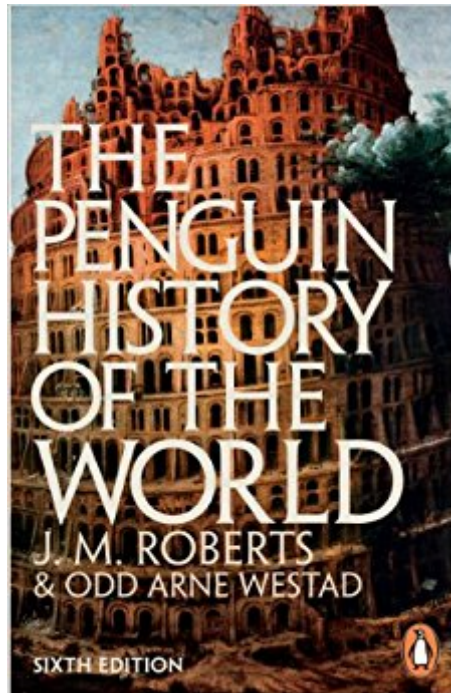




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The Penguin History Of The World: Sixth Edition



Synopsis

The completely updated edition of J. M. Roberts and Odd Arne Westad's widely acclaimed, landmark bestseller *The Penguin History of the World* For generations of readers *The Penguin History of the World* has been one of the great cultural experiences - the entire story of human endeavour laid out in all its grandeur and folly, drama and pain in a single authoritative book. Now, for the first time, it has been completely overhauled for its 6th edition - not just bringing it up to date, but revising it throughout in the light of new research and discoveries, such as the revolution in our understanding of many civilizations in the Ancient World. The closing sections of the book reflect what now seems to be the inexorable rise of Asia and the increasingly troubled situation in the West. About the authors: J.M. Roberts, CBE, published *The Penguin History of the World* in 1976 to immediate acclaim. His other major books include *The Paris Commune from the Right*, *The Triumph of the West* (which was also a successful television series), *The Penguin History of Europe* and *The Penguin History of the Twentieth Century*. He died in 2003. Odd Arne Westad, FBA, is Professor of International History at the London School of Economics. He has published fifteen books on modern and contemporary international history, among them *The Global Cold War*, which won the Bancroft Prize, and *Decisive Encounters*, a standard history of the Chinese civil war. He also served as general co-editor of the *Cambridge History of the Cold War*.

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Customer Reviews

"The leading historical mind of his generation" -[The Guardian](#)"A stupendous achievement . . .

Unrivalled world history for our day . . . it is unbelievable in its facts and almost incontestable in its

judgements." -A. J. P. Taylor,"The Observer"(London)"At once entertaining and scholarly... a book as challenging as it is consistently absorbing" - Christopher Hibbert"A brilliant book ... the most outstanding history of the world yet written" - J. H. Plumb"A work of outstanding breadth of scholarship and penetrating judgements. There is nothing better of its kind" -Sunday Telegraph

J. M. Roberts (1928–2003) was a celebrated and prolific British historian and the author of a number of books, including, *The Penguin History of Europe* and *The Penguin History of the Twentieth Century*. Odd Arne Westad has served as the Director of Research at the Nobel Institute and Professor of International History at the London School of Economics, and has published fifteen books on modern and contemporary international history, most recently, *Restless Empire: China and the World Since 1750*.

This is a great book with a very ambitious topic. Despite some substantial flaws, I highly recommend it for getting an overview of, and a feeling for, world history. My review starts with what I liked, gives some general comments about the book and ends with a list of criticisms.

Part 1: General comments about the book and the authors' approach to history

I read the third edition and, a few years later, the sixth edition. In 1260 pages divided into eight books, the reader is served scholarly history for a general audience and a framework for putting any particular historic subject in perspective. Roberts focuses on the general and essential aspects of world history: everything that shaped the future, everything that has led us to where we are today. The illustrations are only black and white maps. The book includes a detailed index but no footnotes nor references in the text nor bibliography. This keeps the book tractable but renders it substantially less useful as a reference. The English is clear but refined, without fluff or informalities. This approach may not be accessible for those who require a light touch, many pictures and chronologies of monarchs. This book is unique in the plethora of world histories, most of which are either too short, dominated by illustrations or not very serious as a reliable framework for understanding history.

The book was originally written in 1976 by Professor John Morris Roberts and then revised by him, up to the fourth or fifth editions, before his death. Starting with the fifth edition, Professor Odd Arne Westad joined as co-author for revised editions, the sixth being written in 2012. For the sake of simplicity, this review refers only to Roberts as the author, but Westad has substantially updated the book. Westad claims that the sixth edition is "completely revised". Fortunately, the large majority of Roberts' text is untouched. Some important new findings are integrated, some topics extended, some texts shortened.

Roberts explains his goals and intended scope in the preface to

earlier editions. Whether or not our own historical horizon is limited, 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.

Historical inertia is easily under-rated, for example, the historical forces moulding the outlook of Americans, Russians and Chinese for centuries before the words capitalism and communism were invented. Roberts' history is a balance of attention given to historical inertia and change. He seeks to tell a unified story, to recognise that which had the widest and deepest impact, and not just to collect accounts of traditional themes. He avoids dates of events and names of individuals unless they have historical significance beyond their own century. He identifies the historical processes that affected the largest number of human beings, leaving substantial legacies to the future, and he gives their comparative scale and relations with one another. Although we know much about Louis XIV, the Chinese Revolution was more important.

The place for a comprehensive account of facts about the past is an encyclopaedia.

The first sentence of Book One is a question, 'When does history begin?'

The book considers the development of human civilisations to the present. The book's title refers to the World, and Book One explains how short the existence of homo sapiens is compared to that of the rest of the planet. In the preface to earlier editions was a controversial text from Roberts that was later removed. It stated that the origin of the universe, the formation of this planet, the start of life and photosynthesis and vertebrates are 'not history'. Common sense helps here: history is the story of mankind, of what it has done, suffered or enjoyed. We all know that dogs and cats do not have histories, while human beings do.

Historians write about the ups and downs of climate or diseases only to understand why men and women have lived (and died) in some ways rather than others.

Thus, the World in the title is that of humanity and Roberts' story begins with a detailed explanation of the origins of homo sapiens. Some scholars have claimed recently that 'Big History' should start at the beginning of the universe, believing that the three billion year hegemony of bacteria on this planet must be given its due. Big Historians could also argue that Roberts is inconsistent: 'the start of life and photosynthesis and vertebrates' are obviously among the most important processes that have affected human beings. Any controversy here would be easily resolved if the historian specifies his or her intended scope and meaning of the history of X, where X is humanity or cats or the universe.

We have many perceptions of the past that are in fact ahistorical. The question of what is history and what is relevant is often present in the text, directly or indirectly, and Roberts' style is elegant and broad. He deals with the complexity or uncertainty of historical

facts with the expression 'X has at least some claim to Y'. Civilisations have contents, political structures and roots, and those of depth set patterns for the future. Some civilisations are more impressive than others are, i.e., they leave an impression. Some move by different rhythms. Some historical processes that have had less impact are still interesting because they show us the possibilities of humanity. History is at least partially about finding an intelligible narrative (or common thread or model) derived from the information available to us. It explains what was influential or essential about the past. Granted that both authors are European and that the book was first published in the 1970s, one might ask whether this history is overly Eurocentric. This is sometimes the case, but in my opinion generally not. In the last chapter the author(s) do make some dubious statements (see criticisms below) and they repeat their point about Europe's important contributions so often that it comes off as chest beating. However, their focus is generally on that which is innovative (and thereby progressive), influential or essential in the evolution of human civilisation. The book gives each nation or civilisation its due according to these criteria. (Or at least roughly so. See criticisms below.) Civilisations that were less innovative, dynamic or influential get shorter coverage. Roberts is clear both about the important contributions of modern Europe and about the almost negligible historical relevance of most of Western Europe before 1000 AD. His 'Europe' sometimes includes all former colonies and he makes clear how meaningless it is to think of Europe as one political, cultural or military entity over history. To read this book is at times to be taken away by a vast current of names; be they names for places, regions, tribes, dynasties, sects, nations, things or individuals; be they familiar, exotic or completely foreign names. This is a unique sensation. It reminded me of Dorian Gray enjoying such exotica or of writers such as Shakespeare or E. R. Burroughs setting the mood with names. Each name has stories to it that carry over time. This book says much, especially in the first half, about what civilisation is and how the definition has been refined. Whether an early culture counted as a nascent civilisation could be measured roughly by whether it had been able to free human resources from basic survival activities to achieve literacy. Other components of nascent civilisation were urban development, social-stratification, and a perceived separation from and domination over the natural environment. The civilisations that developed over world history can be measured by a combination of many parameters: education; levels of superstition; scientific, medical and technological understanding; artistic, cultural and culinary refinement; awareness of history and states of advancement; the place of women, children and the poor in society; tolerance and valuing of diversity; treatment of minorities (language, race, age, orientation, creed, physical

disabilities etc.); the value of individual merit compared to individual birth or tribe, caste or clan; democratic institutions and influence of citizens; rule of law; separation of religion and state; separation of governmental powers (e.g., legislative, executive, judiciary); treatment of oppositional parties and non-governmental organisations; fair penal systems oriented towards rehabilitation; ethical maturity; secular humanitarianism; support of international justice and peace; and so on. As we progress we realise more recent measures of civilisation, such as whether members of a society can and do achieve fulfilment or whether a society takes responsibility for its sustainability with respect to future generations.

Part 2: A list of criticisms, ordered by relative importance.

(1) The first third of the book consistently focuses on the coming of civilisation, and Roberts explicitly addresses the meaning of civilisation and what it means to write a history of civilisation. In the second third of the book, the underlying thread is roughly about the advancement of civilisation, but with far fewer explicit remarks about this theme or about how this is to be evaluated historically. This is a pity because apparent choices of what material is included or excluded for the narrative are only implicit. (There should have been more about the Golden Age of Islam.) In last third of the book, the theme of civilisation is largely replaced with a less edifying focus on developments related to the great powers. This is a substantial inconsistency of the book; why is civilisation of central importance to humanity before but not now? Modern historical issues related to being civilised and the very mixed record of the West and the East on that front are given far too little attention. The authors mention only a few cases of important changes in attitudes towards gender or race equality, and nothing at all about homosexuality. Backwards trends in civilisation also get short shrift, especially in the last chapter on contemporary history. Roberts rightfully celebrates the Magna Carta as a grand advancement of civilisation, but no mention is made of historic attacks on habeas corpus (America, Guantanamo) and historic increases in torture committed or abetted by numerous colluding countries. (The rendition roster probably included Afghanistan, America, Australia, Britain, Canada, Egypt, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Morocco, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Syria, Uzbekistan and others.) Roberts identifies social stratification as a basic ingredient of nascent civilisations in the beginning of his narrative, and yet trends in recent decades of growing wealth inequality accompanied by a shrinking middle class are given little attention.

(2) In the second half of the book, the British bias of the writer substantially effects the contents. Here are some examples. British influence on the American constitution is given overwhelming attention (p730). The substantial influence of others, e.g., Montesquieu, goes unmentioned. In the first half of the book, the author focuses on the development of civilisation as the main topic of world history, and yet Germanic contributions to civilisation after the Enlightenment

and before the World Wars are given almost no attention. (Peter Watson has called this the 'German genius' in a book on the subject.) The British bias becomes a turn off in statements such as the following (p809): 'In Canada the outstanding difficulty was the existence of a French Canadian community in Quebec'. This perspective is silly and colonial. It would be just as silly to write that the outstanding difficulty was the existence of the English in Ontario.(3) One anomalous remark in the epilogue is out of character with the entire book: 'Few cultures, if any, have been able altogether to resist this forceful [European] tradition: China kow-towed to Marx and science long before it did so to the market.' (p1185) In this context, 'kowtow' connotes servility, harks back to colonial days and implies condescension on the part of authors. This is inconsistent with the otherwise sober and generally neutral text.(4) The book focuses on the narrative and therefore has few illustrations, but where an illustration is warranted, it should be legible. This is not the case for the maps with barely differentiated grey tones and text in microscopic font.(5) Although the book is not just a history of ideas, the advancement of ideas is at the crux of human history and is always present in the text. The historian has the task of allotting the right amount of attention to historically important ideas and choosing which pioneers to mention. This is more or less achieved, but in particular the philosophical origins of secularism go largely unmentioned and the topic of secularism is overwhelmed by Roberts' focus on empiricism and British Enlightenment heroes. Roberts considers the secular philosophy of a tiny number of (unnamed) thinkers in the early Enlightenment to be insignificant (p679, 684), but recent scholarship (e.g., from Jonathan Israel) has shown that their influence was substantial. Roberts states that 'out-and-out atheism (together with rational determinism) had its first serious expression in the eighteenth century' (p695). This statement is at least grossly misleading. By typical definitions of atheism, Spinoza was atheist and was certainly considered to be an out-and-out atheist. The claim that 'serious' rational determinism only started in the 18th century is simply false. When the secular society of the late 19th century suddenly appears in the narrative (p718), there is little explanation of its long-term origin. The Enlightenment origins and development of modern empiricism are given much more treatment, and yet here too the reader is left to remember that the scientific method also had adumbrations in ancient Egypt and Greece and the Golden Age of Islam. It is annoying to read of David Hume's glorious contribution to scepticism when his 17th century precursors go unmentioned.(6) The contributions to the Enlightenment of Italy, Holland, and of Germanic and other countries are overwhelmed by the focus on France, Britain and America. This is typical great powers skew.(7) Unfortunately, the new editions have ditched the helpful page titles of previous

editions. Some obvious candidates for revision remain unchanged in the sixth edition. The
• of chapter one have been very recent for
many editions now. The last map of several maps in the chapter on ancient Greece is misplaced
and should be among the first. Switzerland was indeed the last western European country to
execute a witch legally, but the victim was a woman (Anna Goldi) not a man (p678). America was
first populated 17 000 years ago (p28) or 20 000 years ago (p147).

The book is big and complete. Get one and read a little each day and if you're old enough to
appreciate it, it will probably last you the rest of your life. My only complaint is the print's too small.

This formidable book explains the whole history of mankind on the basis of its key driving forces,
dynamics and implications. Individual events and protagonists are barely mentioned and if so, only
as illustration of the underlying developments. Very long read - but well worth it. Best history book I
have ever read.

Bravo. An amazing journey that will change your life. To even attempt a book that deals with ideas
and events from the beginning of history and try to place it in a context that leads us into our current
civilization is a masterful achievement. Whether you agree with the writers or not, they make you
think and want to know more.

History of the world must be taught in high school in the US. This subject helps us to understand
what is going on around us. Unfortunately this book is too kind for UK.

Long (1200page) single volume overview of world history. I'm not a historian to critique what I'm
sure are many areas where there could be more detail, or where more interpretations could be
given of some events... but then it would be even longer:). I found it very helpful to (finally) have the
beginnings of a comprehensive overview of human history... though it is a grueling read (more a
comment about the material covered than any complaint about the writing).

fine

Bloody brilliant work. Not a reference work per se; meant to be read, slowly, cover to cover. For the
next year.

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