

Raymond J de Souza: Conrad Black's history of the world is magnificent

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Reading the latest volume is pure joy



Conrad Black in 2019. Photo by Peter J. Thompson /National Post

The May long weekend — the sovereign's official birthday — brings forth recommended lists for summer reading. An excellent time, I would suggest, for Post readers to discover Conrad Black the Historian — he has longed earned the capital "H."

My Saturday page-mate has done many things on both sides of the newspaper business, as proprietor and commentator. And he has been an esteemed historian for a half-century; we are soon to mark the 50th anniversary of his authoritative biography of Maurice Duplessis, the titanic premier of Quebec.

(itals) *Duplessis* (itals) was a substantial work at more than 600 pages, but Black was only getting warmed up. His celebrated biographies of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Richard Nixon, as well as his much-needed history of Canada, (itals) *Rise to Greatness* (itals), all weighed in at more than a thousand pages. That can be intimidating for the reader, but Black has the happy talent of making a thousand pages read with the liveliness of his thousand-word columns.

Even Conrad's friends and admirers, of which I am one, were taken aback when he decided to write (itals) *The Political and Strategic History of the World* (itals). At the outset of the project his 80th birthday was already beckoning. Yet this spring the third volume has arrived: (itals) *From Louis XIV to the Brink of World War I, A.D. 1661-1914* (itals). Like the first two volumes, it is over a thousand pages. Conrad had planned three volumes, but there will now be a fourth volume forthcoming, covering the Great War to the present day.

It is a colossal achievement, and a work of generational significance in the writing of history in the English language. It is hard to compare Conrad's history of the world to others; his intellectual ambition and astonishing stamina are singular. No one else even tries. Mammoth multi-volume histories were thought to have been left behind with Churchill.

It is not necessary to begin at volume I, (itals) *From Antiquity to the Caesars* (itals), and march through the subsequent three-thousand-plus pages. I prefer to drop into one period or another, either to learn more about something already of interest to me, or to open the books at random — like an encyclopaedia — and learn something about which I previously knew nothing.

For example, in volume III I happened on this passage about Iran (Persia) in 17th-century India, a timely reminder that Iran's current regime is not worthy of its own people and their civilization.

Did you know "Persian became the language of the court of Agra," and that "Persian poets, artists, musicians, and architects flocked to the capital, which the royal family preferred to Delhi"?

This model of "Persian-Indian elegance and grandeur" produced in due course the Taj Mahal, an example of "the Safavid Persian style, (which,)

including jewelry, silk, perfumes and peacock feathers, and the pleasures of the luxurious harem, found many converts among the Muslims as well as the Hindus, and contributed importantly to the Indianization of Muslim culture and the stability of Mughal rule over two centuries.”

I did not know that, and now I do. There are dozens upon dozens of such examples in Black’s pages.

It is not intuitive that this brickload of history is a time-saver, but time spent immersed in it yields more information, analysis and even wisdom than the ready alternatives in our digital environment.

Consider this assessment of the Second Inaugural from the section on Abraham Lincoln, entitled “The Ordeal and Redemption of America”: “He effectively reconciled more directly and eloquently than any other American statesmen Christian America’s embrace of the Enlightenment.”

That single sentence could be the assigned topic for a graduate seminar in political philosophy.

Nearly 20 years ago Conrad and I discussed who was the greatest prose stylist in the English language, ceding to Shakespeare the poet’s laurel. We both settled on 19th-century figures; St. John Henry Newman for me, President Lincoln for Conrad.

I was delighted then to discover at the beginning of volume II, (itals) *From the Caesars to the Peace of Westphalia and Louis XIV, A.D. 14-1661* (itals) Newman quoting Napoleon on the historic impact of Jesus Christ.

“I have been accustomed to put before me the example of Alexander the Great and Caesar with the hope of rivaling their exploits and living in the minds of men forever,” the Oxford divine quotes the Emperor. “Yet after all, in what sense does Caesar live? Who know or cares anything about them?”

Newman, employing the rhetorical device of quoting an unlikely authority — more authoritative

for the unlikeliness — used the historian’s record himself.

“In the solitude of his imprisonment and on the eve of death, Napoleon is reported to have said,” Newman reports: “There is just one name in the whole world; that is the name of one who passed his years in obscurity, and who died a malefactor’s death; 1800 years have gone by since that time, but still it has its hold upon the human mind.”

“(That name) has possessed the world,” Napoleon continues. “And it maintains its possession. Amid the most varied nations under the most diversified circumstances, in the most cultivated and in the rudest races and intellects, in all classes of society, the owner of that great name reigns. High and low, rich and poor, acknowledge him. Millions of souls are conversing with him, are venturing on his word, are looking for his presence. Palaces sumptuous and innumerable are raised to his honor; his image, as in the hour of his deepest humiliation, is triumphantly displayed in the proud city, in the open country, in the corners of streets, on the tops of mountains. It sanctions the ancestral hall, the closet, and the bedchamber, it is the subject for the exercise of the highest genius in the imitative arts.”

Pure joy to read those lines. Thus Conrad introduced me to Newman on Napoleon on Jesus Christ. That is the thrill of reading good history — that a dying Napoleon, who sought after the glories of Alexander and Caesar, confessed that he was unable to accomplish by force what Christ achieved by love.

The project’s fundamental premise is a Christian one, that history is a story that can be told, the disparate elements can be united, and that far from one damn thing after another, history is the unfolding of an inscrutable Providence, made partially scrutable by companions like Conrad.

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