’intérêt, le nombre très important d’Européens, et, parmi les Français, des Alsaciens et des Lorrains : « Sur les 196 auditeurs qui, au cours des ces dix ans, ont pu entendre Ferdinand de Saussure, 77, soit un bon tiers, sont étrangers, essentiellement Européens. C’est afficher que la linguistique parisienne était devenue attractive, y compris pour les Allemands » (p. 140). On ne peut être qu’impressionné par l’importance de la recherche archivistique fournie par Marc Decimo pour parvenir à l’écriture de ces très nombreuses biographies. Il donne par cette mosaïque de portraits (qui souvent se rencontrent) une vision précise de la société qui a œuvré à la formation des études linguistiques à Paris.

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Academic publishers, it is fair to say, are presently possessed by a mania for handbooks and encyclopaedias. Opinion is divided on the desirability of this trend, but wherever we stand on the question, it is perhaps comforting and encouraging to know that Oxford University Press has felt our little field deserving and commissioned The Oxford Handbook of the History of Linguistics. Aimed principally at the student of linguistics and the interested layperson, its ambitious goal, in the words of the editor, is to offer ‘comprehensive coverage of the history of linguistics in a single volume’ (p. 1). It is this work’s format – a single volume of near 1,000 pages – and intended readership that sets it apart from other classic and more recent encyclopaedic endeavours in linguistic historiography, such as Sebeok’s (1975) two-volume Historiography of Linguistics, Lepschy’s (1994-1998) four-volume series of monographs History of Linguistics, and the three-volume, three-tongued History of the Language Sciences of Auroux et al. (2000-2006). Quite apart from their greater bulk, these earlier projects generally targeted an initiated readership.

In reviewing any large-scale multi-author project, it is necessary to distinguish the editor’s vision from its realisation at the hands of many collaborators. The vision of the Oxford Handbook is immediately recognisable to anyone familiar with the editor’s previous work (e.g.
It is that of a latter-day linguist curious about his origins, where the history of linguistics is a story of cumulative progress, in which the perceived breakthroughs of the past are assimilated to the present, and anything that does not fit the narrative is cast aside as confusion or obstruction. While this vision may be far from the hermeneutic ideal aspired to by many working in intellectual history, it is perhaps inevitable and to some extent justifiable in a book directed at readers approaching the topic from the perspective of modern linguistics. The perpetual challenge – not to be underestimated – in a work of this kind is to relate to the historically 'naive' reader and maintain their interest while guiding them through what is often quite unfamiliar territory.

In total the volume contains 34 articles, which the editor divides up into six parts. The descriptions in quotation marks below are those of the editor in his introduction (p. 1-2). Part I begins with articles on 'the basics of human communication', offering surveys of such questions as the origin of language and writing (ch. 1-2), and the study of gesture and sign language (ch. 3-4). Part II then moves on to 'the history of the analysis of sound systems': phonetics and phonology as they are understood today (ch. 5, 6 and 8), 19th-century study of sound change (ch. 7), and sound symbolism (ch. 9). Part III covers 'non-western traditions', East Asia (ch. 10), India (ch. 11), and 'Semitic and Afro-Asiatic linguistics' (ch. 12). Only the first two of these chapters are really concerned with non-western traditions; the last mostly treats European research into languages of the Afro-Asiatic family, itself a construct of western comparative grammar. Part IV returns to the core topics of 'grammar and morphology' in the western tradition, with a chronological stroll from antiquity to the Renaissance (ch. 13-15), followed by 'morphology throughout the ages' (ch. 16), 'universal grammar from the medieval scholastics to Chomsky' (ch. 17), and a smattering of influential modern schools: American structuralism (ch. 18), generative linguistics (ch. 19), European structuralism (ch. 20), and functional-cognitive approaches (ch. 21). Parts V and VI essentially mop up some of the remaining areas of modern linguistics. Part V covers lexicography (ch. 22), semantics and pragmatics (ch. 23-26), and conversational and discourse analysis (ch. 27). Part VI opens with an article on the history of genealogical and typological classifications of languages with an eye to modern typology (ch. 28), which at times overlaps with chapter 7. The remaining articles offer historical background on sociolinguistics (ch. 29), psycholinguistics (ch. 30), translation (ch. 31), computational and corpus linguistics (ch. 32-33), and philosophy of linguistics (ch. 34).

The realisation of this project shows no real adherence to an overarching plan or approach: the volume rather more resembles a cabinet of curiosities than a finely curated museum. But this diversity is in fact a strength, especially in those cases where the contributors free themselves from the presentist straight-jacket. Exemplary here are a cluster of articles in the middle of the volume that cover mostly pre-modern topics (ch. 13-15): Atherton and Blank's 'From Plato to Priscian', which summarises aspects of ancient philosophical thought relevant to language and traces the emergence of grammar as a discipline in antiquity; Luhtala's 'Pedagogical Grammars before the Eighteenth Century'; and Linn's 'Vernaculars and the Idea of a Standard Language', a solid account of the history of language standardisation. Elsewhere, Deumert's (ch. 29) account of sociolinguistics – or 'socio-cultural linguistics' – is refreshingly broad, even if brief, without being spurious. It takes us back to 19th-century work on living language (Humboldt, dialectology, Whitney, Schuchardt), stops off at American anthropological linguistics

Allan 2010).
and Soviet semiotics, and finishes with the major currents in modern American sociolinguistics. Daniels’s (ch. 2) treatment of the development of writing systems as pre-theoretical native speaker analyses of various aspects of their languages offers an interesting approach to linguistic historiography (pursued also in Allan 2010), but unfortunately in its execution amounts to no more than a standard typology of writing systems with a few prefatory remarks on the origins of major scripts.

The majority of the articles represent competent renderings of the themes and episodes prescribed by the editor. For the most part, they contain enough detail and provide sufficient references to more in-depth sources to satisfy the serious reader. Quite a few articles are, however, of questionable quality, most definitely falling short of the requirements of serious historiography and at times even pushing the boundaries of the publishable. For example, Mufwene’s article on language evolution (ch. 1) sketches, all too roughly and always with reference to the present, everything from Biblical and classical myths of language origins to Enlightenment and 19th century debates, eventually landing with modern bioprograms and their discontents. The venerable Wikipedia is quoted at length, on more than one occasion (p. 16, 46). The twin chapters on phonetics make little pretence at historiography: MacMahon (ch. 5) searches time and space to see where he can find the technical distinctions of modern phonetics, while Loakes (ch. 6) does little more than offer a walk-through of a few software packages. Similarly unsatisfying is Magnus’ treatment of sound symbolism (ch. 9) which, with much condescension, reduces thousands of years of disparate philosophy and aesthetic thinking to an alleged ‘Sound Symbolic Hypothesis’. Malmkjær’s article on translation (ch. 31) does not go beyond summarising the views of a few 20th-century, predominantly American, linguists and analytic philosophers on the subject.

There is no doubt great value in having a single-volume overview of the history of linguistics written at a level accessible to newcomers to the field. While most of the articles in the present volume rise to the challenge – often admirably – the numerous and broadly spread deficiencies in quality control endanger this mission. This book cannot be recommended to novice readers, especially students, who deserve only the best reference materials and should not be burdened with the task of sifting the good from the bad (and the ugly).

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References