A Short Guide to the Oral Examination

For Students of Early Modern European History

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In the case of graduate education, my own experience twenty-five years ago contrasted with that of students today illustrates the point nicely. Those of us at Columbia who in the early sixties prepared for oral examinations in modern European history since the Renaissance were expected, whatever our capacity to read works in foreign languages, to familiarize ourselves with the entire English-language corpus of professional historical scholarship in that vast field, which was then assumed to constitute a foundation shared by all modern Europeanists. The task was certainly time-consuming, but it was by no means impossible. There were perhaps five or six books on nineteenth-century France, two or three on eighteenth-century Germany, comparable numbers treating other times, places, and topics. Then, starting in the sixties, came the flood: by the seventies there were approximately as many American academic works on modern European history published each year as there were on the total "backlist" in 1960. The old assumption that a hardworking student should have a comprehensive grasp of the literature of a major field became hopelessly out-of-date.


This guide is meant to give you a basis on which to start planning your reading list for the oral examination. It is a supplement to the long "Guide to the Study of Early Modern European History for Students Preparing their Oral Examination" that I first wrote 1991 and have since then occasionally revised. By now the long guide has increased so much in size that it is no longer an effective tool for working out a list of books to read for your orals. Hence this short guide.

I have divided this guide into two parts.

The **first part** lists books and articles I would actually like you to read. It is divided into two sections. The **first section** consists of about forty-five books and thirty articles of scholarly literature, arranged according to topics. I have aimed at a balance of reliable overviews, unusually important studies, and recent articles introducing you to the state of the field. For each of the topics into which I have divided this section I have arranged books and articles in the order in which I think it would make the most sense to read them.

The **second section** lists about a dozen primary sources—half of them about the length of an article—that strike me as particularly important for grasping the major issues in early modern thinking about the organization of politics, society, and law. I have arranged them in chronological order, because that is the easiest way to recognize what mattered and what changed when.

I believe the books, articles, and sources listed in this first part will give you a decent grasp of the main outlines of early modern European history as well as a sense of the current state of the scholarship, especially in the areas with which I am most familiar. But it is not writ in stone. There are many other ways to reach the same goal, and there are other goals one might set for the oral examination. Every single item on this list is therefore negotiable.
The second part of this short guide is supposed to prompt you to consider other books and articles you might be reading instead of the ones I chose to put in the first part. I have divided this part into three sections:

In the first section I have listed books that can really change your mind about some fundamental issues and give you a thoroughly new perspective on the past. These are books that I believe every self-respecting historian ought to read at one time or another. But all of them raise issues going far beyond early modern history and many of them are only indirectly related to early modern history. There are other books you need to read more urgently in order to develop a solid foundation in early modern history. I have therefore not put them on the list of books I actually want you to read for the oral exam.

In the second section I have listed books that serve as standard points of reference in the field because they treat a certain topic in an exemplary manner. That is not to say that all of them are still being regularly consulted. John Allen's 1928 *A History of Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, for example, has long since been superseded by more recent scholarship. It does mean that all of them do something outstandingly well that no other book does equally well. There is no book that does a better job of introducing you to the ways in which early modern political thought used to be studied before the more recent scholarship took hold than John Allen's eighty-year old standard. The books in this section are arranged in an order that is both chronological and topical, proceeding from old studies to more recent ones, and from medieval background to early modern history.

In the third section I have listed books that have been published in the last fifteen years or so. They reflect current trends in the field or they establish a new agenda. Some of them may already be considered standards in the field and therefore appear both in this section and in the preceding one. I have listed these books in reverse chronological order, so that you can see more clearly where we are today and where we were fifteen years ago.

What you do with the books listed in the three sections of this second part is entirely up to you. All of them are very much worth reading. Otherwise I would not have listed them. But art is long and life is short. You have got to begin somewhere, and there is only so much you can do in preparing for your oral examination.

Part one tells you where I think you ought to begin. It's a substantial list, but it's manageable. If you think that's enough, fine. If you want to add something more, that's fine, too. If you want to take something out, that's fine, too. No matter what you decide, let's talk about it.

**PART I: WHAT I WOULD LIKE YOU TO READ FOR YOUR EXAM (NEGOTIABLE)**

1. Scholarly literature
   1.1 Overviews
   
1.2 Broad perspectives on European history


1.3 Medieval background


1.4 Economy and Society


1.5 Popular Culture


1.6 Humanism and the Renaissance


1.7 Protestant Reformation


1.8 Catholic Reform and Counter-Reformation


1.9 Political Thought


1.10 Scientific Revolution and Printing


1.11 Diplomacy and Military History


1.12 Historiography and Theory of History


2. Primary sources


PART II: OTHER BOOKS YOU MIGHT LIKE TO READ FOR ONE REASON OR ANOTHER

1. Books that can really change your mind


2. Standards in the field


3. Recent scholarship of continuing interest, in reverse chronological order


