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## THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD



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# The History of the World

SIXTH EDITION

J. M. ROBERTS AND  
O. A. WESTAD

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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## *Preface to Fifth Edition*

The first edition of this book appeared in 1976, and this is the fifth. There have also been several translations, whose texts have sometimes had to vary slightly from the English originals at the request of their publishers. I think that it is unlikely that I shall now have time to offer the public yet another version. Since, though, this contains a very substantial revision of the text after a comprehensive reconsideration it may be helpful to set out once more in a new preface some explanation of what I have tried to do, any why it seemed sensible to do it. At the very least, I feel I should indicate whether the events of over twenty-five years have led me to change the purposes and perspectives with which I set out to break the ground for this book in the late 1960s.

I have very recently heard it said of World History that ‘everything changed’, or something to that effect, on 11 September 2001. For reasons I have touched on briefly below, and because of certain ideas which have guided me from the outset, I think this is very misleading, untrue in any but a much qualified sense. Yet the first reason why a new edition seemed desirable is that world history for over a decade has been passing through and continues to pass through the most recent example of a recurrent phenomenon: a period of turbulent events and kaleidoscopic change. The beginnings of this confused and exciting period were already topics for the last, third, edition of this book, but events in the later 1990s alone made further consideration necessary in case new perspectives had to be taken into account, as well as new facts.

I feared the outcome would be a much enlarged book, but it did not turn out like that. Many changes of detail and style were required, but only the last section of the story underwent major rearrangement and reconstruction. Changes of emphasis were required, of course. There is a little more than in the last edition about recent changes in the position of women, about environmental concerns, about new institutions and assumptions, new questionings of old ones, and about shifts in the formal and informal

basis of the international order (these topics are most marked in recent history, and my views on them can be found set out at greater length in my *Penguin History of the Twentieth Century*, published in 1999). But none of this reflected fundamental change in my standpoint or general outlook, and they can be summed up in much the same terms I have used before and from the outset.

Perhaps my predominant concern, from the start, was to show and recall to a non-specialist readership the weight of the historical past and the importance, even today, of historical inertia in a world we are often encouraged to think we can control and manage. Historical forces moulding the thinking and behaviour of modern Americans, Russians, Chinese, Indians and Arabs were laid down centuries before ideas like capitalism or communism were invented. Distant history still clutters out lives, and perhaps even some of what happened in prehistory is still at work in them, too. Yet there has always been tension between such forces and mankind's unique power to produce change. Only recently (it is a matter of a few centuries at most) in terms of the six thousand or so years of civilization which make up most of the subject-matter of this book there has also been a growing recognition of mankind's power as a change-maker. What is more, enthusiasm for technical advance now seems universal. Even if very recently indeed some have sought to temper this enthusiasm with qualifications, there is now a widespread notion that most problems can and will be solved by human agency.

Because in consequence the two phenomena of inertia and innovation continue to operate in all historical developments it remains my view – as the first edition of this book put it – that we shall always find what happens both more, and less, surprising than we expect. Judgements about the significance of recent or contemporary events, should only be made with this kept firmly in mind. I remain inclined to believe, too, that such judgements will always be influenced very much by temperament, and that our innate optimism or pessimism will tinge any attempt to make predictions. Even if we could handle their abundance, none but the most general statements about likely futures could ever be made from such facts as history provides. Since the last edition of this book, I am aware of a slight shift in my own feelings; I now feel that my children will probably not live in so agreeable a world as I have known, because even greater adjustments in humanity's life everywhere may well be required than I once thought. But I do not claim to know. Historians should never prophesy.

Most of the foregoing I have said before at greater length and need not elaborate further now. It may, though, also be still helpful to new readers of this book if I repeat something of my reasons for choosing the general

approach reflected in its layout and contents. I sought from the start to recognize, where they could be discerned, the elements of general influences which had the widest and deepest impact and not just to collect again accounts of traditionally important themes. I wished to avoid detail and to set out instead the major historical processes which affected the largest numbers of human beings, leaving substantial legacies to the future, and to show their comparative scale and relations with one another. I did not seek to write continuous histories of all major countries or all fields of human activity and believe the place for exhaustive accounts of facts about the past is an encyclopedia.

I have sought to stress the significance of these major influences, and that means chronological and geographical unevenness in allocating space. Although we properly still take time and trouble to gaze at and study the fascinating sites of Yucatan, to ponder the ruins of Zimbabwe or wonder over the mysterious statues of Easter Island, and intrinsically desirable though knowledge of the societies which produced these things may be, they remain peripheral to world history. The early history even of such huge areas as black Africa or pre-Colombian America are only lightly sketched in these pages, because nothing that happened there between very remote times and the coming of Europeans shaped the world as did the cultural traditions in which the legacies of, say, the Buddha, the Hebrew prophets and Christianity, Plato and Confucius were for centuries living and shaping influences for millions of people and often still are.

I also tried not to write most about those subjects where material was most plentiful. There is not, in any case, the slightest chance of mastering all the relevant bibliography of world history. I have sought to stress matters which seemed important, rather than those about which we knew most. Louis XIV, however prominent in the history of France and Europe, can therefore be passed over more briefly than, say, the Chinese Revolution. In our own day, it is more than ever vital to try to distinguish the wood from the trees and not to mention something because it turns up every day in the 'news'.

New interpretations of the meanings of events are offered to us all the time. For instance, much has been heard recently about a clash of civilizations, presumed to be under way or on its way. This assertion, of course, has been heavily influenced by a new awareness of both the distinctiveness and the new excitability of the Islamic world in the last few decades. I have indicated in what follows my own reason for rejecting this view, at least in its most unqualified presentations, as inadequate and over-pessimistic. But no one could fail to recognize that there are, indeed, multiple tensions building up between what is loosely called the 'West' and many Islamic

societies. Both with conscious intention and unconsciously, sometimes even accidentally, profoundly disturbing influences from the West have now been at work to disrupt and trouble other traditions, Islam only one among them, for the last few centuries (the notion of 'globalization' is emphatically not to be seen in terms merely of the last few years). That process began, of course, with the activities of Europeans and that is why I have given considerable space to the evolution of Europe and its centrality until 1945 in world history.

No doubt such an emphasis reflects the most fundamental impulses arising from my own historical heritage and cultural formation. I cannot but write as an elderly, white, middle-class, British male. If that seems a shortcoming too grave to overcome, other approaches can be found, but the reader must weigh them, too, in similar scales before he or she comes to a judgement. I hope none the less that my efforts to be aware of what I might too easily take for granted may have made it possible to provide what the immensely learned historian Lord Acton termed a history 'which is distinct from the combined history of all countries', but which also indicates the variety and richness of the great cultural traditions which determine its structure.

In earlier prefaces, I have identified the many friends and colleagues who in many ways gave me help at earlier stages. I shall always be grateful to them but, because they are on record, I shall not repeat their names here. But I must add to theirs the name of Professor Barry Cunliffe, who was specifically of great help with this edition, and whom I thank most warmly. I continue, too, to owe thanks to the correspondents who have continued to write to me over the years, offering specific advice, suggestion, denunciation and encouragement, too numerous though they are to name here. But none of these friends and critics bears any responsibility for what I chose to do with what they told me, and therefore none should be blamed for anything in what I have written; the responsibility for it is wholly my own.

Finally, though the matter is somewhat personal, I feel I must point out that the final stages of my work of revision were carried out in the months since September last, when plans and schedules were thrown awry by a sudden and unanticipated collapse of health which necessitated frequent and disruptive stays in hospital. It must be obvious that this put considerable strain on others than myself. Very obviously, too, one of the most prominent among them is my editor at Penguin, Simon Winder. At a very difficult time, he continued to show me great patience and to offer encouragement as he has always done. I find it hard to express my appreciation of and gratitude for his calmness and helpfulness. I owe him especial thanks.

Over those same months, though, more than to anyone else I owe thanks

to my family, for the care they offered me, and the love with which they supported me, my children sometimes making long and transoceanic journeys to see me. But in my family, I must single out above all my wife, to whom earlier editions of this book have, in principle, been dedicated. This one is more than ever for her. To the encouragement, advice, judgement and taste she has always made available to me, I must now also recognize that the nearly forty years of devotion she has shown to me and to our children has made possible my own career. Now she has added to her previous tasks those of a full-time nurse. There is no one to whom I owe more and I hope she can find in my offering of this book to her some small evidence of how completely I recognize that.

Timwood, March 2002

Following John Roberts' death, I was approached by Penguin Books with the author's family's approval to attempt an updating of the text in the light of events since 2001. I did this by revising and extending Book Eight so that it covers both long-term trends and specific developments that have become apparent to historians since the opening of the new millennium. The rest of the text for the Fifth Edition remains as completed by John Roberts before his death.


Professor O. A. Westad, July 2007




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## *Preface to the Sixth Edition*



John Roberts was a remarkable historian, whose one-volume history of the world is probably the finest ever produced in English. When I first read it, as a teenager growing up in a small town, I was struck by the scope of it all: Roberts does not just recount history, he tells it; he presents the great outline of human development without losing track of the big stories that drove it forward. He has an eye for the unexpected, for the sudden departures, for that which needs explanation because it does not fit easily with what went before. He believes, deeply, in the human capacity for change and transformation, while never making history teleological, never believing that one part of our history points only to one possible outcome. Roberts understands the complexity of history, but also the need to tell it simply, so that the largest possible number of people get the chance to reflect on what has created the world we live in today. In sum, he was the kind of historian I wanted to be.



I was therefore very pleased when, many years later, Penguin asked me to attempt a completely revised sixth edition of Roberts's masterpiece. In 2007, after John Roberts died, I wrote an updated fifth edition: it turned out to be a very difficult task, since my work had to consist of adding small pieces to an unfinished revision that the author himself had carried out, just prior to his death in 2003. It made me want to do a fully revised version, which – while being as true as possible to the author's intentions – took our historical knowledge forward in directions Roberts could not possibly have been aware of when he did his work. What you are reading now is therefore much more than an update; it is a reworking of the text based on new knowledge and new interpretations. It is, I hope, a new world history for a new century.

The first edition of this book appeared in 1976, after Roberts had begun work on it in the late 1960s. It was well received both in Britain and in America, and some reviewers already then called it 'a masterpiece' and 'an unrivalled world history for our times'. Some saw it as too 'academic' to win over a larger audience (one reviewer felt that it was too 'difficult' for

his undergraduate classes). Others criticized it – in line with the mood of the times – for being too ‘elitist’ or too focused on the rise of the West. But the general reading public appreciated Roberts’s power of synthesis and composition; his *History* was a best-seller from the very beginning, and has since sold more than half a million copies. It was the readers, not the reviewers, who made it the predominant history of the world in print today.

John Roberts continued to revise his *History* through several different stages of historiographical development in Britain, where he lived and worked. His own views did not change much, though there are discernible steps in his revisions of the text. The history of the non-European world became increasingly important to him, as did the early modern era (and especially the sixteenth century). The older Roberts was perhaps less pre-occupied with the significance of cultural differences and with open-ended outcomes to history than the younger man had been. But these were not fundamental changes; most of the text remained intact between the first and the fifth editions.

Revising a text that one much admires involves a constant (and very pleasurable) conversation with its author. Roberts and I agree on most approaches to history: the general needs to take precedence over the particular, and historical processes that keep affecting us today are of greater importance than those that do not (even if they were important in their own time). Roberts put it well in his preface to the fifth edition:

I sought from the start to recognize, where they could be discerned, the elements of general influences which had the widest and deepest impact and not just to collect again accounts of traditionally important themes. I wished to avoid detail and to set out instead the major historical processes which affected the largest numbers of human beings, leaving substantial legacies to the future, and to show their comparative scale and relations with one another. I did not seek to write continuous histories of all major countries or all fields of human activity and believe the place for exhaustive accounts of facts about the past is an encyclopedia . . .

. . . I have sought to stress matters which seemed important, rather than those about which we knew most. Louis XIV, however prominent in the history of France and Europe, can therefore be passed over more briefly than, say, the Chinese Revolution.

The general, the major, the essential. These were key aspects of Roberts’s world history, and I hope they remain as much in focus for me as they were for him.

When we disagree (most often provoked by new gains in our understanding of history), the conversation turns into a difference of opinion, in

which I mostly prevail (though he does sometimes, through sheer obstinacy). For instance, we both believe that world history in the period from the sixteenth to the twentieth century was dominated by the rise of the West. We disagree, however, on the roots of this 'great acceleration': Roberts believed that significant parts of them go deep, back to antiquity, while I find their main branches much closer to the surface in the middle part of the second millennium AD. The practical consequences of this particular disagreement in terms of revisions are slim, however: my revision of Roberts's text on Greece and Rome is not influenced by whether or not I think that the predominance of European societies in the nineteenth century was caused by developments stemming from antiquity.

My main revisions for the sixth edition have been as follows: I have rewritten parts of Book One to incorporate the remarkable gains in archaeological and anthropological knowledge of early human life on earth made over the past decade. I have extended the treatment of India and China in Books Two to Four. I have added new knowledge on major migration patterns in Books Four and Six and have revised the discussion of Central Eurasia, early Islam and of the late Byzantine Empire. And I have extended the treatment of the history of science, technology and economic issues in Books Seven and Eight. Finally, I have added to the presentation of the social and cultural roles of women and young people where it is right to do so, based on what we know today. I am of course aware that new interpretations and new knowledge of history will be added constantly, and perhaps at a more rapid pace now than in the past (history, it is often said, is not what it used to be). But many of the constants remain, as the great unifiers of human history. Roberts and I agree, for instance, that exchanges and engagement between human cultures have generally been more important than the confrontations between them, and that this pattern is likely to continue in the future. Here is Roberts again, from the preface to the fifth edition:

New interpretations of the meanings of events are offered to us all the time. For instance, much has been heard recently about a clash of civilizations, presumed to be under way or on its way. This assertion, of course, has been heavily influenced by a new awareness of both the distinctiveness and the new excitability of the Islamic world in the last few decades. I have indicated . . . my own reason for rejecting this view . . . as inadequate and over-pessimistic. But no one could fail to recognize that there are, indeed, multiple tensions building up between what is loosely called the 'West' and many Islamic societies. Both with conscious intention and unconsciously, sometimes even accidentally, profoundly disturbing influences from the West have now been at work to disrupt and trouble other traditions, Islam only one among

them, for the last few centuries (the notion of 'globalization' is emphatically not to be seen in terms merely of the last few years).

John Roberts attempted to make his *History* a way of understanding how peoples and individuals interacted, and how such interactions became webs of meaning and significance that always had more than one outcome. I hope that my revised edition serves that purpose, too. If the study of history is to be meaningful for as many as possible, then there is a need to emphasize not the short term, but the long term, and to understand the endless human potential for change.

Professor O. A. Westad,  
July 2012





## BOOK ONE

# Before History

*When does History begin? It is tempting to reply 'in the beginning', but like many obvious answers, this soon turns out to be unhelpful. As a great Swiss historian once pointed out in another connection, history is the one subject where you cannot begin at the beginning. We can trace the chain of human descent back to the appearance of vertebrates, or even to the photosynthetic cells and other basic structures which lie at the start of life itself. We can go back further still, to almost unimaginable upheavals which formed this planet and even to the origins of the universe. Yet this is 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. Even when historians write about a natural process beyond human control, such as the ups and downs of climate, or the spread of a disease, they do so only because it helps us to understand why men and women have lived (and died) in some ways rather than others.*

*This suggests that all we have to do is to identify the moment at which the first human beings step out from the shadows of the remote past. It is not quite as simple as that, though. First, we have to know what we are looking for, but most attempts to define humanity on the basis of observable characteristics prove in the end arbitrary and cramping, as long arguments about 'ape-men' and 'missing links' have shown. Physiological tests help us to classify data but do not identify what is or is not human. That is a matter of a definition about which disagreement is possible. Some people have suggested that human uniqueness lies in language, yet other primates possess vocal equipment similar to our own; when noises are made with it which are signals, at what point do they become speech? Another famous definition is that man is a tool-maker, but observation has cast doubt on our uniqueness in this respect, too, long after Dr Johnson scoffed at Boswell for quoting it to him.*

*What is surely and identifiably unique about the human species is not its possession of certain faculties or physical characteristics, but what it has done with them. That, of course, is its history. Humanity's unique achievement is*



2 BEFORE HISTORY

*its remarkably intense level of activity and creativity, its cumulative capacity to create change. All animals have ways of living, some complex enough to be called cultures. Human culture alone is progressive; it has been increasingly built by conscious choice and selection within it as well as by accident and natural pressure, by the accumulation of a capital of experience and knowledge which man has exploited. Human history began when the inheritance of genetics and behaviour which had until then provided the only way of dominating the environment was first broken through by conscious choice. Of course, human beings have never been able to make their history except within limits. Those limits are now very wide indeed, but they were once so narrow that it is impossible to identify the first step which took human evolution away from the determination of nature. We have for a long time only a blurred story, obscure both because the evidence is fragmentary and because we cannot be sure exactly what we are looking for.*

# I

## The Foundations

The roots of history lie in the pre-human past and it is hard (but important) to grasp just how long ago that was. If we think of a century on our calendar as a minute on some great clock recording the passage of time, then Europeans began to settle in the Americas only about five minutes ago. Slightly less than fifteen minutes before that, Christianity appeared. Rather more than an hour ago people settled in southern Mesopotamia who were soon to evolve the oldest civilization known to us. This is already well beyond the furthest margin of written record; according to our clock, people began writing down the past much less than an hour ago, too. Some six or seven hours further back on our scale, and much more remote, we can discern the first recognizable human beings of a modern physiological type already established in western Europe. Behind them, anything from a fortnight to three weeks earlier, appear the first traces of creatures with some human characteristics whose contribution to the evolution which followed is still in debate.

How much further back into a growing darkness we need go in order to understand the origins of man is debatable, but it is worth considering for a moment even larger tracts of time simply because so much happened in them which, even if we cannot say anything very precise about it, shaped what followed. This is because humanity was to carry forward into historical times certain possibilities and limitations, and they were settled long ago, in a past even more remote than the much shorter period of time – 4½ million years or so – in which creatures with at least some claim to human qualities are known to have existed. Though it is not our direct concern, we need to try to understand what was in the baggage of advantages and disadvantages with which human beings alone among the primates emerged after these huge tracts of time as change-makers. Virtually all the physical and much of the mental formation we still take for granted was by then determined, fixed in the sense that some possibilities were excluded and others were not. The crucial process is the evolution of human creatures as a distinct branch among the primates, for it is at this fork in the line, as it



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