

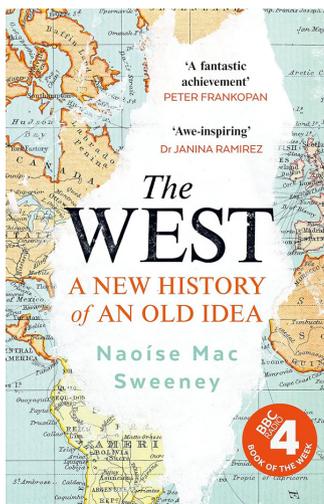
Book Review

The West: A New History of an Old Idea

Mac Sweeney (N.), Pp. x+437, ill. London: WH Allen, 2023. Cased, £22. ISBN: 978-0-7535-5892-8

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In her new book Prof. Naoise Mac Sweeney, of the University of Vienna, has taken up the challenge of writing about that favourite changing academic idea ‘The West’. There have been many books on this topic of late starting with Ferdinand Mount’s *Full Circle* and working its way past Stephen Greenblatt’s *The Swerve* to this sweeping volume written in a narrative of 14 lives. Probably one the greatest of the challenges in writing or reading this book was that apart from the last five lives, not one of the previous nine would have had any idea of what the west was.

Combine that with the fact that many of the individuals that Mac Sweeney writes about are unknown to a current readership. Those lives of Godfrey of Viterbo or Njinga of Angola are just two examples. These seemingly obscure historical figures, however, do not detract from what Mac Sweeney hopes to achieve with this book.

Mac Sweeney uses these lives as evidence that cultural or societal notions change very quickly and that there is no straight inheritance of the idea of ‘The West’. Ultimately the formation of the 19th and 20th century idea of ‘The West’ was one that was derived from many forks in the ideological and historical road. And that even the Greeks and the Romans during their lifetime would not have considered their roots to be in the west. The Greeks through Herodotus regarded Europe as the home of barbarians and, as for the Romans, they thought themselves descendants of refugees of the Trojan War. Troy, of course, to any one reading this review, is very much eastern in its location, and also not European in the Roman sense. ‘The West’ also states that those peoples of modern Greece and Rome probably can’t call themselves the legitimate successors of those ancient peoples as with continuous migration over the centuries the original inhabitants probably don’t even exist genetically anymore either.

Through the examination of these lives, we see that ideas about religion and science developed in the east just as much as they developed in the west and in some cases some inventions were

eastern long before they were western. Mac Sweeney in her field of Classical Archaeology helps the modern reader to know that ‘The West’ is more than just Corinthian columns and dusty manuscripts written by dead men: it is an idea that can still resonate because of its adaptability and transmissibility. Just as medieval Europe could receive or revive the ideas of classical times, so classical reception can continue to play a part in the shaping of the world. The only problem is that many parts of the world have become weary of anything with the word ‘Western’ in it. It is sometimes quite rightly equated with only imperialism and militarism, which have so deeply scarred some now independent nations that they prefer to look east for guidance. Whether this is right or wrong depends greatly on the way that you perceive the evolution of the modern world.

As a reader of this book, you also cannot untie yourself from the concept of ‘The West’ and that of race. Mac Sweeney who has previously written books on Troy and the Trojan War states that those peoples, both Trojan and Greek, would not know about the modern concept of the ‘White Race’ nor would or could they identify themselves as white. When reading these parts that have to do with race, we should not look at it as an attempt at the wholesale damnation of everything to do with ‘White’; instead we must realise that the idea of a ‘White race’ also developed and changed over time just as the idea of ‘The West’ did. There were many forks in this road too, and only a few led to radical racism. Mac Sweeney also admits that these ideas are scarcely new: she acknowledges in one of the later chapters in the book the works of Edward Said, the well known and sometimes controversial Palestinian-American academic, who dismissed the whole idea of the west as being a fiction. But even Said had to admit that a literary line could be drawn from Homer to Virginia Woolf.

Any reader of Mac Sweeney’s book must also admit that these days critics of ‘The West’ have rather gained in number, especially with the conflicts in Palestine and Ukraine. And again, here the reader must be very careful not to fall into a propagandist trap. The idea of ‘The West’ is debated at length by Mac Sweeney and although she criticises it, she admits also that she is not out to destroy it or deem it sarcastically to be a total fabrication. She wants her readership to actively engage in the concept of ‘The West’ in every possible situation in the 21st century where the idea of being Western comes into contact with any other ideological notion. I believe that is why she ended her ‘Lives’ with the example of China, Hong Kong and Carrie Lam, who was the Chief Executive of Hong Kong that crushed pro-democracy protests. It was China which, through Lam, ended the autonomous rule of the city through two systems. Here Lam ended what she herself described as ‘the best of both east and west’.

The story of ‘The West’ in the end is a very simple one: it is a rejection both of traditional western beliefs and those which are coming up in ‘the East’, with China and Russia falling most definitely in the second of those mentioned. The transforming ability of the west throughout time should be looked upon as one of its greatest features and not be part of those elements that are stultifying and corrosive. ‘The West’ can still endure and must still endure because, like democracy, it might be flawed, but currently it is the best system we have – a system that will embrace change even if it takes a bit of time and prodding to get there.

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