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Antony Alcock. *A Short History of Europe: From the Greeks and Romans to the Present Day.* Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xiv + 324 pp. $23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-333-99407-8.

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A Small Bite of a Large Subject

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Antony Alcock's *Short History of Europe* is precisely that–a breathtakingly brief dash through four thousand years and half a dozen aspects of European history, touching on economic, political, military, religious, administrative, and diplomatic developments, but with scarcely a glance at social, cultural, or artistic aspects; the Renaissance, in the usual artistic or literary senses, hardly occurs, to give the most striking example of the book's focus. Written for British university students facing an exam in European history, the book does an admirable job of hitting high points and underlining key developments. American college students would, I suspect, be overwhelmed with the relentless pace, for it bears no resemblance to a typical Western Civilization "text." There are no illustrations, a table of abbreviations relating almost entirely to recent institutions such as NATO, and ten maps, reproduced in gray tones from color originals and thus nearly useless. As a refresher for a graduate seminar, or as background for an intensive consideration of one aspect–political, say, or economic–the book would also be quite useful. But keep this book away from the children; they are not ready for it yet.

Alcock proceeds chronologically, moving from the rise of the Mycenaeans to the development of the European Union in less than three hundred pages of text, which is in itself an admirable accomplishment. He is best at his narrative of key events, but most questionable at his assessment of significance. Having surveyed the Greek and Roman achievement in a scant thirty-five pages, Alcock asserts that Christianity was necessary to "complete" humanity (an assertion that would likely be news to Socrates or Marcus Aurelius–Alcock gives the former seven lines of text, and the latter no mention at all). As he argues: "The Greeks may have been the first to realise the worth of individual liberty, the Romans the value of discipline and authority, but in both these fields the spirit of man is doomed to anarchy and waste unless inspired by faith" (p. 37).

Alcock has constructed his Europe backwards, seeking the roots of the present in the past, and, as with many such surveys, the length of the discussion increases as one approaches the millennium. His view of mankind is gloomy, as the book presents an almost unrelieved succession of wars, conflicts, and unsettling changes ill-digested. The absence of the life of the mind contributes to the tone, with little of the spiritual or intellectual to light the darkness. What Alcock does best is to hit the high points, the topics deserving of mention in a "standard" survey of Western Civilization (assuming that any such thing exists anymore), complete with enumerations of key developments and groups (as the four flavors of socialists fighting for influence in the early 1900s, detailed on pp. 208-11). And his treatment of the origins of the European Union, as French statism triumphed over Anglo-American democracy and individualism, is an enlightening analysis of a startling (and ongoing) revolution, as an old, contentious Europe gives way (perhaps) to a new, cohesive one.

Throughout the text, one finds little nuggets of information that even the well-versed teacher of Western Civilization would be unlikely to know. I, for one, was unaware that *ecstasis* and *enthousiasmos* were Greek philosophical terms (the soul leaving the body, and the god entering the worshipper) adopted by Chrisianity (p. 37). Unfortunately, there are also endless oddities of punctuation and grammar, attributable to the British origins of the text as well as to a merciless editing process to

limit its length. One suspects that there is a much longer book here fighting to get out, and wishes to see it emerge. On the occasions when Alcock's opinions sneak through, as with his assessment that, in the 1990s Bosnian crisis, "the role of the Europeans had been utterly inglorious" as Clinton and the United States cleaned up the mess (p. 274), one is happy to see more than a relentless detailing of "one damn thing after another," as history is too often seen by undergraduates. Of course, in other cases, his biases reveal themselves, as with his passive-voice assertion that American slavery arose when "it was therefore proposed to import black slaves from the west coast of Africa to work the sugar plantations" (p. 113).

This book is, in sum, a fascinating and astonishing achievement, bringing together an enormous range of information and analysis in a brief compass, but it has many annoying aspects as well, as it is littered with badly constructed and sometimes illogical sentences and odd truncations and omissions, such as the fascinating assertion–completely unexplained–that the American Revolution, to which Alcock devotes four lines, happened because "the British departed from their own political principles" (p. 167). It is probably useless for American undergraduate survey courses, but might be well worth the time for their instructors to peruse. I suspect that even the most experienced and jaded teacher would find something here from which to learn, or by which to be provoked, amused, or infuriated.

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