



THE PENGUIN
HISTORY
OF THE
WORLD

J. M. ROBERTS

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J. M. Roberts



PENGUIN BOOKS

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THE PENGUIN HISTORY OF THE WORLD

J. M. Roberts was born in Bath and educated at Taunton School and Keble College, Oxford. After National Service he returned to Oxford in 1950 and became a Fellow of Magdalen the following year. In 1953 he went to the United States as Commonwealth Fund Fellow, the first of several visits to America during which he held, among other posts, those of Member of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton (1960), and visiting professorships at the University of South Carolina and Columbia University, New York.

Dr Roberts was a Fellow and Tutor of Merton College, Oxford, from 1953 to 1979. From 1979 to 1985 he was Vice-Chancellor of Southampton University. He then returned to the Wardenship of Merton in 1985, from which he retired in 1994.

Dr Roberts edited the popular and successful partwork publication *Purnell's History of the Twentieth Century*. From 1967 to 1976 he was joint editor of the *English Historical Review*. He is the author of *Europe 1880-1945*, *The Mythology of the Secret Societies*, *The Paris Commune from the Right*, *The Age of Revolution and Improvement* and *The French Revolution*. In 1985 BBC2 transmitted the thirteen-part historical series *The Triumph of the West*, which Dr Roberts wrote and presented. Later that year he published his book of the same title.

Preface

'Turmoil everywhere, so it's back to the drawing board'. So ran the title given by the editor of *The Times* in 1989 to a light-hearted article setting out the case for revising this History and preparing a new edition of it. Eighteen months or so later, the last day of 1991 hardly seemed to be one on which to labour the point that historical perspectives can quickly change, though that they do was the best reason for a new edition. Yet I found that revision still left much of the book unchanged. Perhaps this is unsurprising; though there had been new material to include (neither my general approach nor my judgements about the proportions of my story had altered, nor had the standpoint from which I wrote it. Most of my original preface could stand, therefore, with only minor alteration, in much the same words as in earlier revisions. It may, though, be worth repeating that world history is inseparably part of the way we see things. Even if the limits of our own historical horizon are not very far away, we strive to make sense of events by getting them 'in perspective', and in fact make judgements about world history all the time. Our minds are not going to be kept empty of them, and those who do not have decent history in their heads will have bad. Most men and women have some notions, however inadequate, about how the world came to be what it is, and such ideas are less dangerous if they are made explicit. Perhaps professional historians are now readier to accept that than even a few years ago.

Readers of the first edition of this book will know that one way in which I have tried to increase our awareness of such judgements and make them a little easier to criticize is by recalling the sheer weight of the inherited past. Historical inertia is easily under-rated. This is not just a matter of what we can see. Ruins and beefeaters are picturesque, but for the most part less important than much mental and institutional history lost to sight in the welter of day-to-day events. It is already beginning to require an effort to remember that what was called the 'Cold War' dominated much of the 1950s and 1960s, recent as that is. The historical

forces moulding the outlook of Americans, Russians and Chinese for centuries before the words capitalism and communism were invented are easier still to overlook. Distant history still clutters up our lives, and thinking. Even our choices of the dates around which we construct our accounts of the past are shaped by history: calendars are cultural artifacts, after all.

From the start, I tried in this book to balance the attention given to the effects of historical inertia by another great fact, mankind's unique power to produce change. Many people find this easier to recognize than the way past history inhibits human freedom. Evidence of the acceleration of change, its growth in scale and its wider and wider geographical spread, has continued to accumulate in recent years and much of it shows a continuing increase in conscious power to master the world of nature. Lately, though, this mastery has been clouded. The enthusiasm once felt for technical and intellectual achievement has even given way to disfavour. The Great Depression, Auschwitz and Hiroshima were followed by pollution, fear of overpopulation and the threat of war with ever more frightful weapons – to name only a handful of twentieth-century evils. Many people now seem to distrust those Promethean visions of man which were in the past so easily distorted into an optimism which assumed that inevitable success lay ahead.

Personally, I doubt whether any balanced judgement about the significance of much that has recently happened is ever struck solely on the basis of a knowledge of historical facts. Optimism and pessimism still seem to me to be for the most part a matter of temperament. And even if my impression is wrong, it does not seem to me that many safe predictions can follow from such facts as history provides. How many of us could rightly have judged the future of the USSR when the first edition of this book appeared? We can only make judgements, not necessary inductions. They do not force us to conclude either that we are now facing problems specially recalcitrant, or, on the other hand, that we are not. Just as when I wrote my first preface to this book, the odds still seem to me to be that the world organized as we know it certainly cannot last much longer, but that ordered and civilized life will go on in most places where it already exists. We have no reason to suppose that the outcome will be any more intolerable than, say, the results of changes forced on traditional Asia and Africa within the last century by the coming of Western technology (and many people may reasonably argue that this would be intolerable enough). Nevertheless, my main ideas have not changed. The words with which I ended this book seventeen years ago seem as apposite as ever, and I had no difficulty in deciding that they should still find a place in this new edition.

For those readers who have never looked into world history before, it

may be worth adding that I have sought in these pages to tell a unified story and not to bring together a new collection of accounts of traditionally important themes. Beyond this, the book was shaped also by a wish to avoid detail and to set out instead major historical processes, their comparative scale and relations with one another. I have not tried to write continuous histories of all major countries or fields of human activity. The place for a comprehensive account of facts about the past is an encyclopaedia; I have assumed that my readers can get at one (and at dictionaries and atlases). Consequently, some topics of great scholarly interest and some of which we are much aware because of the glamour of what they have left behind are passed over briefly or even ignored in what follows. Though we still gape in amazement at the ruins of Yucatán and Zimbabwe and wonder over the statues of Easter Island, and intrinsically desirable though knowledge of the societies which produced these things may be, they are peripheral to world history; the early centuries of black Africa or the story of pre-Columbian America are for the same reason only lightly sketched in these pages. What Europeans later brought back from and did to those continents is a different matter; it has shaped and continues to shape our lives, even if only in small degree. But nothing in the history of black Africa or the Americas between very remote times and the coming of the Europeans to those continents affected the great world-forming cultural traditions in which the legacies of, say, the Buddha, the Hebrew prophets, Plato and Confucius were for centuries (as they still are today) living and shaping influences on millions of people.

Even in writing a selective account, it is easy to feel swamped by the huge quantities of printed evidence and massed scholarly monographs which now fill historical libraries. Fortunately, there is not the slightest chance of mastering all that might be read that is relevant to world history and I have an easy conscience. But bibliography can skew judgement; there is always a temptation to write about something which has given rise to much academic debate. What matters, though, is that a topic is important, not that we may be lucky enough to have information about it. Napoleon, however crucial for France and even Europe, seemed to me safer to pass over briefly than, say, the Chinese Revolution. In the most recent period of history it is more than ever important to distinguish the wood from the trees and not to mention something simply because it turns up every day in the newspaper or on television.

That medium, none the less, has influenced me in one respect since my first edition. An opportunity to make a series of films for the BBC under the title of *The Triumph of the West*, and the writing of a book about it both forced me to think again about the role of Europe and its civilization in world history. The more I studied it, the less I felt misgivings about the recognition I had given to that civilization in this account. The more I

thought about it, the more the centrality of Europe's role in the making of the modern world stood out. Of course, I have striven not to be trapped by a 'Eurocentric' viewpoint and, if I have confirmed, I have not increased the weight I gave to that theme when writing my first drafts twenty or so years ago. The impulses of my own historical inheritance were bound to influence my choice of themes, organization and chronological arrangement, of course, and I still cannot believe (to quote Lord Acton's ideal of historical objectivity) that 'nothing shall reveal the country, the religion, or the party' to which I belong, nor that I could provide (as he hoped) an account of Waterloo to satisfy French, English, German and Dutch alike (not that I had time and space here to spend on such a theme). I hope nevertheless that an effort to remain aware of my assumptions and their limitations may have made it possible to provide what he termed a history 'which is distinct from the combined history of all countries', and which nevertheless displays the variety of the great cultural traditions which give it much of its structure.

The reader should blame no one but the author for what seems inadequate or erroneous nor, indeed, for anything else in this book. Yet many other people helped to bring it into being. In its latest form, it has been especially shaped by the tireless scrutiny of my editors, Adam Sisman and Anne-Lucie Norton, to whom I owe much, and in another important sense, it has been made possible only by the efforts of a team of ladies who have typed and re-typed my drafts – Mrs Moira Wise, Miss Clare Bass, Mrs Joan Barton and Mrs Lesley Walsh. To all of them I am most grateful. I wish also to thank Mr Eric Smith especially for his close eye and unflagging attention to the maps. There were many others to whose informed influence and suggestions I owed much over many years; I explained in my first preface that they were too numerous to be acknowledged individually, though I was happy to record then the debt I owed to them and now gladly do so again. To that I must add further thanks owed to many correspondents who have written to me in the last decade and a half offering specific criticism, suggestion, denunciation and encouragement, too numerous though they, too, are for me to name here. If I do not seem always to have taken much notice of what they have said, I can assure them they are mistaken in that impression. Those whose help is more easily identifiable, because I deliberately consulted them, and to whom I continue to feel special gratitude were listed in the old preface; that record stands, and there is no need to repeat it here. More names must now, nevertheless, be added to theirs and I wish to record my warm thanks to Sir Bryan Cartledge, Dr C. A. Grocock and Mr R. Inskip, to Professors Vassos Karageorgis, H. W. Arndt and Elisabeth Vrba and to Mr M. M. Roberts, all of whom gave me valuable observations and suggestions. I must acknowledge, too, how stimulating I found the books

of Professor E. L. Jones in preparing this new edition. None of these, of course, bears any responsibility for the final outcome; that rests entirely with me. As for my debt to my wife, I should not wish to alter what I have already written about that in any respect save one, by correcting a misprint which slid into the last preface to this book; in an indispensable sense, this book is hers.

J.M.R.
1994

Where they are known, dates of birth and death (and, in the case of rulers, regnal dates) for all persons mentioned by name in the text are given in the index.

Contents

List of Maps	viii
Preface	xi

Book One BEFORE HISTORY – BEGINNINGS

<i>Introduction</i>	3
1 The Foundations	5
2 <i>Homo Sapiens</i>	20
3 The Possibility of Civilization	30

Book Two THE FIRST CIVILIZATIONS

<i>Introduction</i>	39
1 Early Civilized Life	41
2 Ancient Mesopotamia	48
3 Ancient Egypt	64
4 Intruders and Invaders: The Dark Ages of the Ancient Near East	85
A Complicating World	85
Early Civilized Life in the Aegean	91
The Near East in the Ages of Confusion	102
5 The Beginnings of Civilization in Eastern Asia	115
Ancient India	115
Ancient China	128
6 The Other Worlds of the Ancient Past	143
7 The End of the Old World	153

Book Three THE CLASSICAL MEDITERRANEAN

<i>Introduction</i>	159
1 The Roots of One World	161
2 The Greeks	165
3 Greek Civilization	181
4 The Hellenistic World	204
5 Rome	219

6	The Roman Achievement	236
7	Jewry and the Coming of Christianity	251
8	The Waning of the Classical West	266
9	The Elements of a Future	290

Book Four THE AGE OF DIVERGING TRADITIONS

	<i>Introduction</i>	305
1	Islam and the Re-making of the Near East	307
2	The Arab Empires	322
3	Byzantium and Its Sphere	333
4	The Disputed Legacies of the Near East	359
5	The Making of Europe	379
6	India	407
7	Imperial China	428
8	Japan	449
9	Worlds Apart	460
10	Europe: the First Revolution	472
	The Church	473
	Principalities and Powers	485
	Working and Living	495
11	New Limits, New Horizons	506
	Europe Looks Outward	506
	The European Mind	518

Book Five THE MAKING OF THE EUROPEAN AGE

	<i>Introduction</i>	527
1	A New Kind of Society: Early Modern Europe	529
2	Authority and Its Challengers	549
3	The New World of Great Powers	576
4	Europe's Assault on the World	607
5	World History's New Shape	633
6	Ideas Old and New	649

Book Six THE GREAT ACCELERATION

	<i>Introduction</i>	671
1	Long-Term Change	673
2	Political Change in an Age of Revolution	693
3	Political Change: A New Europe	717
4	Political Change: The Anglo-Saxon World	740
5	The European World Hegemony	760
6	European Imperialism and Imperial Rule	783
7	Asia's Response to a Europeanizing World	800

Book Seven THE END OF THE EUROPEANS' WORLD

<i>Introduction</i>	829
1 Strains in the System	831
2 The Era of the First World War	851
3 A New Asia in the Making	882
4 The Ottoman Heritage and the Western Islamic Lands	898
5 The Second World War	910
6 The Shaping of a New World	932

Book Eight THE LATEST AGE

<i>Introduction</i>	953
1 Perspectives	957
Population	957
Plenty	962
The Management of Nature	972
Ideas, Attitudes, Authority	986
2 The Politics of the New World	997
Cold War Beginnings	997
Asian Revolution	1003
Inheritors of Empire: The Middle East and Africa	1020
Latin America	1034
3 Crumbling Certainties	1043
Superpower Difficulties	1043
Two Europes	1055
New Challenges to the Cold War World Order	1063
4 The End of an Era	1075
Epilogue: In the Light of History	1097
Index	1110

List of Maps

Page

- 15 Sites of Some Celebrated Discoveries of Hominid Fossils
- 33 Early Sites of Farming
- 46 The Fertile Crescent
- 70 Ancient Egypt
- 119 The Indus Valley
- 131 China – Physical
- 144 Climatic Changes in the Sahara
- 150 European Megalithic Monuments
- 156 Civilizations of the Near East
- 167 The Greek World of the Aegean
- 177 The Persian Empire of the Achaemenids
- 186 The Peloponnesian War
- 207 Alexander's March to the East
- 211 The Hellenistic World soon after 200 BC
- 216 The Mediterranean c. 600 BC
- 220 Southern Italy 509–272 BC
- 227 The Punic Wars – Major Events
- 233 Roman Expansion
- 243 Major Roads, Cities and Garrisons of the Empire in the Age of the Antonines
- 248 Judaism in the Ancient World
- 259 Paul's Missions
- 271 The Sassanid Empire c. 400
- 280 The Making of the Eastern Roman Empire
- 284 Völkerwanderung
- 299 Justinian's Empire 527–565
- 309 Central Asia
- 313 China under the Han Dynasty
- 316 Seventh-century Arabia
- 319 The Early Spread of Islam

- 326 Islamic Iberia c. 1050
- 332 Islam Beyond the Arab World until 1800
- 335 The Byzantine Empire c. 1265 and c. 1354
- 347 The Growth of Venice as a Mediterranean Power
- 351 Kiev Rus
- 364 The Mongol Empires
- 373 South-eastern Europe about 1400
- 376 Ottoman Expansion
- 382 Charlemagne's Europe
- 390 Christendom before the Islamic Conquest
- 398 The Medieval Empire
- 404 Christendom in the Eleventh Century
- 409 Moslem India
- 421 Moghul India
- 481 European Universities Founded before 1500
- 493 German Eastward Expansion
- 511 The Crusader Wars
- 539 European Trading Stations and Possessions in Africa and Asia
c. 1750
- 558 Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe
- 585 Europe (Treaty of Westphalia 1648)
- 589 The Beginning of the Ottoman Retreat in Europe
- 594 Russian Expansion 1500–1800
- 615 The Growth of British Power in India 1783–1804
- 618 Exploration of the Americas
- 626 British Atlantic Trade in the 1770s
- 630 Economic Resources of the British American Colonies in the
Eighteenth Century
- 636 Christian Missionary Activity in Africa and Asia in the Nineteenth
Century
- 642 Africa in the Early Modern Era
- 677 The Slavery Problem in the United States
- 699 The Emergence and Consolidation of the USA
- 713 Napoleonic Europe
- 726 Europe in 1815
- 735 Russian Expansion to 1905
- 736 Europe in 1914
- 745 The Winning of the Far West
- 748 The American Civil War 1861–65
- 759 The British Empire (and Protected Territories) 1815–1914
- 771 South America after Independence
- 789 British India 1858–1947
- 791 Africa in 1880

- 795 Partitioned Africa: Areas of European Domination in 1914
- 803 Manchu China
- 815 Japanese Expansion 1895–1942
- 823 Major Religions of Asia in the Early Twentieth Century
- 824 Imperial Expansion in South-East Asia 1850–1914
- 833 Migration from Europe in the Nineteenth Century
- 840 Ottoman Decline and the Emergence of Modern Turkey 1683–1923
- 867 The Great War 1914–18
- 873 Russia in 1918
- 889 China 1918–49
- 921 Europe During the War of 1939–45
- 951 Proposed UN Partition of Palestine 1947/Israel 1948–67/Israel
1967–75
- 965 Worldwide Life Expectancy/Population Density/Gross Domestic
Product/Daily Calorie Intake
- 969 World Energy Resources
- 999 Post-War Germany and Central Europe
- 1015 The Post-War Recovery of Eastern Asia/Population Pressure in
South and East Asia
- 1022 The Post-Ottoman Near and Middle East
- 1028 Decolonization in Africa and Asia
- 1037 Post-War Latin America
- 1060 Post-War Europe – Economic and Military Blocs
- 1077 The Soviet Union and its Successors

HISTORY OF THE WORLD
