

FOREWORD

“All history is modern history.” —WALLACE STEVENS

When someone is said to have a sense of history, what does that mean? And why is such an attribute considered a compliment and a virtue?

For a long time it was said that this country had a short history. It was as if our time began with Columbus. Our roots were in Western civilization. Our politics began with the American Revolution. The Civil War saved our nation, and World War II our civilization. Our youth as a nation gave us energy, made us separate and special, and perhaps even a bit better than the rest of the world.

But the past half-century, partly through setbacks, sometimes through social advances, has imparted a more mature view of our connection to events far beyond our shores and before the arrival of Europeans in North America. This greater appreciation has often been forced upon us by current events. The civil rights movement of the sixties led to a renewed interest in African history. The Vietnam War forced us to concentrate on the shadow of China, with its great dynasties and magnificent culture, over the rest of Asia. For all its horror, 9/11 forced us to grapple with Islamic history and the Arab world. When President George W. Bush proclaimed a crusade, after 9/11, the intense reaction in the Middle East drew our attention to prior instances in history where Christianity and Islam have come into conflict. It could be said that we finally joined world history.

With the arrival of the new Christian millennium in the year 2000, we had an opportunity to view history in multiples of a thousand years. We are still at the dawn of the third millennium, and how good it is to have this book as a memento for the transition we are experiencing. It is still time to take the long view.

Eyewitness to History is more ambitious; it covers more than merely a thousand years. It presents the whole feast of human history, delivered in short takes on the notable figures and the great empires and dynasties, on the driving themes of history in the arts, in religion, in economics and trade, in human migrations and dramatic voyages, in law and fashion and the lot of women. When heard from beginning to end, the whole of history is an exciting story. Simply written and therefore accessible to all ages, beautifully illustrated, its material carefully chosen and cleverly spiced with pithy statements from the wise and witty and appointed with Twitter-like “takeaways” to serve as guideposts to the memory and appetizers for further study, this is a gift to endow the library or coffee table of every educated person and citizen of the world.

—James Reston, Jr.
HISTORIAN AND AUTHOR