

# The Best History Books

November 21, 2011 Category: Miscellaneous

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## THE 125 BEST HISTORY BOOKS:

### 25 Ancient History (Pre-Enlightenment):

**Guns, Germs & Steel** –Jared Diamond

**The History of the Ancient World** –Susan Wise Bauer

**The History of the Ancient Near East 3,000-323 B.C.** –Marc Van De Mieroop

**Egypt, Greece, and Rome** –Charles Freeman

**The Peloponnesian War** –Donald Kagan

**Persian Fire** –Tom Holland

**A War Like No Other** –Victor Hanson

**The Greeks** –H.D.F. Kitto

**Augustus: The Life of Rome's First Emperor** –Anthony Everett

**How Rome Fell** –Adrian Keith Goldsworthy

**Rubicon: The Last Years of the Roman Republic** –Tom Holland

**The History of the Decline & Fall of the Roman Empire** –Edward Gibbon

**The Closing of the Western Mind** –Charles Freeman

**Abraham** –Bruce Feiler

**Lost Christianities** – Bart Ehrman

**Framing The Early Middle Ages** –Chris Wickham

**The History of the Medieval World** –Susan Wise Bauer

**The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe** –Patrick J. Geary

**Byzantium I, II, III** –John Julius Norwich

**Lost To The West: The Forgotten Byzantine Empire** –Lars Brownworth

**Sailing From Byzantium** –Colin Wells

**A Distant Mirror** –Barbara Tuchman

**An Economic & Social History of the Ottoman Empire** vol. I & II –Inalcik / Faroqhi

**The Formation of Islam** –Jonathan P. Berkey

**From Dawn To Decadence: 1500 to the Present** –Jacques Barzun

50 The Enlightenment / Early U.S. History (pre-WWI):

**The Philosophy of The Enlightenment** –Ernst Cassirer

**The Enlightenment** –Margaret C. Jacob

**The Enlightenment** vol. I & II –Peter Gay

**A Revolution of the Mind** –Jonathan Israel

**Radical Enlightenment** –Jonathan Israel

**American Colonies** –Alan Taylor

**A People's History of The United States** –Howard Zinn

**The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789** –Robert Middlekauf

**Revolutionaries** –Jack Rakove

**1776** –David McCullough

**The Radicalism of the American Revolution** –Gordon S. Wood

**The Creation of the American Republic** –Gordon S. Wood

**Original Meanings** –Jack Rakove

**Novus Ordo Seclorum** –Forrest McDonald

**The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution** –Bernard Bailyn

**Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815** –Gordon Wood

**American Creation** –Joseph Ellis

**American Sphinx** –Joseph Ellis

**John Adams** –David McCullough

**Thomas Paine** –Craig Nelson

**Alexander Hamilton** –Ron Chernow

**Washington: The Indispensable Man** –James Thomas Flexner

**Washington: A Life** –Ron Chernow

**The First American: Ben Franklin** –H.W. Brands

**Benjamin Franklin** –Walter Isaacson

**The Days of The French Revolution** –Christopher Hibbert

**Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution** –Simon Schama

**The Rise of American Democracy** –Sean Wilentz

**What Hath God Wrought: The Trans. of America, 1815-1845** –Daniel Walker Howe

**The Age of Jackson** –Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

**American Lion: Andrew Jackson** –Jon Meacham

**Team of Rivals** –Doris Kearns Goodwin

**Lincoln** –David Herbert Donald

**With Malice Toward None** –Stephen B. Oates

**Abraham Lincoln** –James M. McPherson

**Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era** –James McPherson

**Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution** –Eric Foner

**From Colony To Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776** –George C. Herring

**The Metaphysical Club** –Louis Menand

**The Mind & The Market** – Jerry Z. Muller

**The Worldly Philosophers** –Robert Heilbroner

**Freethinkers** –Susan Jacoby

**The History of Western Philosophy** –Bertrand Russell

**American Colossus** –H.W. Brands

**The Age of Revolution** –Eric Hobsbawm

**The Age of Capital** –Eric Hobsbawm

**The Age of Empire** –Eric Hobsbawm

**The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt** –Edmund Morris

**Theodore Rex** –Edmund Morris

50 The Modern Era (WWI to present):

**The Age of Extremes** –Eric Hobsbawm

**The Proud Tower** –Barbara Tuchman

**The Guns of August** –Barbara Tuchman

**A World Undone** –G.J. Meyer

**The First World War** vol. I, II, III –Hew Strachan

**The First World War** –John Keegan

**A Peace To End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire** –David Fromkin

**The Russian Revolution** –Sheila Fitzpatrick

**A People's Tragedy** –Orlando Figes

**The Road To Terror** –Getty / Naumov

**The Great Terror: A Reassessment** –Robert Conquest

**The Lords of Finance** –Liaquat Ahamed

**Fascists** –Michael Mann

**The Rise & Fall of the Third Reich** –William Shirer

**The Third Reich** vol. I, II, III –Richard Evans

**Freedom From Fear: The American People In Depression & War, 1929-1945**

–David M. Kennedy

**The Second World War** –Martin Gilbert

**A World At Arms** –Gerhard Weinberg

**FDR** –Jean Edward Smith

**FDR: Traitor To His Class** –H.W. Brands

**Eleanor Roosevelt: Vol. 2** –Blanche Wiesen Cook

**Postwar** –Tony Judt

**Grand Expectations: The U.S., 1945-1974** –James T. Patterson

**Wealth & Democracy** –Kevin Phillips

**The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth** –Benjamin Friedman

**John Kenneth Galbraith** –Richard Parker

**India After Gandhi** –Ramachandra Guha

**Truman** –David McCullough

**The Great War for Civilization** –Robert Fisk

**The Dead Hand** –David E. Hoffman

**The Devil We Knew** –H.W. Brands

**House of War** –James Carroll

**Killing Hope** –William Blum

**Legacy of Ashes** –Tim Weiner

**Anti-Intellectualism In American Life** –Richard Hofstadter

**The Age of Reform** –Richard Hofstadter

**Eisenhower** vol. I & II [abridged as **Soldier & President**] –Stephen E. Ambrose

**Einstein** –Walter Isaacson

**Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life** –Jon Lee Anderson

**The Years of Lyndon Johnson** vol. I, II, III –Robert A. Caro

**Dereliction of Duty** –H.R. McMaster

**The Trial of Henry Kissinger** –Christopher Hitchens

**Nixonland** –Rick Perlstein

**The Untold History Of The United States** –Oliver Stone

**The Looming Tower** –Lawrence Right

**The Shock Doctrine** –Naomi Klein

**A Brief History of Neoliberalism** –David Harvey

**Restless Giant: The U.S. From Watergate To Bush v. Gore** –James T. Paterson

**The Age of Reagan** –Sean Wilentz

70 OTHER GOOD HISTORY BOOKS:

**Before The Dawn** —Nicholas Wade

**The History of the Peloponnesian War** –Thucydides

**The Age of Augustus** –Werner Eck

**Caesar: Life of a Colossus** –Adrian Goldsworthy

**The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire** –Edward Luttwak

**The Fall of the Roman Empire** –Peter Heather

**The Fall of Rome And The End of Civilization** –Bryan Ward-Perkins

**Empires & Barbarians: The Fall of Rome & the Birth of Europe** –Peter Heather

**Early Christianity** –Charles Freeman

**The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia** –Rene Grousset

**Empires of the Silk Road** –Christopher Beckwith

**The Horse, The Wheel, and Language** –David Anthony

**The History of The Mongol Conquests** –J.J. Saunders

**The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages** –Chris Wickham

**Barbarians To Angels: The Dark Ages Reconsidered** –Peter Wells

**The Making of the Middle Ages** –R.W. Southern

**Chronicles of the Crusades** –Jean de Joinville

**God's War: A New History of the Crusades** –Christopher Tyerman

**Genghis Khan & The Making of the Modern World** –Jack Weatherford

**Byzantium** –Judith Herrin

**The Byzantine Wars** –John Haldon

**The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire** –Edward Luttwak

**The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age** –Halil Inalcik

**Mohammed, Charlemagne, and the Origins of Europe** –Richard Hodges

**The Pursuit of Glory: Five Revolutions that Made Modern Europe** –Tim Blanning

**Isaac Newton** –James Gleick

**Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life** –Nicholas Phillipson

**Economic Sentiments** –Emma Rothschild

**His Excellency: George Washington** –Joseph Ellis

**James Madison & The Creation of the American Republic** –Jack Rakove

**Thomas Paine & The Promise of America** –Harvey J Kaye

**A Peoples' History of the American Revolution** –Ray Raphael

**The Age of Federalism** –Stanley Elkins

**Rescue My Heart At Wounded Knee** –Dee Brown

**The Long, Bitter Trail: Andrew Jackson & The Indians** –Anthony Wallace

**This Republic of Suffering** –Drew Gilpin Faust

**For Cause & Comrades** –James McPherson

**Standing at Armageddon** –Nell Irvin Painter

**Origins of the New South** –C. Van Woodward

**Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.** –Ron Chernow

**The March of Folly: From Troy To Vietnam** –Barbara Tuchman

**The Arabs: A History** –Eugene Rogan

**A History of The Modern Middle East (4<sup>th</sup> Edition)** –William Cleveland

**Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed The World** –Margaret Macmillan

**A Shattered Peace: Versailles 1919 & the Price We Pay Today** –David Andelman

**The Great Influenza** –John M. Barry

**The Balfour Declaration** –Jonathan Schneer

**Reawakened Nation: Birth Of Modern America: 1896-1929** –Bruce Schulman

**Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers In Chicago** –Lizabeth Cohen

**The Great Bull Market: Wall Street In The 1920's** –Robert Sobel

**1929** –John Kenneth Galbraith

**John Maynard Keynes** –Robert Skidelsky

**The Second World War** –John Keegan

**Franklin D. Roosevelt & American Foreign Policy** –Robert Dallek

**The Ethnic Cleansing Of Palestine** –Ilan Pappé

**The Great Cold War: A Journey Through the Hall of Mirrors** –Gordon Barass

**The Making of the Atomic Bomb** –Richard Rhodes

**Mao: The Unknown Story** –Jung Chang, Jon Halliday

**Mao's Great Famine** –Frank Dikotte

**Parting the Waters: America In the King Years** –Taylor Branch

**1967: Israel, The War, & The Year that Trans. the Middle East** –Tom Segev

**A Fiery Peace In A Cold War** –Neil Sheehan

**A Bright, Shining Lie** –Neil Sheehan

**Dispatches** –Michael Herr

**Vietnam: A History** –Stanley Karnow

**The Pentagon Papers** –George Herring

**Where The Domino Fell: America & Vietnam** –Olsen/Roberts

**The Wars of Watergate** –Stanley Kutler

**The Prize** –Daniel Yergin

**The Global Cold War: 3<sup>rd</sup> World Interventions & The Making of Our Times** – Odd Arne Westad

**The Cold War: A History Through Documents** –Judge / Langdon

Also noteworthy are Arthur Schlesinger's many books, including *The Imperial Presidency*, *Cycles of American History*, *War & The American Presidency*, *The Age of Roosevelt* vols. I, II, II, and *A Life in the Twentieth Century*. There are also worthwhile books by Norman Stone, Tony Judt, and other great scholars.



One must sift through endless trash-pulp, brazen revisionism and outright propaganda to find the few gems of bona fide history. I did my best to find those gems. The 185 books listed above meet high standards of historical scholarship.

It is good to keep in mind that there is much to learn from informed, insightful works of fiction as well. Books like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*, George Orwell's *1984*, Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mocking Bird*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, several Upton Sinclair books, and the Gore Vidal novels can all teach us important things about history—things that no work of non-fiction can capture so poignantly.

It should also be noted that documentaries are a valuable resource for learning history. For example, regarding the American Civil War, Ken Burns' documentary is indispensable, capturing things that no mere writing can capture.

Omitted were *far*-ancient histories of Egypt / Africa, Mesopotamia, Hindu culture, China / Southeast Asia, and the Americas (Aztecs, Incas, Mayans, Native American tribes, etc.), since these topics—though important in their own right—are of tertiary relevance to understanding modern society. For such purposes, ***The Cambridge Ancient History*** vols. I, II, III is wonderful (though this requires reading thousands of pages and spending over a thousand dollars).

Other highly involved resources fall outside the scope of the current compilation. As with the MIBYs, I limit the listing to works that are accessible to the typical reader—especially in terms of length and cost. Regarding the American Civil War, for example: Allan Nevins' 8-volume *The Ordeal of the Union*, Bruce Catton's 3-volume *Centennial History of the Civil War* and Shelby Foote's 3-volume *The Civil War* aren't appropriate for the present purposes.

Meanwhile, this list attempts to limit the selections to those that offer general, "big picture" coverage. William C. Davis' *Lincoln's Men*, Charles B. Flood's *Grand & Sherman*, Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering*, and Charles Royster's *The Destructive War* are great books on the Civil War, yet approach the history from particular angles and themes. In addition, there are various specialized books that concentrate on only certain aspects of the Civil War (e.g. certain personalities, certain battles), and therefore are relevant for narrower interests. This criterion for selection (for this list) applies to all major historical events.

Some historical figures do have significant “big picture” relevance, and thus warrant a place on this list. Such figures must be more than just personalities covered for curiosity seekers. Thus, no matter how great the book may be, resources that don’t meet this standard of relevance are not included.

Fascinatingly, it is very difficult to find a fantastic biography of Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, or Thomas Jefferson (other than the one for each that is listed). Barring the exception in each case, the major biographies for each figure all seem to have significant flaws, biases or shortcomings (e.g. overly-romanticized depictions, like Forrest McDonald’s and Richard Brookhiser’s works on Hamilton). Books on James Madison by Garry Wills and Ralph Ketcham are underwhelming. That only a single biography that is universally praised can be found for each figure is surprising.

It is also unfortunate that there is a paucity of attention devoted to one of the most important Founding Fathers, Thomas Paine. That a Pulitzer Prize winning book (Joseph Ellis’ *Founding Brothers*) neglects Paine is nothing short of tragic.

Omitted are books that are more commentary / analysis books than “history books” proper. While the former must be based on history to some degree (and the latter inevitably contain some element of commentary / analysis), this list deals with “history books” proper.

#### Regarding works on the genesis of the U.S.:

Books on the “Founding” and the “Founders” are ubiquitous. There is so much garbage that has been printed on the topic, it is has become somewhat of a task to survey the mountains of pulp trash to route out the few gems. Books written by knowledgeable and honest (i.e. genuine) scholars are few and far between, but exist.

I’ve tried to route out any books involving bias. For example, regarding books on Thomas Paine, John Keane’s *Tomas Paine: A Political Life* is slightly biased toward the right (a difficult thing to do, since Paine was the quintessential progressive). Meanwhile, Christopher Hitchens’ *Thomas Paine’s Rights Of Man: A Biography* is a slightly romantic depiction of Paine. Eric Foner’s *Tom Paine & Revolutionary America* is interesting yet more concerned with an assessment of Paine’s social context than with Paine per se. Jack Fruchtman’s *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom* may be worthwhile. All four are reasonably good books, but not the best. Consequently, it is the book by Craig Nelson and the book by Harvey J. Kaye that made the list.

My fallibility notwithstanding, I aimed to do the readers of MasonScott.org a service by doing the legwork for them. The books listed here are, without a doubt, the most excellent resources for

the layman on the origins of the U.S.

Some descent books may not have made the cut simply because they are of the wrong format (memoir-based) or not definitive works. For example, for interesting commentary on the First World War, *The Great War & Modern Memory* by Paul Fussell and *Cataclysm* by David Stevenson may be worthwhile.

#### Regarding the Cold War period:

There is—indeed—an endless supply of pulp trash (i.e. brazen revisionism and outright propaganda) on this contentious topic. It is therefore no easy task to find an un-slanted book on the Cold War—as most authors seem to have an ideological agenda (one way or the other) or some sort of ax to grind.

On the one hand, there are books that are too apologetic toward the U.S.S.R., such as Martin Walker's *The Cold War: A History*, Edward Pessen's *Losing Our Souls*, Craig and Logevall's *America's Cold War*, and Walter LaFeber's *America, Russia, & The Cold War*.

On the other hand, there are a slew of books that are too apologetic toward the U.S., such as two of John Lewis Gaddis's three major works on the topic (*The Cold War: A New History* and *We Now Know*). Meanwhile, the right-wing propaganda that has been churned out goes on and on and on—and is not even worth mentioning.

I was meticulous in only including books that were impartial, and exhibited marks of great scholarship.

*For the Soul of Mankind* by Melvyn Leffler, *The Global Cold War* by Odd Arne Westad, and *The Cold War* by Ronald Powaski seem to be relatively balanced—yet don't seem to have garnered much notoriety by scholars. *The Hawk & The Dove* by Nicholas Thompson is interesting yet—being more like a memoir than a history book—provides a very incomplete picture. George F. Kennan has some interesting analysis—though certainly biased toward the right. *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* (three volumes), though highly regarded, isn't accessible to the typical reader (2,000 pages; \$500), so was not included.

Regarding the Korean War, the most thorough source is probably Allan R. Millett's 3-volume *The War For Korea*, yet it does not qualify for the common reader. I.F. Stone's *The Hidden History of the Korean War*, David Halberstam's *The Coldest Winter*, Clay Blair's *The Forgotten War*

, and T.R. Fehrenbach's *This Kind of War* are also worthwhile. Cummings' *The Korean War: A History* is not a history book; it is more of a left-wing polemic, so does not qualify. (That said, he makes some worthwhile points—all of which should be taken with a grain of salt.)

Regarding the Vietnam War, much of the “history” is written through an ideological prism—reflecting the orgy of biases on the Cold War in general. Those like John Prados write books from the left; while apologists for U.S. right-wing policy provide a significant distortion (e.g. George C. Herring's *America's Longest War*). Finding objective scholarship on this war is especially difficult. *The Vietnam War* by Mark Atwood Lawrence is okay, but underwhelming. Philip Caputo's highly acclaimed *A Rumor Of War* is a worthwhile book, but (like Frederick Downs' *The Killing Zone* or Karl Marlantes' *What It Is Like To Go To War*) is more of a memoir, not a history book. *Dispatches* by Michael Herr is worthwhile for journalistic accounts on the micro scale.

I did my best, and—as usual—welcome feedback from those who—for each historical period—are far more knowledgeable than I. I look forward to learning more by being made aware of the best history books available.