

# The Good Book Guide

EUROPE - A CULTURAL HISTORY by Peter Rietbergen. Routledge, 2nd edition 2006. xxxviii + 545 pp. Index £21.99 pbk.

This book is truly epic in its scope. The breadth of Professor Rietbergen's chronological study is awesome. A synthesis of the most important ideas in cultural history from many linguistic sources, it explores how Europe developed as a conceptual and cultural entity from prehistoric times to the present. Tribal migrations, ancient Greece and Rome, the spread of Christianity and its division into Eastern Orthodox and western Catholicism and the later protestant split, the spread of knowledge and ideas, industrialisation, political and philosophical evolution and revolution, the growth of elite, bourgeois and popular cultures and their convergence into a modern mass culture, all are expertly and confidently discussed.

The book stresses how cultures on Europe's margins were influential through migration, trade and travel. These outside influences also helped forge a European identity by defining an external other. Prominence is given not just to Christianity but to the role of Islam by its former presence in southern Europe and as a neighbour over borders, as well as the integral role of Judaism.

The arrangement of the book into four parts, subdivided into chapters with sub-headings, means that the text can be used by those studying a particular theme or time period. Each section is a compre-



*Disraeli depicted in Vanity Fair, 1874 (detail)*

hensive essay on a particular aspect of culture. The only weakness is the index, which only lists names and reference titles, not topics. For those familiar with a particular period of cultural history the book will extend knowledge into new areas, both in time and geographically or act as a synopsis of existing knowledge as an aid to revision.

Susan Barton

DISRAELI AND THE ART OF VICTORIAN POLITICS by Ian St. John. Anthem Press, 2005. xiv + 239 pp. Index £14.99 pbk.

Disraeli remains a perennially fascinating figure, and Ian St. John's new book on him, an unusual blend of high-level scholarship, sophisticated synthesis and sixth form-friendly exposition, is a significant attempt to unravel his mysteries. Those readers who are hard

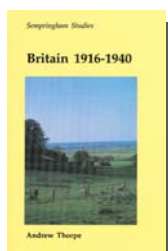
pressed for time will find the brief sections at the end of each chapter entitled 'Historians Debate' a very useful summary of the key issues, with helpful comments by the author to guide us through the historiographical maze. Students with note-taking tasks to complete will also be grateful that Dr St. John does not disdain to divide his text with plenty of sub-headings. There are even numbered lists, spotlighting, for example, the seven key factors which need to be borne in mind when evaluating Disraeli's handling of the Eastern Crisis.

Dr St. John not only has a good eye for the telling quotation, he has a nice turn of phrase himself, and although he presents a panorama of views on the key aspects of Disraeli's career, he does not fight shy of pithy and confident judgement. As an example, he writes 'the idea that Disraeli was only remotely responsible for events in Afghanistan simply cannot be sustained. It was a bold imperial move of the kind that Disraeli relished.'

Not all will find the overall interpretation of Disraeli convincing, and the more modestly talented sixth former may be puzzled by Dr St. John's picture of this 'self-willed' 'artist' in politics. Abler students and their teachers will be grateful for a book which advances our understanding of this strange and elusive man beyond the tired dichotomies implied by that classic examination question, 'Was Disraeli an opportunist?'

David Cooper

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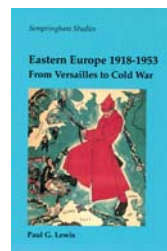
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