

# Wikipedia: where history is bunk

**Gerard DeGroot**  
**declares 'culturomics'**  
**to be a pointless idea**



*Who's Bigger?:  
 Where Historical  
 Figures Really Rank*  
 by Steven Skiena and  
 Charles B. Ward

**Cambridge University  
 Press, 380pp**  
**£18.99 \* £17.99**  
**e-book £16.80**

**S**teven Skiena is a computer scientist. His friend, Charles Ward, is a Google engineer. They've teamed up to write a book that measures the significance of individuals throughout recorded time. Or, as they put it bluntly: "Who's bigger?"

Well, I'm an historian. While reading this book, I kept thinking of that wonderful moment in a Billy Connolly show when he challenges a heckler: "Don't tell me how to do my job. I don't come to your workplace and tell you how to sweep up."

Maybe scientists shouldn't write history. No, that's not fair; you don't need a licence to practise the craft. I've read plenty of wonderful history books written by authors who are not technically historians. History is, however, a discipline, with strict rules that govern how evidence is collected, analysed and used. A book that breaks those rules is bad history.

*Who's Bigger?* is very bad history.

While Skiena and Ward admit they're not historians, they're certain that their book can make "a genuine academic contribution" to the study of history by analysing how importance is assigned to historical figures. Sorry, that's rubbish. *Who's Bigger?* is a parlour game, wrapped in big words and complex formulae to give it gravitas. This bogus venture is given a nice scientific name — "culturomics" — which is defined as "a new paradigm employing massive datasets to answer questions in the social sciences and humanities".

The massive dataset is Wikipedia. Yes, Wikipedia. Skiena and Ward have analysed the 843,790 biographical pages on Wikipedia to "distinguish who's hot from who's not". The unit of measurement is the page hit. In this popularity contest, Jesus comes first and Sagusa Ryusei, an aikido master, finishes last. The authors insist that sophisticated algorithmic buffers

have been applied to negate the bias and mischief that plague Wikipedia. They even claim they can distinguish popularity from significance. But it's still Wikipedia, the bane of most teachers and academics. Skiena and Ward are clearly smitten with Wiki-love. "The deeper we have delved into analysing Wikipedia, the more we have been impressed with the general sensibility and correctness of this amazing human artefact." Oh dear.

So, who is bigger? Rounding out the top five are Napoleon, Muhammad, Shakespeare and Lincoln. Poor Churchill only manages 37th place, just behind George W. Bush and quite far behind Ulysses Grant, one of the worst US presidents. Quite surprisingly, Franklin Roosevelt finishes 20 places behind Teddy, the 23rd biggest person in history. This list is fun because it's so

utterly ridiculous.

One of the main flaws in this research is that the authors used only the English language Wikipedia. As a result, Africans, Asians and continental Europeans don't fare well in the significance stakes. But neither do Brits. The flaws are especially apparent in rankings by category, ie, the most significant scientists, basketball players, mass murderers, dentists, etc. Americans naturally dominate. The top ten suffragists

are all American, with not a Pankhurst in sight. Likewise, the top nine trade union leaders are Yanks, a fascinating result given that America has a weak labour movement.

The most significant revelation is that Americans clearly use Wikipedia a lot more than those of us in the rest of the world. That explains why there are 24 Americans in the top 100 and why James Madison finishes 46 places above Otto von

**Who's Bigger? is just a parlour game, wrapped in big words and complex formulae**

Bismarck. The possibility of an American bias, however, doesn't bother the authors.

Skiena and Ward might not claim to be historians, but they do feel qualified to pronounce upon how history should be written. The most excruciating chapter in this book is entitled "Who Belongs in Bonnie's Textbook?" Apparently, Skiena got annoyed when he failed to recognise a large number of the names in his daughter's history textbook. He subjected these names to the Wiki-ometer and concluded that there was something seriously wrong with

her education. That prompted the *Who's*



*Bigger* golden rule: anyone with a Wiki ranking lower than 5,000 should probably be excluded from history books. Applying that standard puts Lech Walesa, Julius Nyerere, Lord Kitchener and virtually every Canadian, except the ice-hockey player Wayne Gretzky, into the dustbin of insignificance. At this point I ceased being amused and started getting angry.

Clearly an algorithm that ranks the obscure US president Grover Cleveland as more significant than John Calvin is seriously flawed. But the issue isn't who's bigger, but what is history? The past doesn't lend itself to digital measurement; history is a subjective discipline. That's what makes it so fascinating. Ranking famous people and then giving them tweet-sized biographies does not enhance our understanding of the past.

Leaving all that aside, there might be some merit to this system. On the website that accompanies the book I keyed in Steven Skiena, pressed return and got this reply: "I could not find an entity with the name 'steven skiena'. Sorry!" I guess that means he's insignificant. Well, that's reassuring. **Gerard DeGroot is professor of history at the University of St Andrews. He doesn't have a Wikipedia page**

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**HIT-MAKERS** Clockwise from top left, Abraham Lincoln; Jesus Christ; Napoleon; William Shakespeare; Muhammad with the Archangel Gabriel