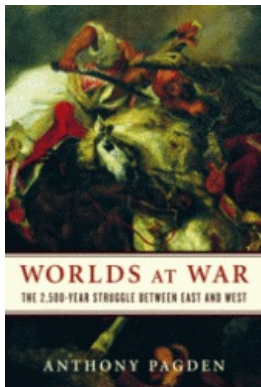


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Ten for the History Books — Summer Reading [Part 1]

Monday, June 2, 2008

Summer is a great time to catch up on reading that is both enjoyable and truly informative. Several major books in the category of historical works are worthy of a good summer reading project, and each of these fills some gaps in our understanding of the past — and thus the present.



1. Anthony Pagden, *Worlds at War: The 2,500-Year Struggle Between East and West* (Random House, 2008).

According to Anthony Pagden, it was his wife, classical scholar Giulia Sissa, who suggested that he write a book about what the ancient Greek historian Herodotus called the “perpetual enmity” between Europe and Asia. Pagden took up that challenge, and *Worlds at War* is the result. Readers owe Giulia Sissa for that suggestion. This is one of those books that helps in a unique way to make the modern world make sense.

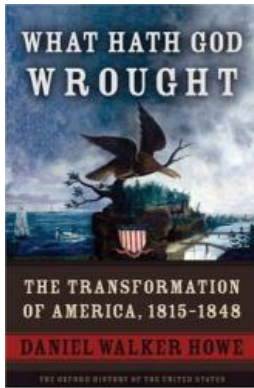
Pagden traces the struggle between Europe and Asia all the way back to the Peloponnesian War — an event shrouded in myth and legend. What becomes clear is that deep cultural differences and hatreds still drive history and the struggle between the East and the West.

All the way back to Herodotus there was an acknowledgement of what Pagden calls “a struggle between two civilizations, two ways of understanding political authority, two modes of living, and ultimately two concepts of humanity.”

Pagden takes his reader through the development of the world as we now know it, looking to the crucial engagements between East and West that defined that development. Interestingly, he makes the argument that the struggle between the Christian and Islamic conceptions of life — central to the modern dynamic — replaced the older struggles between Western universalism and Eastern dualisms. The book takes the reader through the story of events and individuals ranging from Alexander the Great to Augustine to Muhammed to Napoleon to Osama Bin Laden — with a host of others along the way. *Worlds at War* is fascinating, informative, and compelling.

An excerpt:

On the final day of 1821, a National Assembly was convened near Epidaurus that declared Greece to be an independent republic, adopted a constitution loosely modeled on the French constitution of 1799, elected as its president Prince Alexandros Mavrokordatos, and stated that “the Greek nation calls Heaven and Earth to witness that in spite of the dreadful yoke of the Ottomans, which threatened it with destruction, it still exists.” Greeks now took to slaughtering Turks and Turks, in retaliation, Greeks. In the end it was, of course, the Greeks who prevailed. More than twenty thousand Turkish men, women, and children, some of whom had lived in Greece for generations, were hunted down by bands armed with clubs and scythes, often led by priests who months before had protested their unwavering loyalty to the “blessed sultan.” Within weeks of the outbreak of the revolution, the Turkish and Albanian Muslim population of the Peloponnese had ceased altogether to exist as a community. What little remained of it huddled for protection in the remaining Turkish enclaves on the coast, but these, too, were under siege. The moon, as the Greeks said, had devoured them all. It was a slaughter that Greece and Europe, swept along by talk of the heroic liberators of ancient liberty, has chosen to forget.



2. Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, "The Oxford History of the United States" (Oxford University Press, 2007).

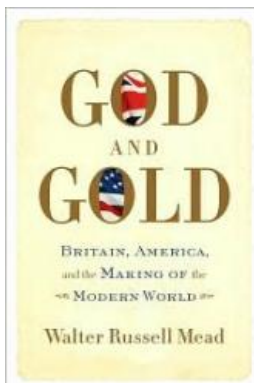
"The Oxford History of the United States" is an indispensable series of major historical works, and *What Hath God Wrought* is a worthy addition. It may well be that the periods just before and just after the Civil War are least known by today's Americans. In many ways, the nineteenth century has been reduced to that cataclysm. Daniel Walker Howe's book helps to correct that impression.

Howe, who taught at both Oxford and UCLA, tells the expansive story of America as a young nation. It is the story of territorial expansion, technological development, theological crisis, and the crisis building to civil war.

What Hath God Wrought explains the impact of the telegraph and railroad, the spread of public education, the emergence of Texas, the westward expansion, the threat of sectionalism, and the intellectual climate of the times. Readers will debate his reading of these issues, but Howe cannot be faulted for declining to make a judgment. He gives attention to such developments as the moral crises of slavery and the roles of women. He helps to explain America as we now know this nation.

An excerpt:

The evangelical movement brought civilization and order, not only to the frontier but throughout the rural and small town environments in which the vast majority of Americans then lived. Evangelical revivals rolled through the canal towns where Finney enjoyed his famous successes, through rustic Vermont, and through the booming cotton lands of Mississippi. All over the country, farmers and townspeople expressed by innumerable voluntary activities their commitment to republicanism and religious toleration along with their desire for spiritual sustenance stable values. Some evangelicals committed themselves to the moral reformation of society as a whole; those tended to be the ones concerned with interdenominational cooperation. Others concentrated attention on the moral standards of their own membership as "islands of holiness" in a sea of infidelity and immorality. This distinction would turn out to be important when evangelicals chose sides in politics.



3. Walter Russell Mead, *God and Gold: Britain, America, and the Making of the Modern World* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).

In some sense, every book is an argument. Some arguments are more carefully disguised than others even as some are more persuasive than others. *God and Gold* makes an argument for the ascendancy of English-speaking cultures on the global scene. Walter Russell Mead, Henry A. Kissinger Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, makes his argument with an energetic style and insightful analysis.

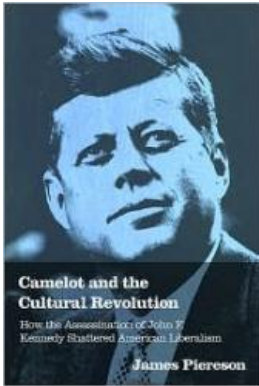
God and Gold tells the story of American and British influence in the modern world while giving a very careful attention to the role of religion in developing the Anglo-American ethos and worldview. He sees Evangelical Protestantism as central to the influence of the English-speaking world and a key leadership constituency for the future. Every reader will find rich food for thought in this book.

An excerpt:

Capitalism is taking us toward a future of accelerating change. The first twenty years of the twentieth century saw as much technological progress as the entire nineteenth century. Currently, industrial societies appear to be doubling their rate of technological progress every ten years. If this continues, and there is every reason to suppose that it will, the twenty-first century will experience the equivalent of twenty thousand years of "normal" human progress.

This suggests the tide of social change will continue, that economic and political relationships around the world will be in constant flux, and that the cultures that dislike dynamic capitalism or are unable to manage it well will suffer even greater difficulties than they now face. New armies of ghost dancers are likely to sweep down from the hills, and, as technology creates new and cheaper biological and other weapons of mass destruction, they are likely to wield more

terrible weapons than ever.



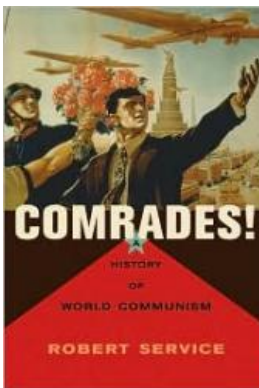
4. James Piereson, *Camelot and the Cultural Revolution: How the Assassination of John F. Kennedy Shattered American Liberalism* (Encounter Books, 2007).

James Piereson argues that the assassination of President John F. Kennedy represented nothing less than a major turning point in American history — but one which would take some time to become fully apparent. As Piereson, senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, argues, liberalism supplied much of the energy that drove our politics during the greater part of the twentieth century. It now seems clear that Kennedy’s assassination had the effect of draining much of that political energy out of the liberal movement.

Piereson makes his case that the death of President Kennedy led to a break-up of the old liberal order, a shift to far more radical movements on the Left, and the transformation of liberalism from cultural optimism to a “punitive liberalism” that turned against the American ethos. *Camelot and the Cultural Revolution* is a book that helps the last four decades come into far better focus.

An excerpt:

It was Kennedy’s status as a cultural figure that is responsible for the enduring interest in the man and his presidency and for his transfiguration in death into a liberal hero. Because of his premature death, Kennedy was not in office long enough for the wear of politics to have stripped away his cultural luster. In this sense, his untimely death only magnified his posthumous cultural appeal. Kennedy, moreover, in seeming to stand above and apart from the conventions of middle-class life, opened up new possibilities for cultural politics and cultural criticism that were eventually absorbed into the mainstream of liberal reform, so much so that within a few years liberals seemed more preoccupied with cultural issues — feminism, sexual freedom, and gay rights — than with the traditional issues of economic security that had animated Roosevelt, Truman, and even Kennedy himself. It was thus through the opening that Kennedy provided that the ideas associated with cultural radicalism began to blend with the broader movement of liberal reform. Yet it was perhaps this immersion in cultural politics following Kennedy’s death that as much as anything else brought about the end of the liberal era. Liberals after Kennedy identified their doctrine with his style and his sophistication while, in many areas, abandoning the substance of his ideas. To them Kennedy represented more a cultural ideal than a political leader with a program.



5. Robert Service, *Comrades! A History of World Communism* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

Robert Service is one of the historians best equipped to address the master narrative of world communism. He is the author of major biographies on Stalin and Lenin [*Stalin: A Biography* and *Lenin: A Biography*] and he has made world communism the primary focus of his work as scholar. “The seeds of modern communism germinated long before the twentieth century,” Service reminds his readers, even as he takes us into the black darkness of communism in the tragic century just behind us — and still with us.

Service looks at the grotesque reality of communist revolutions and communist regimes without evasion or flinching. He forces his reader into a deeper understanding of how communism came to define life for so many millions on this planet, why it failed, and why “the impulses which led to communism are not dormant.”

We have long needed a one-volume history of world communism, and *Comrades!* is the book for which we have been waiting. [An additional benefit is the inclusion of many color plates of communist propaganda -- not to be missed.]

An excerpt:

Yet ideologies and politics can mutate and spread like a virus which counteracts every medical effort to pinpoint and eradicate it. Lenin and the Bolsheviks groped their way to the creation of their new kind of state. This became the stereotype for communist systems elsewhere; and the USSR itself underwent internal variation in subsequent decades.

Communism also infected other movements for the transformation of society. The totalising ideas, institutions and practices of Marxism-Leninism had a profound impact on the political far right. The one-party, one-ideology state with its disregard for law, constitution and popular consent was implanted in inter-war Italy and Germany. Neither Mussolini or Hitler acted only in response to communism; and the forced submission of society to comprehensive control took different forms in the USSR, Italy and Germany. But the importance of precedent is scarcely deniable. The objective of an unrestrained state power penetrating all aspects of life — political, economic, social, cultural and spiritual — was a characteristic they shared. The same phenomenon emerged in the secularist Baathist regime in Iraq under Saddam Hussein and appeared in the Islamist plans of Osama bin Laden as well as in the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

All such leaders from Mussolini and Hitler down to bin Laden have detested communism. They dedicated themselves to its annihilation. Yet they were influenced by communist precedents even while regarding it as a plague bacillus. Communism has proved to have metastasising features. It will have a long afterlife even when the last communist state has disappeared.

[Coming later this week -- "Ten for the History Books" Part 2].

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