

# The **NO-NONSENSE GUIDE** to **WORLD HISTORY**

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Boyd Tonkin,  
*The Independent*,  
London

### About the author

**Chris Brazier** has been a New Internationalist co-editor since 1984. His other books include *Vietnam: the Price of Peace* (Oxfam 1992), the anthology *Raging Against the Machine* (New Internationalist 2003) and *Trigger Issues: Football* (New Internationalist 2007). Since 2001 he has also been principal writer for UNICEF's annual flagship report *The State of the World's Children*.

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# **WORLD HISTORY**

**Chris Brazier**

**New Internationalist**

The No-Nonsense Guide to World History

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## Foreword

CHRIS BRAZIER is right; a historian confronting the task of a history of the world in 40,000 words would gasp. No professional is presented with this challenge, even in the most general first year outline course. Chris moves easily from the slimy origins of organisms to asymmetrical power relations in the 21st century. His history is a **New Internationalist** history, linked with other themes being pursued in the *No-Nonsense Guide* series. He insists, as do many contemporary historians, that we should break away from Euro-centric interpretations and narratives. He demands that women's history be placed center stage. He reminds us constantly that in most epochs, and most cultures, there have been sharp inequalities: humankind faces this dilemma as starkly, perhaps more so, at the beginning of the 21st century. His history includes a record of extraordinary human movement and migration, a phenomenon with a long pedigree that remains central to contemporary concerns in a world with bounded nation states. Although he does not offer an environmental interpretation of history, he ends with a plea for environmental consciousness in facing core issues of humankind's reciprocal relationship with nature. We remain, after all, and before anything else – before our color or culture or religion – a mammal species dependent upon the natural world.

The human species is, however, unique, not least in its self-criticism. Chris Brazier's history is critical of many aspects of the past, and also of its interpretation by previous generations of Europeans. Here I agree with him, and this capacity to change and reassess must remain one of our culture's great strengths. There are also points where I may disagree with Chris. Everywhere he wishes to look behind the relics of pyramids, monuments and palaces and to investigate

## Foreword

the human cost and the work involved. Yet his treatment of pre-colonial African empires is perhaps too celebratory, somewhat in contrast to his emphasis on hierarchy and exploitation in the pre-Columbian Latin America. Sometimes he does not correct enough for me. I can see why he has to focus on empires and politics in this history, in order to provide some chronological framework across vast swathes of time, but I would like to hear more loudly the voices of plain people. And perhaps I am less troubled by the future, the opportunities offered by the modern world and technology, and more convinced of the benefits of uneven, sometimes faltering, global democratization.

Historians are a querulous bunch and are taught to be so. On no account should we be protected from brave generalizers who seek to make sense of the whole, when so many professionals cultivate close vision. History must inevitably be a subject for contestation, because it is always to some degree ideological in nature, and because it is so important for understanding, justifying or changing the present. This book is a challenge. It is vivid, informal and informative. Let us give it to schoolkids and students to read; let's listen to their comments. They will have their own interests which they would wish to find mirrored in the past. We must find ways to cater for them and this kind of text is a good place to start. Perhaps every professional historian should be required to write a history of the world in 40,000 words – nothing would be more conducive to humility.

*Professor William Beinart*  
St Antony's College  
University of Oxford

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# Introduction

THE BRIEFER a history of the world sets out to be, the more ambitious it inevitably is. Some people write entire learned tomes about postage stamp design between 1864 and 1902. So how can I possibly condense the whole history of the world into such a limited space? Only by being very selective and sweeping. But I think there is a real value to this. Many historians have an intimate knowledge of their particular nook or cranny but may not always stand back to try and see the great building in its entirety.

Indeed, most of us know bits and pieces of history without ever knowing how they fit together. This came home to me when I was in the attic sorting through boxes of papers from my own ancient past. I came across the history projects I did at school. And almost all were about wars – pages and pages on the disposition of the Duke of Marlborough's troops at the Battle of Blenheim, whole chapters on the different phases of the Napoleonic Wars.

The energy I put into all this came from a certain fascination with the past – I wanted to be transported back into a bygone age to see how its people really lived. But what a waste of that enthusiasm to have it expended on military campaigns in a tiny corner of Europe when all the world and time was there for the tasting... School taught me next to nothing about the histories of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The odd queen aside, I learned nothing at all about women's history, which has been submerged for thousands of years beneath the endless flow of wars and politics and is only now beginning to surface. And I was taught very little about the everyday experience of ordinary people throughout the ages, the ones who actually died building the Pyramids or plowed the fields beneath the castle.



So researching this history, originally for an issue of the *New Internationalist* magazine, was a real adventure – as I delved into the continents and communities that were left out of all the old text books. But I have also tried to integrate these hidden histories with the more conventional narrative of imperial dynasties and superpower battles.

The contribution of ordinary women and men should never be overlooked, but history would be unintelligible if it did not include the politics and the conquering empires that have helped shape their world. History teachers may now try to give children a picture of the great world beyond their own shores. But this book is for all those of us who have only a few fragments of the tapestry.

*Chris Brazier, 2001*

I'm grateful that this small book has been sufficiently valued by readers that is now going into its third edition, 10 years and numerous reprints after it was first published. The 2011 edition is substantially the same as the revised text of 2006, though I have expanded my last chapter on the early years of the 21st century to include the financial crisis, the election of Barack Obama and the uprisings in the Arab world. As in 2006, I write about such recent history with some trepidation, since we are inevitably so caught up in current events that it is difficult to see them clearly. That said, it already seems evident that the judgment of history is unlikely to be kind on the world's present leaders, who look to be as incapable of learning lessons from the past as any of their predecessors.

*Chris Brazier, March 2011*