

John Hirst, *The Shortest History of Europe*, Melbourne, Black Inc., 2009, PB, pp 149, \$19.95.

Mega history is back, bigger than ever. We have had a cavalcade of books like *Millennium*, *Why the West Rules - for Now*, and Geoffrey Blainey's *A Short History of the World*. Penguin was so keen on re-issuing the late JM Roberts' *History of the World* it hired someone to update his text.

Much of this is inspired by a sense of being at a turning point in world history, with Asia's rising economies seemingly poised to upset Western dominance. It is the biggest vogue for big history since HG Wells tried to change the world with *The Outline of History*, and travelled as far as Canberra to spread the word about forgetting all those petty nationalisms if we wanted to keep civilisation afloat. In John Hirst's intriguing little charmer of a book the agenda is the more modest one of reminding us of Australia's wider historical context.

The best big histories are short. This plays to their strength of raising the really major determinants of global development well above the fog of detail and qualification. Roberts' book might be the closest today to a standard account of world civilisation but, at 1,256 pages, is not as effective as his lesser known *Short History of the World*.

So Hirst's *The Shortest History of Europe*

looks promising, literally. It is a trim little thing of 149 pages. Do not worry about his solemn page one warning that he'll cover some points in more detail – he hardly does. One of his few accounts of a specific event is the meeting of the Third Estate at the Versailles tennis court as the French Revolution was just getting serious. The whole book can be read in a session or two, quite unlike my own value-for-money choice for desert island companion, Norman Davies' mighty *Europe: A History*.

Hirst assumes a tone that is distinctly patient, almost weary. You can easily imagine this outstanding historian of Australia as an avuncular figure in a lounge chair reading to some unenlightened youngsters sitting neatly cross legged at his feet. This is not too far off the reality. He confesses upfront that his book is taken from lectures to La Trobe undergraduates who, he found, had decidedly little grasp of their own wider civilisation. It radiates naive charm as it works its way through explaining who exactly Socrates was, defining secularism, and serving up pronouncements like 'The Romans were better than the Greeks at fighting.' There is a more than vaguely implied subtext of 'whatever did these students do at school?' Yet occasionally there is a sobering realisation of having just read something you should have known before. With my background in economic history I still did not realise how the wheeled plough helped transform the medieval world.

This is not a potted chronological history from the arrival of *Homo sapiens* up to the EU. Hirst stays focused on recounting how an unlikely cultural evolution made Europe unique. His big idea is the mixed nature of European civilisation, as contrasting cultural currents clashed, reinforced and adapted rather than extinguishing each other. This created a freak of a civilisation, culturally powered by liberating agents that defied pressures to conform and stagnate.

To explain, even more briefly than Hirst. The interaction of classical civilisation, Christianity and the Germanic warriors who put paid to the Roman Empire formed a civilisation which preserved Greek and Roman learning. The Germanic warriors who adopted Christianity were also sufficiently

contrary and fractious to create a lasting legacy of resisting kingly absolutism. Add some science, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and a shot of Romanticism and you more or less get modern Europe – increasingly secular over time, keen on science and progress, but also prone to contrasting forces of emotion and liberation.

Europe remained one civilization culturally, but resistance to tyranny and the dispersal of power left space for innovation and economic dynamism, as well as making rulers work to retain their peoples' loyalty. Fittingly for such a culture, the story includes many big individuals. The ancient world fields a particularly strong team – after Socrates, we get Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Pericles, Thucydides, Augustus, Justinian and Constantine.

Hirst uses the same structure as in his original lectures. He kicks off with two chapters outlining the aforesaid cultural evolution, then switches to eight thematic chapters on government, conquerors, emperors, popes, language and the common people. The message – that gloriously creative Europe has bequeathed Australia deep cultural roots – is compelling.

In seeking out what is distinctive about Europe he pays tribute to Patricia Crone, a Princeton Islamicist, who preceded Hirst in dubbing Europe a global freak. He says little about Europe's impact on the wider world, and by ending proceedings about 1800 cuts out Europe's great cultural offshoot the United States, let alone Australia. But by that time Europe was well and truly defined – and at La Trobe there was a separate lecture course on modern Europe.

Explanations gain here from being kept to the simplest respectable minimum. Many volumes have been written proffering reasons for the industrial revolution's British origins, ranging from shortages of firewood to the demographics of the upper classes. Hirst sorts it all out in a one paragraph account of parliamentary government being unwilling to keep the economy in a straightjacket. A few other inexplicable big things are instead left for us to ponder. Why, for example, did ancient Greece produce so many great minds? Nor is he tempted into the currently fashionable next step

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of predicting Europe's likely future as China and India grow.

Keeping proceedings so concise yet fluent, albeit at the cost of innumerable painful exclusions, is the book's main strength. Although it began in the lecture theatre, its sense of purpose makes it more than a mere textbook. One gripe, though. In a book so short and tightly organised I can live without an index, but a page on recommended further reading would have been interesting.

The Shortest History of Europe is far more enjoyable remedial course than radical reinterpretation. It makes you wonder what other small gems remain hidden away in lecture notes. Perhaps a strength of Australian history is that as a moderate sized nation at the world's margins, we intermittently consciously remind ourselves of our broader cultural context. European historians do not always see the need to do this for themselves. Their loss, our potential gain, maybe?

Stephen Wilks

Stephen Wilks is a public service contractor who is doing a doctorate on Country Party leader Sir Earle Page. He was a Councillor of CDHS and reviews regularly with *Canberra Times*.

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Address

Curtin Shopping Centre
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Postal Address

PO Box 315, Curtin ACT 2605
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www.canberrahistory.org.au

Email

admin@canberrahistory.org.au

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Will Dyson's caricature of King O'Malley, c 1907, *Source: ula.pic.au 13729055.*