

Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Written in History: Letters That Changed the World*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2018, 272 p.

In the last couple of years, numerous works of popular history in the form of epistolary literature have been published in the English-speaking world. Some of these works are *Letters of Note*, *More Letters of Note*, written by online blogger Shaun Usher and *Letters to Change the World*, by journalist Travis Elborough, just to name a few. Also, there are innumerable published letters of famous individuals. The book which is the topic of this review is called *Written in history: Letters That Changed the World* by the famous historian Simon Sebag Montefiore, who is more famous for his works such as *Jerusalem: The Biography* and *The Romanovs 1913-1918*. Even though Montefiore is a Cambridge-educated historian he is keener on writing popular history books and novels which made him famous. *Written in history* is another example of such a work, while not strictly an academic book it still has strong methodological elements that historians employ in their research and writing.

In this book, the author is primarily oriented on giving a brief overview of the letter that, according to him, changed the world. He establishes a template with which he sets up all of the hundred or so letters. At the beginning of his work, in the introduction, Montefiore reflects on the importance of letters in everyday life, as well as their importance to historians. He reflects on the character of letters, especially those before the modern era since they were the main means of communication between distant areas and people. Montefiore also considers the appeal the readers have in reading such types of historical sources and literature. While to a historian a letter in most cases is a primary source with which he can get a better understanding of the writer, recipient, and the event to which they relate. On the other hand, this type of literature is appealing to an everyday reader since letters tend to be shorter and more condensed in content, which is easier and quicker to read.

This tendency to write concisely propped the creation of the saying “If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter”.

Sebags collection of letters was arranged in thematic groups and sections. These letters were sorted into the next sections: love, family, creation, courage, discovery, tourism, war, blood, destruction, disaster, friendship, folly, decency, liberation, fate, power, downfall, and goodbye. Similar to the short length of letters the sections are also short, on average, all of them are about 10 to 20 pages long. The length of these sections is long enough to convey a variety of ideas in a single message within each section and at the same time, the shortness of the sections helps the reader in holding their attention.

Besides that, all the sections follow a concise template that consists of a short historical introduction regarding the sender and receiver, if applicable, as well as the historical context in which the letters were made. In most cases, this contextualization outweighs the amount of text written in the letter, and even in some instances it dwarfs the letters. Also, it has to be noted that while the contextualization of the letters is great and the author did go to great lengths to give an insightful and concise representation of the events and people involved in the letter, in essence, the reader will not learn that much about these events solely based on these letters.

As far as the authors of the letters are concerned, they varied from men such as Augustus, Harun al-Rashid, Henry the VIII, and Churchill, to Hadrian, Abraham Lincoln, Stalin, and George Bush. Besides that, the author showcases letters of female authors such as Catherin the Great, Frida Kahlo, Ada Lovelace, and Rosa Parks. One big problem, which is only extirpated by the title of the book is that these letters did not in fact change the world. It is better to say that the letters were written by people who changed the world in a certain time period and in a certain area. This is important to point out seeing that the majority of letters included in the book were written by Europeans living in modern or contemporary times. Little to no attention is given to letters from Asia and Africa, as well as the letters of antiquity and the Middle Ages. There are some sporadic letters

from different famous rulers Augustus, Ramses the II, Babur, Saladin, just to name a few. Nevertheless, their mentions are quite sporadic, and minute compared to the number of letters that were included which originated in Europe during the last couple of centuries. In that respect, the title which is given to the book is perhaps a little misleading.

This work is a fascinating book in many ways. Sebag Montefiore has collected letters of mixed quality and interest, which by his way of grouping and sorting form coherent and interesting thematic sections. While there are numerous negative remarks which can be said about this book, especially from a historian's point of view, this work cannot be solely judged by a "standard" historian's approach. The reason being is that Sebag's approach is not one of a standard academic since he is a strong proponent of popular history and so far, he has found great success. His works have been sold in thousands and he is constantly and regularly writing and publishing new books. He has found a steady and steadfast following and supporters, which is more than we can say about most historians. Maybe this has to do with his approach and sorting of subjects that are of keen interest to the public as well as his way of formulating and expressing his views in a clear and comprehensible manner. His approach seems to be in opposite contrast to today's historical approach and literature which in essence became a means by which academics tend to go into depths of their research and on paths very few, besides their fellow academic and some enthusiasts, can follow.

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