Keeping it in the family

The ties that bind world history

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THE WORLD

A family history

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE

1344pp. Weidenfeld and Nicolson: £35.

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE is Britain’s most indefatigable biographer. He has written prizewinning Lives of Russian rulers (Catherine the Great, Stalin), a dynasty (the Romanovs) and a city (Jerusalem), as well as three novels. Yet even his earlier hefty page-turners were mere stretching exercises beside his latest feat of strength, *The World: A family history*. Weighing in at 1,300 pages, this rollicking, globetrotting “biography of many people rather than one person” spans the Akkadian empire and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is almost unpickable: whether you find it unpainfully dependent on your appetite for narrative and yearning for a thesis, as well as an iron stomach and sheer Sitzfisch to match the author’s own.

*The World* is, by Sebag Montefiore’s own admission, a pandemic book. It might be the most ambitious product so far of that unsettling moment. Encountered before a second reflection on a life-time’s reading, as well as the digestion of a vast array of modern scholarship. The result is a truly global history spanning almost every continent – apologies, Antarctica – and hundreds of its human inhabitants. (The non-human world features occasionally as scenery, little more.) “No book is easy to write,” Sebag Montefiore remarks in his preface, “and world history is harder than most.” The controlling device for this “intimate, human history” is the family, a baggy concept that he deploys flexibly but ignores strategically when it gets in the way of a good story. More positively, the focus on family allows Sebag Montefiore to give more space than is usual in such popular histories to women and children, though youngsters appear mostly as those heirs to thrones and riches who procured passage from the misogynistic Byzantine Gita and the Bible to Dynasty and Succession. Family here is the arena of wealth and power. How those gifts have been distributed historically is a question The World largely untouched, though not from lack of examples.

Just what family history is, Sebag Montefiore never really explains. On the book’s final page he sums up its panorama in tones echoing Edward Gibbon or *The World’s* “presiding spirit”, the fourteenth-century Arab historian-sociologist Ibn Khaldun: “I have written of the fall of noble cities, the vanishing of kingdoms, the rise and fall of dynasties, cruelty upon cruelty, folly upon folly, eruptions, massacres, famines, pandemics and pollutions”. All this, and more, figures prominently in the book’s thrilling tapestry. Yet how much of it falls under the heading of family history is less clear. Colloquially, family history is the story we each tell about the snakes and ladders of family fortunes, the triumphs and tragedies that have made us who we are. Medically, a family history is more disturbingly diagnostic: an account of illness and morbidity in our nearest and dearest that sheds light on genetic causes for concern. In scholarly circles family history is the study of gender, demography and the household, of kinship and co-residence as they evolved over time. In that last sense family history is the study of “the way we never were”, the world we might have been. But Sebag Montefiore has put it: a demolition of the idea that any form, even the “nuclear family”, has ever been normative or universal.

*The World* mostly consists of the first strain of family history – stories of who and how we came to be – laced with something like the second: humanity’s cumulative maladies, even emptiness. It has little of the third, of reflection on the history of the family or families across time and space. The book is light on theory and unselfconsciously about method: Sebag Montefiore wants stories to speak for themselves and is not much inclined to point the moral or finger analytically. To be sure, he thumbs thumbnail sketches of family forms throughout *The World*. We learn briefly about Spartan communalism – an inspiration for Plato’s Republic and More’s Utopia – and about the Roman family, that extended household of free and enslaved persons headed by a mighty paterfamilias. Sebag Montefiore introduces both Vikings and Incas as polygynous, and rightly notes that “family and slavery were interwoven” variously over time, not least in the destructive effects of the social death modern slavery inflicted in the Atlantic world. Yet *The World* does not address when, where and why it should be a good idea to have more Bushes, bin Ladens and Kim. Along the way we meet Patos and “Fat Fucker” (Ptolomy VIII and King Farouk), Fabius Warty Delayer (Fabius Concatora) and Little Rascal (Li Bing and Emperor Gaozu) amid a rogues’ gallery of snappily nicknamed villains and victims. We also encounter plenty of characters who did not secure their succession, among them childless figures like Alexander the Great, Shaka Zulu and Simon Bolivar: as Nelson Mandela ruefully remarked, “When your life is a struggle, there is little time for family”. They all came from families, of course, but not prosperous.

Writing of those who did, Sebag Montefiore occasionally succumbs to the chronicler’s disease of overcompression, as when the Egyptian king Philocharis and the Libyan king and queen, Magas and Delphos, are cast as “a bazzoon of orchiectomies?” amid a few lines on the Kingdom of Apama, “arranged the marriage of their daughter Berenice to his son Euergetes. But Apama, a Seleucid princess, wanted to keep Cyrene as a Seleucid base and, after Magas had died of gluttony “...”. And there is quite a bit of “meanwhile, in Mexico” here (“At the same time, across the world, another megalomanical visionary ...”) as the author ties disparate developments across the continents. Yet even a highly skilled storyteller and per-photographic could so deftly grip attention across twenty-three “acts”, spanning more than six millennia and packed with lavish and pulldown detail.

While the potency of empires and kings, conquerors and tyrants, animates most of *The World*, softer forms of power are more marginal. Ideas are not the book’s strong suit. The Enlightenment appears as “the intellectual movement of a feverishly interconnected European elite close to a nervous breakdown and identity crisis”. Nor is the economic power of families treated fully. The Krupps and the Leopoldes of *Utopia* do not appear. *The World* is also light on the result of luck, discovery or legalized theft”. For Voltaire history was “a tableau of crimes and misfortunes”. Gibbon agreed, calling it “the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind”. Wherever dynasties arise, they preserve and increase inequality, and they restrict public goods. How a handful of families worldwide achieved and sustained such depressive dominance is beyond even this uniquely ambitious book’s remit.

For Voltaire history was “a tableau of crimes and misfortunes”. Gibbon agreed, calling it “the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind”. This book provides ample evidence of families spanning follicles, as well as many of humanity’s crimes and misfortunes. “Family was all”, Michelle Obama said, but that is far from the case. It is “the only family”. The promoters of the 2015 Global Family Reunion thought so: “Who’s invited? You! All seven billion members of the human family.” Simon Sebag Montefiore might have concurred with that magnum opus shows that family may be too capacious, too pseudo-urban and putatively too individualized a concept to be analytically useful without other, more rigorous lenses in play. As family history, at least, *The World* is not enough.