



# Why Europe?

Two new books try to answer the central question of Western Civilisation. **Richard Allsop** looks at what they find.

**T**wo recent histories of Europe, one by an English archaeologist, the other by an Australian historian, both start from a premise of the unique importance of Europe:

- ‘Europe came to dominate the world during the course of the second millennium AD.’
- ‘European civilisation is unique because it is the only civilisation which has imposed itself on the rest of the world.’

Both Barry Cunliffe and John Hirst ask their readers to consider what it was about Europe that made its citizens have the desire, and the capacity, to dominate the other continents. Both look for big answers to this big question.

Any similarities end there. It would be hard to find two books of such radically different size and presentation, and with such differing interpretations of what is important in history.

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Sculpture depicting Charlemagne, Paris, France

Cunliffe, a veteran Oxford archaeologist regarded as a pre-eminent expert on the Iron Age, has produced a lavishly colour-illustrated hardcover book which runs to 480 pages, including a twenty page section of suggested further reading for those who take their history seriously.

Hirst, a veteran La Trobe University historian most of whose work has been on aspects of Australian history, has produced a paperback of 152 pages, with a handful of black and white images, and without the support of even an index. His book is based on lectures that he gave to introduce undergraduates to a few basics of European history. It begins with two very general lectures and then has six slightly more specific ones. Where Cunliffe enunciates historical reasons for his timeframe, Hirst stops at 1800, for the prosaic reason that, when he was teaching his course, there was another subject which covered the subsequent period.

Given that just about the only things these books have in common is that they think Europe is important (hardly a groundbreaking idea), one

might ask why look at them together. The answer is that by pursuing such different themes they force the reader to consider what really is important in history.

Cunliffe believes that what distinguishes the people of Europe was that over millennia they had become ‘hard-wired to be mobile’. This desire to be on the move was largely a factor of geography, in particular, the fact that so much of Europe is close to water—hence the title: *Europe Between the Oceans*. However, other geographic features also have an impact:

The successive waves of eastern peoples sweeping westwards and ending up in the restricted territory between the Carpathian arc and the eastern Alps are a recurring theme throughout the first millennium BC and first millennium AD. It is a product of the constant build-up of population on the distant steppe. Presented with such a remarkable phenomenon, it is difficult not to accept that geography is sometimes a major determinant in history.

Hirst, on the other hand, identifies three early factors that meant Europe was the favourite to conquer the world—classical learning, Christianity and German warrior culture. The key moments of the first millennium AD in Europe in his thesis are when the Roman Empire becomes Christian and when the Christian Church becomes Roman. Then, when the Germans invade the empire, they continue to support the Roman Church, which in turn preserves classical learning, thus completing the circle.

While for Hirst, Christianity holds the whole show together until the modern world begins about 1400, for Cunliffe it does not appear to be that important. One of the key moments in Hirst is the 313 conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christianity, the first link between the three elements in his chain. Constantine merits three mentions in Cunliffe, twice in regard to how he and

his predecessor, Diocletian, attempted to deal with the problem of inflation across the Roman Empire. The third describes his military campaigns and mentions in passing how at the battle of Milvian Bridge ‘he embraced Christianity’. This event happens early in a chapter in which Cunliffe takes his readers from 300 to 800, a period in which he says ‘Europe underwent a total reformation’ and that ‘the seismic shifts taking place can all too easily be obscured by the superficialities of narrative history’.

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However, in going from Constantine to Charlemagne, the spread of Christianity does not really seem to rate as a ‘seismic shift’; indeed, Europe being Christianised does not rate a mention in the introduction to this chapter, but the fact that ‘the world of Islam was to share the European stage’ does.

Cunliffe is a follower of the Annales school of history, in particular of Fernand Braudel. Braudel pioneered the concept of the *longue duree*, which Cunliffe defines as ‘the deep rhythm of underlying forces influencing all human society’. Historians should not be distracted by exciting, but often trivial events such as battles, coups or day-to-day politics, but look for the big changes in how people live, considering factors such as the effects of climate, development of technology and movement



Jean Lemaire (1601–1659) 'Roman Senators and Administrators'

of people. As Cunliffe puts it, 'despite what military leaders and politicians may have thought they were more acted upon than actors'.

Interestingly, the *Annales* school rated a significant mention in *The Australian's* review of Hirst's book, reviewer Remy Davison arguing that:

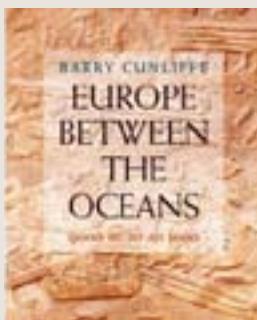
Hirst implicitly takes issue with Marxist structuralism, which dominated French historiography in the 20th century, and remains de rigeur in history departments throughout the Anglo-Saxon world. Marx—and his French disciples—Fernand Braudel, Marc Bloch and Jacques Le Goff—broadly ascribe the emergence of European civilisation, capitalism and liberal democracy to the *longue duree* (long-cycle) of economic development, epitomised by class struggle.

While there are some similarities in Marxist and *Annales* approaches to history, this depiction is quite misleading. Indeed, many on the Left have seen Braudel as a conservative historian, and seen him endeavouring to create 'a form of socio-economic history that did not rely on Marxist concepts and stressed continuity rather than change'. Others have argued that, in recent decades, the dominant force in history departments has been post-modernism, a philosophy that is neither Marxist, nor close to the *Annales* school. What makes Davison's comments even stranger is that the highest profile Australian historian to have expressed admiration for the work of Braudel is Geoffrey Blainey.

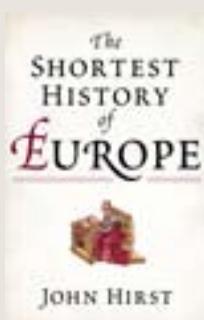
In part, the approaches of historians and archaeologists are driven by the sources. Historians like to wait until Herodotus and Thucydides appear. These two Greek historians do not

become available as sources until two-thirds of the way through Cunliffe, but when they do, he actually uses them quite a lot as he believes 'both writers were close to the events they described and, while no means free from bias, they strived for accuracy.' However, he reads history in a way which would have greatly surprised the early historians.

In a chapter titled 'States in Collision' which takes us from the Greek victory at Salamis in 480BC to the destruction of Carthage in 146BC, Cunliffe states that 'the historical sources would have us believe that everything was driven by the egos of men and the honour of the state, but this was only petulance on the surface of deeper movements.' These deeper movements included growing division of labour, the increasing expectations of urban societies, and resultant competition for scarce resources between states and peoples.



*Europe Between  
The Oceans:  
9000 BC—AD 1000*  
by Barry Cunliffe  
(Yale University Press,  
2008, 480 pages)



*The Shortest History  
of Europe*  
by John Hirst  
(Black Inc., 2009,  
152 pages)

**Cunliffe's book is a useful reminder that contemporary talk about unprecedented global warming overlooks the fact that in 20,000 BC 'land temperatures were about 20 degrees lower than they are today'**

Hirst describes what the mathematicians and scientists were doing in Ancient Greece; Cunliffe explores how society was meeting the demand 'to provide the food and services to support gaggles of philosophers and droves of vase painters'. Hirst is a huge fan of Classical Greece. He acknowledges that the Romans were better than the Greeks at fighting, law and engineering, but the Greeks were better at everything else. What he sees as 'the greatest legacy that European civilisation still owes to the Greeks' is that the answers to important questions would be 'simple, mathematical and logical'. Why were the Greeks so clever? Hirst argues that 'historians have no convincing explanation'. Cunliffe at least provides a partial explanation saying that 'the world in which they lived was energized by mobility facilitated by the sea'. Cunliffe does not spend much time on the sort of achievements Hirst

so admires, although he does acknowledge a 'stunning cast, encompassing the greatest minds who created the basis of western civilization'. For the historian, Hirst, the significant history of Europe begins with the Ancient Greeks, for the archaeologist, Cunliffe, it commences in 9000BC as Europe's climate approaches what we today regard as normal, as the three thousand year warming after the Last Ice Age reached something approaching stability.

Incidentally, both books provide some useful ideas for contemporary debates, Cunliffe implicitly and Hirst explicitly. Cunliffe's book is a useful reminder that contemporary talk about unprecedented global warming, somewhat overlooks the fact that in 20,000 BC 'land temperatures were about 20° lower than they are today'. Cunliffe shows how the rising of the seas radically altered life in Europe, although, of

course, it was in Australia that this phenomenon had the greatest impact on a human population. Hirst must have got his students thinking when he contrasted how, in contemporary discourse, there appears to be a manifest double-standard in the treatment of Christian creation myths compared with Aboriginal creation myths—'For our children you want them to have only science; yet you seem envious of those people without science whose traditional beliefs have not been disrupted'.

One theme which comes through powerfully in Cunliffe is the importance of free movement of people and goods.

All the big changes in history are in some way the product of some form of trading whether of goods, ideas or practices. He has a keen eye for economic development and pinpoints the 9th century BC Tyre as the place and time where 'we have now moved firmly into a commercial world—a world of supply and demand, price fluctuations and private speculation'. Economics explains a lot, such as the end of the Roman Republic:

The century of political turmoil and military conflict... is usually explained in terms of the ambitions of 'big men' who inspired the factions and led the armies—people like the Gracchi, Marius, Sulla, Pompey, Julius Caesar, Mark Antony and Augustus—but really they were only helpless human beings caught up on the deep swell of change set in motion by the rise of acquisitive elites vying for space in a peninsula too small to contain them.

Centuries later, he finds a range of interesting explanations for the decline of the Roman Empire, emphasising the spread of disease and speculating about the possibility of lead poisoning reducing fertility rates. Recognising that not everything is materialist, he comments that 'finally, one should not overlook the debilitating effects of living in a time of crisis'.



Pieter Aertsen (1508–1575) 'Market woman with Vegetable Stall'

Cunliffe stops in 1000AD because 'the counterbalancing of Europe in the tenth century AD is a convenient place to end' because for different reasons the Scandinavian and Mediterranean spheres were losing comparative strength and 'the Atlantic facade came into its own again'. Hirst provides a clever sketch of the big events from 1400 onwards—renaissance, reformation, scientific revolution, parliamentary government in England, Enlightenment, revolution in France and romanticism.

There is no doubt that for years Hirst must have performed a useful service to his students 'who had too much Australian history and knew too little of the civilisation of which they are a part'. In its new book form, it will hopefully provide the same service to a wider readership. However, with its

brevery, as well as being digestible for the less knowledgeable, Hirst's book forces both writer and reader to focus on that which is really significant.

Writing specifically about Europe is in one important way easier than writing world history. Writers of world history must studiously restrict the amount of coverage they devote to Europe, unless they wish to suffer the wrath of vigilante reviewers ready to lambast them for any hint of Eurocentricism. So one can see why any historian who believes that Europe was the key agent of change in the world may perhaps choose to write a book specifically about Europe, rather than the world. In some ways that is a shame, because in order to know why it was Europe that colonised the world rather than vice versa, one must consider the broader world. It was not inevitable that Europe would be the coloniser;

Blainey emphasises this point in his history of the world:

In 1400 an observer with the gift of acute foresight might have thought that China was rushing, ahead of England, towards the world's first industrial revolution.

In 1600 and 1700 the rise of Europe to dominate much of the world was not preordained.

Given that it was still in doubt in 1700, one might think that a book which stops in AD 1000 was of limited use in providing an explanation. However, the fact that it was the Atlantic facing countries of Europe that ended up being the great exporters of European civilisation would tend to indicate that it was the geography that, in the end, changed the world.

