

**Christopher Dummitt: Conrad
Black's ambitious History of
the World brings a proudly
western perspective**

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From Antiquity to
the Caesars, 14 A.D.



CONRAD
BLACK

Christopher Dummitt writes in the [National Post](#):

The most ambitious task for any historian is to write a "History of the World." It's ludicrously massive in scope,

requiring both encyclopedic knowledge and a discerning ability to select the right stories to tell and arguments to make. This is the task that Conrad Black has set for himself in his new book *The Political and Strategic History of the World*.

Right away you can see how he's trying to make things more manageable: by offering not a history of world cultures or societies but instead a narrative of politics and war. He certainly has given himself plenty of space in which to make it happen. This 1000 + page book that takes us from antiquity up to 14 AD. It is the first of an anticipated three volumes.

It is not as insurmountable a mission as it may seem at first. Possibly the most important history book of the last decade was Yuval Noah Harrari's *Sapiens*, a brilliant and original take on what makes humanity distinct. It's a text that roves over everything from prehistoric political organization to the place of religion in human society, and offering original arguments such as the one where he says it was actually humans and not plants and animals that were domesticated with the agricultural revolution. He distils the essence of the capitalist revolution in a short, sharp chapter that explains why early modern bankers were much happier to loan their money to the tiny Dutch republic rather than the powerful absolutist Spanish King, and why this matters. Harrari's book travels at 30,000 ft in the air, allowing you to survey the entire landscape, and then dipping down to provide up close views via pithy and well-chosen anecdotes.

Black has opted for a different style. He veers over vast stretches of time and space, and he does have an overarching argument about how he sees the whole big picture. But Black is devoted to a narrative style, recounting the stories of key states and leaders, of battles and political intrigue. We get a lot of minutiae, plenty of detail, with the overall assessment coming through pithy asides and a very short introduction and conclusion. The overall impact is impressive, intimidating even. I could imagine someone usefully picking up

the volume to read a single chapter at a time.

It would be more accurate to call this a history of the western world – and Black is unapologetic about this choice. There is a single chapter on India and China. The Americas don't show up at all. The rest largely follows a standard schema for a history of western civilization, opening with the history of the Jewish people, moving on through the ancient middle east, with a large place for the rise of Egypt. The vast majority of the book takes us through the history of ancient Greece, its conflict with Persia, the rise of Philip of Macedon and his world-conquering son Alexander the Great, and then the rise of Rome. We end with the establishment of the Roman Empire and the fall of the republic, and the great life of Octavian.

One of the joys of reading a work like this is to catch glimpses of the author behind the history. As E.H. Carr said long ago, historians make history when they decide what to include and not to include, in assessing significance. Reading a work of history can sometimes be like listening to someone tell you a story where you not only hear the story but catch glimpses of their own personality in the retelling.

Conrad Black's version of world history is one in which events matter more than ideas and where great individuals shape the past. As he says at one point, "Readers will also note the greater historic importance of men of action over sages, like Plato and Cicero, whose meddling in government was largely ineffectual." (xvi) This is not a work interested in the foreignness of the past, in the idea that the past is a "different country." Instead, Black assesses the great men of history – from Alexander to Pompey or King Solomon to Xerxes – as if they are operating in the same field of action: the world of politics.

How do these figures mobilize the state? How do they wage war? How do they fund their wars or motivate their people? How do

they pacify conquered territories? Across the range of time, some figures perform better than others. It's in this context that we get somewhat random asides, like where Black compares the Egyptian pharaoh Amenhotep IV to Michail Gorbachev. The effect can be jarring – but it also reveals a lot about what Black is trying to do here – to assess individual leaders across time and space. His is a classical and conservative view of human nature – that humans are humans, that the predicament of the leader fundamentally doesn't change.

There is much to be said for this in assessing individuals, if not societies. Anyone who has read Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* can't help but see mirrors of their own predicament. Here was a Roman emperor writing daily to himself as a form of self-improvement. By some random chance his personal scratchings have survived to the present. When you read Aurelius urging himself to get up out of bed in the morning and not lie lazily under the covers, you can instantly see that some parts of the human experience are universal.

That said, there is also a foreignness in the *Meditations* and in much of history. If humans don't change, cultures do. The worlds in which we live – the religious ideas we believe in (or don't believe in), the moral codes we fail to adhere to – all of these change. This world of historical difference isn't a version of the past that Black explores.

Black's book is in this and many respects deliberately out-of-style. Like his opinion columns today, it provides a conservative and proudly western view of the world written by a man who has sought to build business empires of his own, and who feels there is a universal challenge about the predicament of great men.

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