

History | Book Review

## Keeping it in the family

The ties that bind world history

By David Armitage



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Portrait of the painter Andries van Bochoven and his family, 1629 | © Heritage Image Partnership Ltd/Alamy

### IN THIS REVIEW

#### THE WORLD

A family history

1,344pp. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. £35.

Simon Sebag Montefiore

**S**imon Sebag Montefiore is Britain's most indefatigable biographer. He has written prizewinning Lives of Russian rulers (Catherine the Great, Stalin), a dynasty (the Romanovs) and a city (Jerusalem), as well as three novels. Yet even his earlier hefty page-turners were mere stretching exercises beside his latest feat of strength, *The World: A family history*. Weighing in at 1,300 pages, this rollicking, globetrotting "biography of many people rather than one person" spans the Akkadian empire and

the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is almost unpickable: whether you find it unputdownable may depend on your appetite for narrative and yearning for a thesis, as well as an iron stomach and sheer *Sitzfleisch* to match the author's own.

*The World* is, by Sebag Montefiore's own admission, a pandemic book. It might be the most ambitious product so far of that unsettling moment. Enforced becalmment spurred reflection on a lifetime's reading, as well as the digestion of a vast array of modern scholarship. The result is a truly global history spanning almost every continent - apologies, Antarctica - and hundreds of its human inhabitants. (The non-human world features occasionally as scenery, little more.) "No book is easy to write", Sebag Montefiore remarks in his preface, "and world history is harder than most." The controlling device for this "intimate, human history" is the family, a baggy concept that he deploys flexibly but ignores strategically when it gets in the way of a good story. More positively, the focus on family allows Sebag Montefiore to give more space than is usual in such popular histories to women and children, though youngsters appear mostly as those heirs to thrones and empires who populate myth from the Bhagavad Gita and the Bible to *Dynasty* and *Succession*. Family here is the arena of wealth and power. How those gifts have been distributed historically is a question *The World* leaves largely untouched, though not from lack of examples.

Just what family history is, Sebag Montefiore never really explains. On the book's final page he sums up its panorama in tones echoing Edward Gibbon or *The World's* "presiding spirit", the fourteenth-century Arab historian-sociologist Ibn Khaldun: "I have written of the fall of noble cities, the vanishing of kingdoms, the rise and fall of dynasties, cruelty upon cruelty, folly upon folly, eruptions, massacres, famines, pandemics and pollutions". All this, and more, figures prominently in the book's thrilling tapestry. Yet how much of it falls under the heading of family history is less clear. Colloquially, family history is the story we each tell about the snakes and ladders of family fortunes, the triumphs and tragedies that have made us who we are. Medically, a family history is more disturbingly diagnostic: an account of illness and morbidity in our nearest and dearest that sheds light on genetic causes for concern. In scholarly circles family history is the study of gender, demography and the household, of kinship and co-residence as they evolved over time. In that last sense family history is the study of "the way we never were", as one of the field's founders, Stephanie Coontz, has put it: a demolition of the idea that any form, even the "nuclear family", has ever been normative or universal.

*The World* mostly consists of the first strain of family history - stories of who and how we came to be - laced with something like the second: humanity's cumulative maladies, even madnesses. It has little of the third, of reflection on the history of the family or of families across time and space. The book is light on theory and unselfconscious about method: Sebag Montefiore wants stories to speak for themselves and is not much inclined to point the moral or linger analytically. To be sure, he sprinkles thumbnail sketches of family forms throughout *The World*. We learn briefly about Spartan communalism - an inspiration for Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia* - and about the Roman *familia*, that extended household of free and enslaved persons headed by a mighty paterfamilias. Sebag Montefiore introduces both Vikings and Incas as polygynous, and rightly notes that "family and slavery were intertwined" variously over time, not least in the destructive effects of the social death modern slavery inflicted in the Atlantic world. Yet *The World* does not address when, where, how or why family structure changed: there are far more references to nuclear weapons, war and codes than to the "nuclear family", mentioned only three times in a thousand pages. Even the book's extensive online bibliography has nothing on the history of the family as such.

The bulk of *The World* treats those especially potent and dangerous families we call dynasties. It presents a dazzling, at times dizzying, procession of Ptolemies and Ashokas, Song, Tang and Ming, Abbasids and Timurids onward to Bourbons, Bonapartes and the House of Saud, as well as more recent dynasts such as the Kennedys, Nehrus, Gandhis, Bushes, bin Ladens and Kims. Along the way we meet Fatso and “Fat Fucker” (Ptolemy VIII and King Farouk), Fabius Warty Delayer (Fabius Cunctator) and Little Rascal (Liu Bang, later Emperor Gaozu) amid a rogues’ gallery of snappily nicknamed villains and victims. We also encounter plenty of characters who did not secure their succession, among them childless figures such as Lenin and Hitler, Shaka Zulu and Simón Bolívar: as Nelson Mandela ruefully remarked, “When your life is a struggle, there is little time for family”. They all came from families, of course, but each failed to create a dynasty.

Writing of those who did, Sebag Montefiore occasionally succumbs to the chronicler’s disease of overcompression, as when the Egyptian king Philadelphos and the Libyan king and queen, Magas and Apama, “arranged the marriage of their daughter Berenice to his son Euergetes. But Apama, a Seleucid princess, wanted to keep Cyrene as a Seleucid base and, after Magas had died of gluttony ...”. And there is quite a bit of “meanwhile, in Mexico” here (“At the same time, across the world, another megalomaniacal visionary ...”) as the author ties disparate developments across the continents. Yet only a highly skilled storyteller and pen-portraitist could so deftly grip attention across twenty-three “acts”, spanning more than six millennia and packed with lavish and pullulating detail.

While the potency of empresses and kings, conquerors and tyrants, animates most of *The World*, softer forms of power are more marginal. Ideas are not the book’s strong suit. The Enlightenment appears as “the intellectual movement of a feverishly interconnected European elite close to a nervous breakdown and identity crisis”. Nor is the economic power of families treated fully. The Krupps and the Rothschilds get their due, but with 90 per cent of the world’s businesses now family-run or controlled, the relative absence of Murdochs and Waltons, Agnellis and Porsches, not to mention the Korean *chaebols*, is striking. (The economic historian David Landes filled that gap in 2006 with *Dynasties: Fortune and misfortune in the world’s great family businesses*.) Artists and scientists get even shorter shrift: here are the Mozarts, father and son, but not the generations of Bachs; Shakespeare, but nary a Brontë. The seemingly asexual Isaac Newton earns a paragraph, but the Darwins - Erasmus and Charles - languish in a footnote.

*The World* is still wildly entertaining: where else will you learn between the same covers about Persian men’s make-up, a gift of testicles preserved in salt or the fox-tossing prowess of the Saxon elector Augustus the Strong? It is certainly enriching, not only in its vast cast of characters, but also from the author’s sesquipedalian word hoard, flush with “orchietomies” and “funambulists”, flirtatious “frizelations” and even the odd “bazzoon”, a term unknown to any conventional dictionary (qv Donald Trump, “lover of a bazzoon of *Playboy* centrefolds”). It is bracingly profane: few historical works can have used the C-word and the F-bomb so profusely. And it is often gut-churning: Sebag Montefiore details every form of torture and assassination, from Ottoman strangling to the unspeakable atrocities of the Jamaican slaveholder Thomas Thistlewood, and he might provide one too many descriptions of castration - a bazzoon of orchietomies? - for more sensitive readers. In such cases the lack of footnotes or even page references may be a blessing, but the “select bibliography” on Sebag Montefiore’s website will not easily reveal the source of a juicy quotation or lurid anecdote. The publisher has not served him or his readers well in this regard.

“Take this pudding away - it has no theme!”, Winston Churchill allegedly exclaimed about a particularly

elaborate dessert. We can hope our life will find purpose without demanding that it has an argument: but is the same true of an array of many lives, like *The World*? Historians such as Herodotus and Anna Comnena might think not: their more exacting colleagues - Thucydides, Ibn Khaldun, Machiavelli, most professional historians writing today - would demand a theme. Power would be a good starting point, especially because Sebag Montefiore invokes Michel Foucault early and approvingly, but leaves it to others to ask why families, of whatever kind, have been such enduringly effective vectors of power down the centuries. Whether families have been more efficient at transmission than other networks - religious, educational or economic, for instance - is also left open. And why certain kinds of family have been valued at specific moments - royal families rather than corporate dynasties, and modern royal families qua families, with all the trappings of domesticity and faux familiarity - remains uninvestigated.

“In many ways”, Sebag Montefiore writes, “we are all members of dynasties.” True enough, but there is clearly less advantage to being the fourteenth Mr Wilson than the fourteenth Earl of Home. Power and wealth cascade down the generations: as the economist Gregory Clark argued in *The Son Also Rises* (2014), social mobility is as sticky in modern Sweden as it was in Qing China; the surnames that dominated fifteenth-century Florence do so today. *The World* quotes Balzac’s *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* to good effect: “All rapidly accumulated wealth is the result of luck, discovery or legalized theft”. Wherever dynasties arise, they preserve and increase inequality, and they restrict public goods. How a handful of families worldwide achieved and sustained such depressive dominance is beyond even this uniquely ambitious book’s remit.

For Voltaire history was “a tableau of crimes and misfortunes”. Gibbon agreed, calling it “the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind”. This book provides ample evidence of families spawning follies, as well as many of humanity’s crimes and misfortunes. “Family was all”, Michelle Obama said, but can everything be reduced to family? The promoters of the 2015 Global Family Reunion thought so: “Who’s invited? You! All seven billion members of the human family”. Simon Sebag Montefiore might think so too. But his magnum opus shows that family may be too capacious, too sentimental and paradoxically too individualized a concept to be analytically useful without other, more rigorous lenses in play. As family history, at least, *The World* is not enough.

**David Armitage** is the Lloyd C. Blankfein Professor of History at Harvard University and author, most recently, of *Civil Wars: A history in ideas, 2017*. He is currently working on a global history of treaty-making and treaty-breaking

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