



Kingfisher History Encyclopedia, The

Books Reviewed:

[Kingfisher History Encyclopedia, The](#) [1]

Issue:

[120](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Clive Barnes](#) [3]

~~Not a Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

3

The history of the world in 500 pages is a tall order, particularly if you want to acknowledge the way in which the subject has broadened in the last twenty years. The Kingfisher Encyclopedia is the work of a team of writers, some of whom, like Neil Grant and Fiona Macdonald, have a number of children's histories to their credit. They bring to the work knowledge of societies and cultures in Asia, South America and Australasia, as well as Europe and North America. This allows the reader (probably a keen 10-14 year old) both to follow the history of separate continents and to appreciate the developments that have brought all our destinies together on the eve of the millennium.

The book is cleverly organised in ten chronological chunks, each preceded by a world map which summarises developments in the periods covered. There is enough clarity of purpose in the writing and editing to make the enterprise coherent, despite the usual reliance on the double page spread. The prints, paintings and photographs are generally well selected and reproduced: but some of the fill-in illustrations look hasty and fanciful. The picture of the battle of Agincourt, for instance, offers a melee of knights and men-at-arms but throws no light on the particular way it was fought.

It is mainly a political history, emphasising conflict and conquest and leading personalities (who are pictured with a potted biography in the margins). Arts, science and technology are given short treatments at the end of each large section; and there is less weight than there might be given to social and economic developments.

The major problem, however, arises from the size of the project. The quality of the text suffers. Concepts are introduced without being explained, generalisations abound, and explanations are sometimes vague or misleading (?Rivalry between Catholics and Protestants caused much bloodletting, and in England, a civil war?). Sometimes it is just wrong. For instance, Rousseau's celebrated 'man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains' was not a reference to slavery. Occasionally, small mistakes have been made, like captions pointing to the wrong illustrations.

It is this lack of precision and accuracy which, despite a full index, makes the book more suitable to browse through and whet the historical appetite rather than to use as a reference work.

Running Order:

37

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