

The Shortest History of Europe

Contents

Introduction

SHORTEST HISTORY

Chapter 1. *Europe Classical and Medieval*

Chapter 2. *Europe Modern*

INTERLUDE *The Classic Feeling*

LONGER HISTORY

Chapter 3. *Invasions and Conquests*

Chapter 4. *Forms of Government I*

Chapter 5. *Forms of Government II*

Chapter 6. *Emperors and Popes*

Chapter 7. *Languages*

Chapter 8. *The Common People*

CONCLUSION *What Is It about Europe?*

List of Maps & List of Images

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INTRODUCTION

IF YOU LIKE TO SKIP TO THE END OF A book to see what happens, you will enjoy this book. The endings start soon after it begins. It tells the history of Europe six times, each from a different angle.

These were originally lectures designed to introduce university students to European history. I did not start at the beginning and go through to the end. I quickly gave the students an overview and then returned later with more detail. The first two lectures sketch out the whole of European history. This is truly the shortest history. The next six lectures take a particular theme. The aim is to deepen understanding by returning and more deeply examining.

A story has a plot: a beginning, a middle and an end. A civilisation does not have a story in this sense. We are in thrall to narrative if we think a civilisation must have a rise and fall, though it will have an end. My aim here is to capture the essential elements of European civilisation and to see how they have been reconfigured through time; to show how new things take their shape from old; how the old persists and returns.

History books deal with many events and people. This is one of history's strengths and it takes us close to life. But what does it all mean? What are the really important things? These are the questions I always have in mind. Many people and events that get into other history books don't get into this one.

The more detailed lectures in the second part of the book stop around 1800—

and this simply because when I designed this course of lectures there was another course dealing with Europe since 1800. So how much history does this leave out! I have looked forward occasionally, but if my approach works you'll recognise the world we now live in, whose lineaments were laid down long ago.

After classical times, the book deals chiefly with western Europe. Not all parts of Europe are equally important in the making of European civilisation. The Renaissance in Italy, the Reformation in Germany, parliamentary government in England, revolutionary democracy in France: these are of more consequence than the partitions of Poland.

I have relied heavily on the work of historical sociologists, particularly Michael Mann and Patricia Crone. Professor Crone is not an expert on European history; her specialty is Islam. But in a little book called *Pre-Industrial Societies* she included one chapter on 'The Oddity of Europe'. This is a *tour de force*, a whole history in thirty pages, almost as short as my shortest history. It provided me with the concept of the making and reworking of the European mix, as set out in my first two lectures. My debt to her is that great.

For some years at La Trobe University in Melbourne I was fortunate to have as a colleague Professor Eric Jones, who was a great encourager of the big-picture approach to history and upon whose book *The European Miracle* I have heavily relied.

I claim no originality for the book except in its method. I first offered these lectures to students in Australia who had had too much Australian history and knew

too little of the civilisation of which they are a part.

John Hirst

