

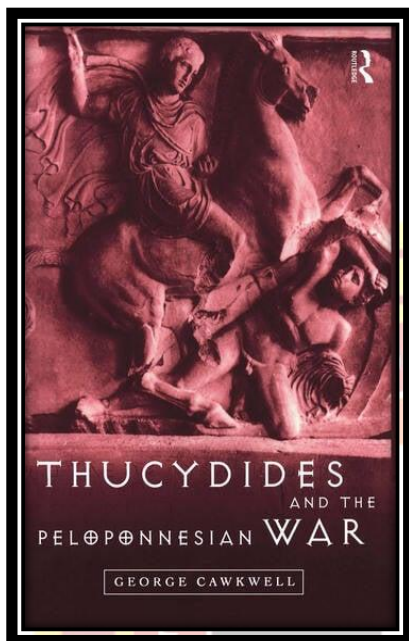
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## RE-EVALUATING THUCYDIDES: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF GEORGE CAWKWELL'S ANALYSIS

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### About Book:



**Title:**

*Thucydides and the  
Peloponnesian War*

**Author:** George Cawkwell

**Publisher:** London:  
Routledge

**Year of Publication:** 1997

### Abstract

*In this review of George Cawkwell's *Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War*, the reviewer has emphasized Cawkwell's critical examination of Thucydides' narrative of history. Cawkwell challenges the conventional view of Thucydides as an infallible historian, analyzing his portrayals of key figures like Alcibiades and Demosthenes, his attitude towards Pericles, and his perspectives on the Athenian Empire. The review commends the thoroughness of Cawkwell's comprehensive approach, noting that his work stands out for its detailed examination of both Thucydides' methodology and the causes of the Peloponnesian War. By reassessing the conventional interpretations and addressing the contentious aspects of Thucydides' account, Cawkwell supplies a meticulous understanding that enriches the scholarship on this decisive moment in the Greek history.*

### Keywords

*Thucydides, Classical Studies, Historiography, Ancient Greece, Historical Methodology, Historical Accuracy, Revisionist History, Athenian Empire, Sparta and Athens, Greek History, Alcibiades, Pericles, Demosthenes, War And Politics, etc.*



### Full Book Review

There is a substantial body of work about, the ancient Athenian general and historian Thucydides and his famous treatise “History of the Peloponnesian war” about the fifth-century B. C. E war between Sparta and Athens which was regarded as a classic even from the antiquity. There are numerous scholarly books and articles discussing about the methodology of Thucydides, if he pioneered the scientific history writing or not, the origins of the war, and analyses of various political and military strategies discussed on the book and so on. Among those works, George Cawkwell’s “Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War” is very different in approach and in its persuasiveness as it provides a detailed analysis of Thucydides’ narrative and crisp exposition of some of the most debated views in the study of the history of the Peloponnesian war and the methodology of Thucydides.

The importance of the treatise of Thucydides probably lies in the fact that it was perhaps the sole authentic historical narrative depicting the contemporary history and military and diplomatic activities of Athens in the Fifth Century B. C. E. This almost unrivalled position of authenticity gained the treatise almost a scriptural status in the Western history and historiography. This is best exemplified in the great five-volume commentary of A. W. Gomme, K. J. Dover and A. Andrewes (1945-81). During the nineteenth century, many historians and classicists such as Roscher (1842), Ranke (1885) had come to regard Thucydides as the archetypal “scientific historian” and a model for how history should be written. In Twentieth Charles Norris Cochrane also accepted Thucydides as the father of “Scientific history”, for using a truly scientific method of historical investigation and thinking including strict standards of impartiality and evidence-gathering and analysis of cause and effect, without reference to intervention by the deities (1929). Leo Strauss, analysing Thucydides’ writings commented that he pioneered the school of “Political Realism” which views the political behaviour of the individuals and inter-state relations are constructed by fear and self-interest (1964). In the 70s, there has been a new willingness among historians to examine Thucydides’ text as a work of literature rather than a ‘source’. They focused on Thucydides’ use of large-scale literary devices such as ring-composition, tragic plot-forms and repeated themes, as well as small-scale literary tropes, such as inter-textual allusion and significant changes of focus. Virginia Hunter revealed him as an artful reporter (1973). Robert Connor showed that Thucydides’ text is shaped in such a way that initial observations about war and power are subverted or qualified by new applications, ironies, or paradoxical results (1984). However, awareness of the literariness of Thucydides’ text has not, in fact, led to wide-scale challenges to the basic historicity of his narrative; the main focus of the research on Thucydides remains the reliability of his narrative for constructing an accurate account of fifth-century history. Increasingly, historians are willing to reject assumptions of Thucydidean infallibility and to attempt to control his narrative by looking for internal consistency; chronology (works by Philip Deane (1972), Ron Unz (1986) and J. H. Schreiner (1997) and by comparing it with other sources. Simon Hornblower’s work is worth mentioning here (1987). Also the Peloponnesian War- the central theme of the Thucydidean treatise is also scrutinized by historians. Apart from de Ste Croix and Badian, Donald Kagan argued that despite historical limitations, Thucydides offers modern policymakers useful insights into the reasons why nations go to war in any age. Therefore he compared the causes of the Peloponnesian war and the First World War (1995). Among these works George Cawkwell’s study is an unmatched holistic analysis of both the methodology used by Thucydides and the causes of the Peloponnesian war as he perceived. The book is exceptional as till its publication, no other books were able to cover such a wide range of study in a single and



slender volume. Cawkwell, in this book widely re-examined the conventional views on Thucydides and controversial views of his account of the Peloponnesian war; analysed the representation of Alcibiades and Demosthenes in Thucydides' narrative, the relationship with Pericles and Thucydides' view on Athens. Many other issues are addressed into passing, such as Thucydides' treatment of Persia, reassessment of tributes and places of Athens etc. Cawkwell's approach is to some extent conservative, in the positive sense of word in its concerns and orientation. Rather than using too many methodologies, Cawkwell mainly concentrated on analysing the narrative of Thucydides and the contexts and historical reality lying behind that narrative.

A venerable practitioner of ancient history, Cawkwell has pointed out his understanding of Thucydides by distilling his lifetime's work to the study of ancient Greek history in this concise volume, both scholarly and accessible. In a series of short chapters, Cawkwell discussed and confronted some of the most debated issues in the study of ancient Greek history. His treatment to the questions historians ask of Thucydides is shrewd, engaging and useful to interpreters from whatever perspective. Cawkwell began his enquiry with questioning Thucydides' credibility and overall outlook: "Gone are the days when he was accorded the sacrosanctity once accorded to Holy Writ" (Cawkwell, 1). He also questions the accuracy of Thucydides and historical realities lied behind the text. Analyzing the text, Cawkwell explained that Thucydides' narrative, while not immune from flaws arising from political bias, ignorance or lack of insight, is basically credible. The Thucydides that emerges from these pages is actually an honest historian with a monstrous passion for seeking out the truth. Although, his judgment, especially in military matters, can often be flawed.

Unlike, some historians, he acknowledged both the complexity of Thucydides' views and obliqueness of his expression of them: "one may beware the easy labelling of his views" (Cawkwell, 4). Therefore, Cawkwell is correct in identifying Thucydides' apparent scepticism about atheism in his own writings. Cawkwell concluded that "Thucydides seems in general rationalist and scientific" (Cawkwell, 4). Along with, his discussion paid serious attention to "what [Thucydides] says and...what he does not" (Cawkwell, 4). Cawkwell, thereafter also evaluated Thucydides' "truest explanation"- what actually caused the Peloponnesian war. Cawkwell then delved himself into the debate regarding the causes of the Peloponnesian war by the historians, which is more or less dominated by two polarized accounts. G. E. M. de Ste Croix defended the position of democratic Athens and convicted the aggressive Sparta for initiating the War (1972). On the contrary, Ernst Badian attempted to show that the Athenian policies before the war had aimed to push Sparta into the conflict (1993). Cawkwell here characteristically returns to Thucydides' position for whom the "truest explanation" was the armed conflict as an inevitable result because the growth of the Athenian power and the fear which it produced in Sparta. Cawkwell has also seen Thucydides' analysis of the causes of the war was a later addition in his book and this was not the result of a change of his mind. Cawkwell also assessed the Athenian naval strategy for the war as proposed by Pericles which was supported by Thucydides. Thucydides thought if Athenians followed the Periclean defensive strategy, Athens could easily survive the war against Sparta. Here, Cawkwell criticised Thucydides and showed the fallacy of Pericles as he was unaware to recognize the danger posed by the Spartan alliance with the superpower of the East, Persia. Even Thucydides could not recognize it. The alternative, aggressive policy of Demosthenes and his political ally Cleophon to carry the war to Sparta's heartland to strike at the Achilles' heel of the regime, the possible collaboration of Helots and



Messenians. Cawkwell showed that it was more effective strategy than of Pericles', but it was unfairly marginalized by Thucydides. He was unable to appreciate the two demagogues so far ahead of their times. Although it was not swayed by Thucydides' personal animosity to Cleophon is quite correctly showed by Cawkwell unlike most scholars. While rejecting the view of Thucydides' unfairness to Cleophon, Cawkwell showed that actually Thucydides mentioned overall neutrality to Cleophon as he correctly criticised Cleophon for the loss of Athens as he rejected the Spartan peace agreement in 425 B. C. E., which ultimately led to the loss of Athens. Cawkwell remarked that Thucydides was actually unfair to Demosthenes (following B. W. Henderson (1927) and Cleophon was deprived of backing him (Cawkwell, 72-73). Thus he questioned the efficacy of Thucydides' judgement to war, even though he was almost uncritical of Thucydides' political judgements. Cawkwell also argued that Thucydides showed a misleading picture of failure of Athenian invasion in Sicily (415-413 B. C. E.). Initially Thucydides blamed the general Alcibiades for the failure. But later he asserted that the expedition lacked support from the home. Cawkwell argued that after witnessing Alcibiades' military brilliance in the war, Thucydides reassessed his account and Cawkwell showed that Athenian success might deny Sicily from supplying resources to her ally Sparta, thus the plan of intervention was not a vague one. Cawkwell also carefully analysed Thucydides' reading about Athenian allies. Thucydides' representation that the maritime empire of Athens was unpopular among its non-Athenian subjects who desired liberty was earlier challenged by G. E. M. de Ste Croix, who argued that the majority of the population of the subject states preferred rule by democratic Athens than by their own elites ("The Character of the Athenian Empire", *Historia*, iii (1954), 1-41). Cawkwell rejected this view by stressing upon the symbolic importance of "liberty" in Thucydides' account. The book is ended with three valuable appendices- on the Callias and Megara decree and on military services in Athenian empire. At the end, author only mentioned the essential works which are used, rather than giving a full bibliography which he thought would be immense. But that would surely benefit us.

Despite being an excellent manifestation of scholarship, this book has some crucial drawbacks which cannot be overlooked. Firstly, the weakness of the book lies in its relative narrowness in approach. The author almost solely concentrated on analysing the text of Thucydides rather than using any other methodologies such as the application of geography, archaeology, anthropology etc. Using those tools could supplant the arguments of the book more materially and perhaps it made them more concentrated and sound. This narrowness severely limited the scope of the book. Secondly, the picture of Thucydides as depicted by Cawkwell emerged as slightly too simple as a figure despite Cawkwell's caution about his elusiveness. Thirdly, Cawkwell's negative reading of Thucydides' judgement to Demosthenes. From the omission of a eulogy of Demosthenes where one is provided for Nicias led Cawkwell to conclude Thucydides' failure to esteem Demosthenes. But that eulogy of Nicias is very ambiguous and bitter and the Sicilian narrative preceeding this eulogy accounted superiority of Demosthenes. Moreover, we all know that Thucydides was too good a writer not to prefer showing to telling and what he showed for Demosthenes registered his respect for him. Cawkwell most probably misinterpreted the only speech of Demosthenes in Thucydides' book (4.10) and thus concluded that. Fourthly, Cawkwell's argument supporting Thucydides that Athenian supremacy was unpopular among her non-Athenian subjects was not so profound. Cawkwell did not seriously scrutinize the possibility that Thucydides was not able to view to empire from the perspective of the poor population of the subject states who might support Athenian supremacy over their states.



Fifthly, the author did not discuss sufficient sources in French and German languages in the study, which he himself accepted. Using which would further enhance the range and quality of the arguments.

There are a number of books written during and after the work of Cawkwell and tried to make up the limitations of his work. Tim Rood tried to demonstrate a sensitive analysis of how the whole text works and was partially able to overcome Cawkwell's limitations, with the help of narratology (1998). There are a number of works which blended multiple methodological tools to compensate the limitation of Cawkwell's understanding. We can name the works of Gregory Crane (1998) and Hans-Peter Sthal (2003) tried to unfold Thucydides' political and literal dimensions. Marshall Sahlins used the tool "historical anthropology" to depict a critical note on Thucydidean reality (2004). The work of Victor David Hanson (2005) is also a piece of great labour and but most of the works are unable to eradicate the limitations of Cawkwell. Perhaps it is the huge scope of the book, which barred the modern scholars to overcome the flaws of Cawkwell made in this book. But such a nuanced work is long awaited.

Despite the limitations, Cawkwell's work can be easily regarded as a classic introduction both to Thucydides and the War of Peloponnesia. Cawkwell's mixed verdicts on Thucydides made the book very useful for students to understand the problems of using Thucydides' account. Thucydides' contribution in the Western history and historiography is immense. Therefore it is required to understand his methodology and the text and its various dimensions. Cawkwell's account is very helpful in understanding those concepts.

### References

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