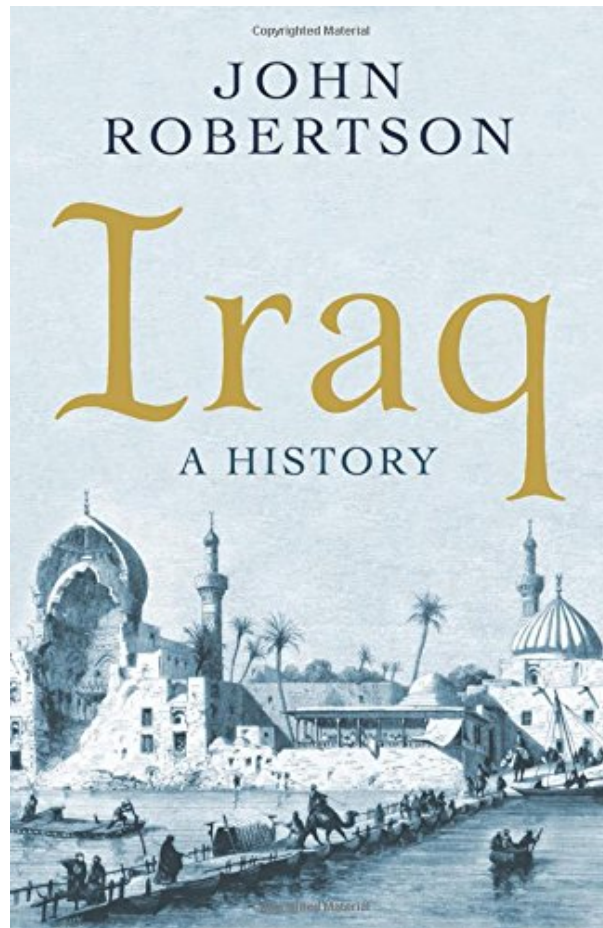


IRAQ: A HISTORY (SHORT HISTORIES) BY JOHN ROBERTSON



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Review

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CHOSEN AS ONE OF HISTORY TODAY'S 10 BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR

In this insightful analysis, highly-respected expert John Robertson canvases the entirety of Iraq's rich history, from the seminal advances of its Neolithic inhabitants to the aftermath of the American-led invasion and Iraq today. Grounded in extensive research, this balanced account of a country and its people explores the greatness and grandeur of Iraq's achievements, the brutality and magnificence of its ancient empires, its contributions to the emergence of the world's enduring monotheistic faiths, and the role the great Arab caliphs of Baghdad played in the medieval cultural flowering that contributed so much to the European Renaissance and the eventual rise of the West.

Fascinating and thought-provoking, Robertson's work sheds light on a remarkable story of world history, one that has been too often overlooked. Wide-ranging and extensive in approach, it is sure to be greatly appreciated by historians, students and all those with an interest in this diverse and enigmatic country.

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I have read this book with great interest. It fully explains the forces that have lead to the current state of affairs. It is well written and researched, and should be required reading for anyone who wants to understand what is going on in this region of the world.

2 of 21 people found the following review helpful.

He manages to give the Brits and Americans at least SOME credit

By Edward Brynes

Because this book deals with six thousand years of history in three hundred pages, the author must leave out a great deal of information. He is a deft narrator, but he shows a sneering anti-American attitude and a marked leftist bias .

American and British soldiers came to Iraq "as standard-bearers of self-proclaimed great countries, cradles of liberty, freedom, and democracy, countries that were the embodiment of "good" and "civilization." The author wants to call the invasion a fraud, but what would he do about Saddam's well-documented record of aggression, evasion on nuclear efforts and cruelty in governance?

"Since as far back as the third millennium BCE, Iraq has suffered disruption and at times catastrophe at the hands of alien migrants, foreign invaders, and conquerors, from mountain tribesmen sweeping into the Mesopotamian floodplain around 2250 BCE, to Alexander the Great's phalanxes in the fourth century BCE, to the Mongol Khan Hulegu's horde in 1258, to the European and American occupations from World War I to Operation Iraqi Freedom. " Many other invaders could be mentioned, as he recognizes elsewhere. Why specifically are Mongols bracketed with the recent Americans and Brits? Does he want to suggest that Americans, like Mongols, ransacked Baghdad?

The author gives Islamic doctrine more space than seems appropriate. Muhammad appears as a sort of proto-socialist and a great believer in justice. "Muhammad's insistence that there was only one true God obviously threatened the status of the Ka'ba, and therefore the profits of the local elite, who began then to persecute Muhammad's followers." The author momentarily ignores that there were plenty of Jews (monotheists of course) living among the Arabs. (And how does monotheism cut into anybody's profits?)

There is a crisp and fast-paced narrative of the confusion of peoples who swept over the Middle East from the seventh to the fifteenth centuries. All were Muslim, or became Muslim, except for the Crusaders. (They are not among the disrupters previously listed.) After World War the Ottoman empire was divided into Mandate territories, i.e., examples of what is now called "state-building", meant to gain independence once the League of Nations recognized that they could stand alone. Under its Mandate, Iraq was turbulent and became more so in the 1930's.. There were numerous rebellions and massacres of various minorities, such as Jews and Christians, without public indignation. Iraq sided with Nazi Germany during World War II. After the Mandates ended, there were numerous coups and coup attempts.

After World War II, the Ba'athist ideology (Arab nationalism plus socialism) became the predominant political movement in Iraq. The problem with Ba'athism was that it enabled the growth of a "shadow government" of insiders, a kind of Mafia, which became the vehicle for the ascent of Saddam Hussein. The author spends no time on the harmful aspect of the Ba'ath, apparently considering it as a legitimate vehicle of Arab national pride. (My information on the shadow government is from 'Iraq' by Charles Tripp.)

In fact, the only really major villains in the author's account are the Brits and Americans. Above all they are

greedy for oil, even if this has been the greatest source of wealth for the Iraq. Even the American-led invasion of 2003 was supposedly motivated by oil. But this does not explain why the Coalition stayed in Iraq even after the country had been secured. It just wasn't possible to set up another Ba'athist and continue business as usual. It was the entire party, not just Saddam, that had to be subdued; hence L. Paul Bremer's "de-Baathification" effort and the expulsion from government of all Baathists. Saddam and his friends had accumulated too long a record of villainy. The author hints at this. "If Iraq's history since 1932 is any guide, it remains uncertain whether a cohesive, sustainable, truly inclusive "Iraqi" identity that all of the people of Iraq can buy into can be built to last over the long haul."

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