



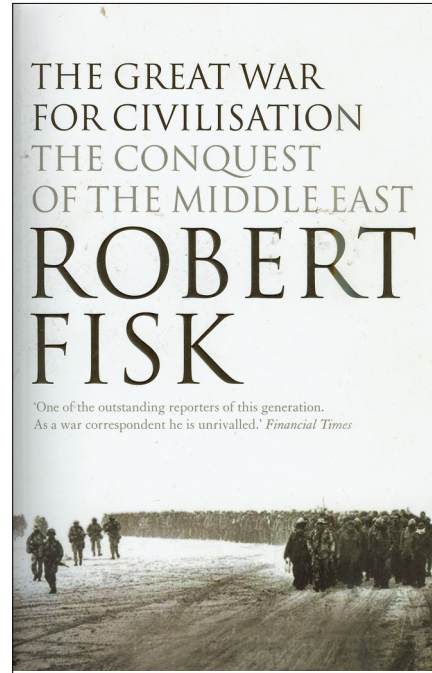
JON STEPHENSON is a New Zealand foreign correspondent who has reported extensively from the Middle East.

A revelation about human rights and the ‘war on terror’

The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East, by Robert Fisk.
London: Harper Collins, 2005. 1366pp.
ISBN 184115007X (cloth)

SINCE 9/11 and the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, British journalist Robert Fisk has built a huge following as a staunch critic of George W. Bush’s ‘war on terror’. But Fisk’s cogent—often controversial—analysis of American foreign policy and Western meddling and mendacity in the Middle East is nothing new: based in Beirut, he has reported for 30 years on conflicts from Algeria to Afghanistan.

The Great War for Civilisation examines the modern history of this region, taking its title from the words inscribed on the 1914-18 war medal



the author inherited from his father. In 17 months after that war, Britain and France drew the frontiers of Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia as well as much of the Middle East.

As the dust jacket tells us, ‘Fisk has spent his entire career watching the people within these borders die’. This book is his ‘passionate outcry against the lies and deceit that have sent soldiers to their deaths and killed tens of thousands of men and women—Arab, Christian and Jew—over the past century.’

The length of the tome has been criticised, and there is no denying it could have used a closer edit. How-



ever, Fisk has gone through hell to report from the messy states created by the victors of World War I, and he has a lot to say. Above all, he wants to remind us we can't switch off history—that understanding the present means understanding and learning from the past.

Take Iraq. Fisk cites a proclamation made by General Stanley Maude when the British invaded in 1917 (p. 172). 'Our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators.' Ring a bell?

Then, when a revolt began a few years later in Fallujah, the Brits laid much of the city to waste. Sound familiar? As the saying goes, those who forget history are doomed to repeat it.

Fisk himself has a PhD in the subject, yet *The Great War for Civilisation* is written in prose that makes the extensive—often disturbing—detail come alive. Packed with anecdotes as well as analysis, this is ground-up history—not the work of an armchair academic.

His reports from Soviet-occupied Afghanistan are extraordinarily vivid. Equally captivating are his encounters with men like Ayatollah Khomeini and Osama bin Laden.

But while the book ranges from the Armenian genocide to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and beyond,

Fisk's concern is not just for key themes—or actors—but ordinary people who are caught in events beyond their control.

One is his father Bill, who, as an officer, declined to take part in the execution of an Australian soldier convicted of murder. So, as Fisk has said, the book is also about refusal:

[R]efusal to obey orders; refusal to accept the narrative of events laid down by our governments and our military people, especially when they're going to invade other people's countries (Fisk, 2005).

It is at times a depressing read. What happens when injustice reigns or orders are executed uncritically is recounted through page after grueling page of bloodshed, duplicity and deceit. Western leaders chasing oil or hegemony emerge with little more credit than the Arab dictators they armed or helped to power.

Unsurprisingly, Fisk's depiction of the situation in the Middle East has been described by some as excessively negative. Others complain he fails to offer a vision for a better future.

The author might reply that recent events in Gaza, Lebanon and Iraq fully justify the gloomy portrait he has painted of the region. Hope is hard to find—especially when one



considers the intractable nature of the Israel/Palestine problem or the consequences of America's looming confrontation with Iran.

As for answers, Fisk insists that most of them lie in the past: that with regard to the current Iraq insurgency, for instance, the Anglo-US 'Coalition' should not have launched this 'frivolous, demented conflict' in the first place.

Can the peoples of the Middle East escape the history that we and our Western forefathers have shaped for them these past 100 years? Fisk is doubtful. 'History—a history of injustice—cloaks them too deeply.'

A less-than-adequate response, perhaps. Yet simplistic solutions to the mess that is the Middle East would not have improved this book.

It would, however, have benefited from greater attention to detail. As Oliver Miles has pointed out in the *Guardian*, there are a disappointing number of errors—some trivial, some serious—which more rigorous fact checking would have readily uncovered.

Moreover, the bibliography is idiosyncratic and the index far from comprehensive; the shortage of photos (intended to keep the price down) is also unfortunate. Hopefully, some of these problems will be remedied in future editions.

More problematic is Fisk's critique of the West's Middle East policy, condemned by some as uninformed and biased. It is hard to find evidence to support the first allegation, but the claims of bias raise an important issue.

C.S. Lewis once wrote that what we learn from experience depends on the kind of philosophy we bring to experience, but Fisk rejects the suggestion he views evidence through an anti-American (or anti-Israeli) prism. He says he is against extremism whether it comes from the mosque or the White House, and that his views are based on the facts—not the other way round.

Lewis' warning also stands for the reader. If you see the West—and America in particular—as a shining city atop a hill and think those resisting the 'Coalition' in Iraq are all 'terrorists' and 'evil-doers', then Fisk's book is not for you.

However, if you are curious about history and the 'war on terror' and suspect a disregard for the rights and suffering of others is not confined to Arab despots or Muslim extremists, then *The Great War for Civilization* will be a revelation.

Reference

Fisk, R. (2005). Interview with author, October.