

Frank McLynn. *Genghis Khan: His Conquests, His Empire, His Legacy.* Boston: Da Capo, 2015. 704 pp. \$32.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-306-82395-4.



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The latest biography produced by Frank McLynn is an ambitious attempt to chase Genghis Khan across the Eurasian Steppe and beyond. McLynn's objective in *Genghis Khan: His Conquests, His Empire, His Legacy* is to synthesize "all the scholarship done in the major European languages in the past forty years relating to Genghis and his sons." This popular history is not for professional Mongolists though, as, McLynn astutely acknowledges, they will "doubtless" find "many things" objectionable (p. xxv). Nevertheless, McLynn assumes the role of all-knowing historian to recount the triumphs of Genghis Khan and his armies.

Since McLynn is not particularly concerned with the scholarly debates that surround Genghis's life and times, the author begins with a vivid description of Mongolia's landscape. In lurid prose, he brings the sweeping grasslands, arid desserts, and harsh climate of central Asia into view. Rather than articulating an argument or situating his work within the current historiography, as others might, McLynn opts to discuss how

environmental conditions affected the basics of pastoral nomadism. This sets the stage for the rise of Temujin, an unassuming boy from a poor family, as he consolidated followers and became Genghis Khan. Though, in the conclusion, McLynn curtly dismisses climatic theories that might help explain the meteoric expansion of the Mongols, he credits the harsh Mongolian habitat and a pastoralist lifestyle for Genghis's military acumen: responsiveness, mobility, daring, and the energy to muster a fight.

The survival skills necessary for life on the Great Steppe are on full display in the many conquests of Genghis Khan at the heart of this work. Children were taught to ride stout Mongolian ponies at an early age, and the horsemanship this cultivated made the Mongol cavalry a formidable force. Men could stay in the saddle for days, allowing Genghis to move his armies vast distances with frightening speed. With their mounts at a gallop, warriors could fire arrows from composite reflex bows in any direction. Since women were equal to men on horseback and accustomed to

moving their homes and herds, Mongol supply lines generally followed close behind the initial assault forces. Though these attributes also served other steppe nomads, Genghis was a “political genius” who devised masterful military strategies and drew supporters with his “personal charm and charisma,” McLynn tells us (pp. 152, 155).

Evidence of Genghis Khan’s ingenuity, stratagem, and magnetism fill the pages of McLynn’s narrative. To replace, or at least supersede, the clans, tribes, and lineages that had traditionally structured Mongol sociopolitical relations, Genghis organized his army by units of ten, one hundred, one thousand, and ten thousand. This military system crosscut competing allegiances and fostered loyalty and obedience for the Great Khan himself. When deploying these units in war, “Genghis was more chess player than gambler,” according to McLynn (p. 187). Advanced scouts located water and grazing lands ahead of Genghis’s warriors who utilized their mobility to make quick strikes and feigned retreats to torment local populations and draw defending armies onto terrain that favored the Mongols. Such meticulous planning and dramatic maneuvers became the hallmarks of Mongol victories in China, Korea, Manchuria, the Middle East, Russia, and eastern Europe. Through it all, Genghis maintained an air of invincibility, claiming the Mongol god Tenggeri favored him and the world empire he was building. Of course redistributing pilfered booty to his loyal adherents and brutalizing those who opposed him also helped cultivate fidelity, or at least submission.

Over seventeen chapters and nearly five hundred pages, McLynn builds the case that Genghis Khan was “the greatest conqueror the world has ever known” (p. 489). While this may be so, McLynn’s explanation for Genghis’s success fails to account for much of the historiography the author claims to synthesize. Theories about the development of supra-tribal confederacies, for example, or the impact of exchange networks on

Mongol decisions to “raid or trade” are underutilized. Given the inclusion of monographs by Thomas Barfield, Joseph Fletcher, Nicola Di Cosmo, and Morris Rossabi in the extensive bibliography, this need not be the case. It might have been permissible to overlook these historiographical debates since *Genghis Khan* is meant for a wider audience, except that the author takes the work of other historians to task in the truncated conclusion.

According to this “great man” history, Genghis Khan built an empire predicated on constant expansion. With his “genius” at work and “chance” on his side, Genghis united the Mongols and directed their efforts outward (pp. 494, 492). To slow their advance would have spelled disaster as the Mongol empire would have been undone by internal rivalries and uprisings from the agrarian societies the Mongols ruled. By sheer will and self-determination, Genghis refused to let this happen, and in the process he unintentionally changed the world. While at times laudatory of the man who made them famous, McLynn is no admirer of Mongol culture or society. The ride or die mentality that drives Genghis Khan throughout this traditional biography makes for an interesting read, though students of inner Asian history may be disappointed in the end.

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