History as the Story of Liberty

A Globalised Western Civilisation

By Arthur Herman

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Introduction

Michael Basset (Auckland)

Arthur is a distinguished historian of American birth who is an authority on British history. He has many books to his name. He has taught at Georgetown University, George Mason University, and at the Smithsonian Institution.

His distinguishing characteristic is that he is someone who is prepared to think across a wide spectrum of facts and ideas, and to draw relevant conclusions about what works and what doesn't, what has progressed mankind, and what has held us back. I hope he won't be offended when I call him a politician's historian.

He is part of the trend away from the narrow specialisation that has dogged the historical profession for most of the past forty years The era where historians discovered more and more about less and less, and could rarely join the dots.

And Arthur Herman isn't afraid to provoke controversy. Several reviewers of his bestseller on Scotland *The Scottish Enlightenment: How the Scots Invented the Modern World* have complained that he missed this and that, or neglected the importance of something else, but he seems quite insouciant, pleased because he's made readers think. Good on him!

Surveying Arthur's writing I'm struck by his restless search for the things that have driven success throughout history.

In his book on Scotland, which is a rattling fine read I should add, he says: 'I was always fascinated by how much of modern thought was inspired by those great minds of the Scottish Enlightenment.' There are some wonderful pen portraits of Adam Smith, David Hume, the philosopher and historian, of Sir Walter Scott, the novelist, and others.

Arthur identifies an enduring passion for freedom from oppressive landlords, from the overbearing Scottish Kirk, from trade restrictions and so on. And he notes the constant need for personal endeavour.

My eye fell on the homily my mother always preached to me: 'God helps those who help themselves.' At one point he says: 'True liberty requires a sense of personal obligation as well as individual rights.' What a timely message that is for some of those who constantly tell us about their entitlements, but act blissfully unaware of any obligation in return!

The same search for what drives events lies behind Arthur's book *To Rule the Waves: How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World*. This is a magisterial sweep of the kind that stands alongside Niall Ferguson's book *Empire*. It moves from the Armada through the era of piracy, trade, Empire and war, and it reveals Arthur's huge respect for Britain's role in the modern world. Talking of the part Britain played during World War Two, he quotes approvingly another broad sweep historian, the redoubtable AJP Taylor, who once observed that Britain had 'sacrificed her post war future for the sake of the world'.

Arthur's same dedication to the struggle for human freedom can be seen in his contemporary columns about modern world challenges. A few weeks ago, just after the ceasefire in Lebanon, he reflected in a New York newspaper on what had happened. He likened the stance of much of the western world and its reluctance to confront Hizbollah, to Neville Chamberlain's reaction to Hitler. Arthur is on record as describing the War on Terror as possibly the world's number one issue of the day.

Above all, Arthur Herman provokes debate. And it looks like it is ongoing. There's bound to be plenty surrounding the book he's currently preparing about Churchill and Gandhi. Churchill, some of you might recall, in one of his most memorable bits of invective, once described Mahatma Gandhi as 'this one-time Inner Temple lawyer, now seditious fakir, striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceroy's Palace'. Arthur's book looks like it could be the story of a confrontation between a Mandela-like search for liberty on the one hand, and the preservation of standards, and possibly even privilege, on the other. It should be another good read.

So it's a pleasure to have Dr Arthur Herman with us tonight to deliver the Bonython lecture, 'History as the Story of Liberty: A Globalised Western Civilisation.' ■

Introduction

Geoffrey Blainey (Melbourne)

When Arthur Herman's book, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, appeared he caused a great stir, even in Australia. It is interesting to note the two subtitles. The subtitle for the English edition is 'The Scots' invention of the modern world' and the American edition says 'How the poorest country in Western Europe showed us the way'.

It's a remarkable story, the result of deep research expressed in loosed prose with a sense of fun which is not amiss even in Scotland. It must have been a wonderful experience to produce this book and to have seen the sensation it caused in Scotland. Every year a special prize is awarded, sponsored by Glenfiddich, called the Spirit of Scotland. It is handled by a famous Scottish newspaper—and so is quite above board—and people nominate those they admire for the prize each year. In 2002, just after *The Scottish Enlightenment* appeared, Dr Arthur Herman's name appeared on the short list. Of course, there was a degree of dismay in Scotland because some argued that he wasn't a Scot. His supporters replied that this was all the more reason why he should receive the award. In the end, he didn't but he was on the short list. He was later made a member of the Scottish Arts Council, which is a great honour for a foreigner.

The book tells of the remarkable intellectual revival that took place in Scotland in the eighteenth century, how many distinguished people suddenly arose in that society so favourable to talent like

David Hume or Adam Smith, famous writers like James Boswell and Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott, the famous architect Robert Adam, and the man who really pushed the steam engine forward, James Watt. The remarkable list goes on.

As Dr Herman has said, one of the secrets was that Scotland was a country that valued education and also valued liberty. It was also probably the most educated country in the world and Australia gained the benefit of so many of those Scots who came and settled here. In fact, for 60 years the, Scots college was only 200 yards from here, and 200 yards in that direction our federal parliament met for its first 26 years which included the long serving prime ministers Andrew Fisher and Stanley Melbourne Bruce and several other Scots.

Dr Arthur Herman has had a distinguished career. The book I've spoken about is not his only book: he has written a well known book on the American senator of the 1950s senator Joseph McCarthy, a book on the English navy and how it ruled the world and then ceased to rule the world, and another on the idea of decline, an idea that seems to obsess us at this moment of fixation about global warming.

He has great skill in taking one of these huge global subjects and making sense of it. And tonight he is talking about liberty and history in the wider sense. It gives me great pleasure to welcome him and introduce him. ■

History as the Story of Liberty

A Globalised Western Civilisation

'Great originality,' the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt wrote, 'has to wait for times of tempest, when publishers' agreements and copyright laws lapse simultaneously.'[1] I can make no claims for great originality; and as far as I can know (and hope), today's copyright laws seem reasonably secure. However, this is certainly a time of tempests, both domestically and internationally, and therefore a good time for reassessing the place of Western civilisation in world history and the world's future.

In Burckhardt's time, in the nineteenth century, that place seemed relatively solid and secure. Then optimism gave way to pessimism and uncertainty as the twentieth century approached.[2] After World War One and the experience of the Somme and Verdun, the classical liberal view of figures like Thomas Babington Macaulay and Francois Guizot, in which Western history was the progressive triumph of civilised liberty (about which in all fairness men like Burckhardt were beginning to have their doubts as early as the 1870s') seemed outdated and arrogant. Then in 1931 a young English historian named Herbert Butterfield published a diatribe against the whole complacent Victorian pack, entitled *The Whig Interpretation of History.* A year later Adolf Hitler came to power. The emergence of barbarism as the changeling of civilisation seemed to confirm that the Whig idea of history as the story of liberty was not only outdated, but misleading and perverse.

The historical profession obligingly surrendered to Butterfield's onslaught, which was supported by various Marxist auxiliaries. Three generations of historians, including that of my own teachers, took the opposite tack of Macaulay and classical liberalism. The study of the history of the West became the history of mankind's dark side, from religious fanaticism and racism to the nationalisation of the masses, as well as the triumph of industrialisation, imperialism, and the perversion of science in service to the absolute State or, alternately, the bourgeoisie. If Susan Sontag's declaration that Western civilisation represented 'the cancer of human history'[3] seemed overstated (and a view even she eventually repudiated), it was by 1967, in the shadow of the Vietnam War, becoming the dominant view on college campuses and in academic journals.

After 1989, the view changed again. Revelations about the Soviet gulag (first revealed in irrefutable detail by Alexander Solzhenitsyn); the killing fields of Cambodia; the mass starvations in China during the Great Leap Forward and murderous purges in the Cultural Revolution; the outbursts of genocide in places like Rwanda and the Sudan; forced critics to confront forces even darker than Western civilisation—forces highlighted by the burning Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. Suddenly a world built on free markets and free human beings does not seem so sinister: under certain conditions, it may even seem desirable.

Given this shift of perception, the time may be ripe for a reappraisal of our historical thinking over the last sixty or seventy years, and a belated acknowledgment that the old Whig historians, including Macaulay and Guizot, may have been more right than wrong. That in the end, the pursuit of liberty—the idea that individuals deserve to be able to organise their lives as they, and not others, see fit—may be the chief distinguishing mark of the West as a world civilisation, as it has been since the Greeks on, and that that idea may be the most valuable legacy it leaves.

A few authors in the wake of the Cold War, like Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man*, did try to point this out. However, their message was drowned out in a fruitless debate over whether the Cold War marked the end or a new beginning for history,

and what new global threat the West would have to face after the collapse of Communism (now we know). For the historical analysis of liberty to be truly valuable, it needs to start not at the end, but at the beginning, with the Greeks and the classical world. And while it is true that Western civilisation's principle of liberty has not always been put in practice, ideas do have consequences—particularly ideas of liberty.

Stages of liberty

In the ancient world, theories of liberty still tended to follow the practices of individual *poleis* or city states, above all Athens and Sparta. However, with the fall of the Roman Empire, that process began to be reversed. In the Middle Ages notions of human freedom and liberty appeared almost like utopian visions, set against a background of constant war, turmoil and squalor. However, by the eighteenth century and the dawn of the modern world, the emphasis on liberty, which had once been the obsession of philosophers, thinkers and activists, had begun to be reflected in public opinion, steadily forcing institutions into alignment. The result has been that the past two centuries have seen more progress in the growth and expansion of liberty than in any previous period in history (and the greatest growth in institutions to suppress and curtail that liberty, for the same reason).

Seen in this light, the story of liberty forms a cumulative historical process: first in the realm of ideas, then in reality. It is not an uninterrupted or inevitable process—that was the mistake the Victorian 'Whig historians' made—but full of backsliding and unexpected twists and turns. Nonetheless, over time it became an inseparable part of the fabric of reality of the West and in the world today. From an analytic point of view, we can see it coming in four stages, each building on the other.

The first stage is **political** liberty. As most people know, it is the ancient Greeks who gave birth to the idea of the self-governing *polis* and the Romans who perfected it with their notion of the *res publica*, the public space where citizens come together to decide their collective fates, and to enjoy their individual rights.[4] What

is less well known is that the Middle Ages made a particularly valuable contribution to Western history as the story of political liberty by developing the notion that all forms of political authority, from municipal corporations to monarchies, require the consent of the governed in order to be legitimate.[5] The so-called conciliar movement of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries even tried to apply this principle to the Catholic Church—where it failed, and prompted a rollback not only in the Church but Europe's leading monarchies. However, the medieval notion of political consent would inspire ideas of popular sovereignty in later centuries, right down to our own day.[6]

The second stage is **intellectual** liberty, developed in the Renaissance. Inspired by the rediscovery of antiquity's ideal of the free individual as the basic unit of public and civic life, the Renaissance gave to history the image of man as free to pursue all forms of creative expression and rational inquiry, including in the realm of science. That ideal would suffer setbacks (such as the trial of Galileo in 1618), but once again we see a fundamental principle laid in place. Eventually, that principle would come to justify all forms of free expression from political speech, as in Milton's *Aeropagitica,* to religious and philosophic inquiry in John Locke's *Letter on Toleration.* By the Enlightenment this notion of an open public square where values are free to circulate and even collide, would take on the characteristics of not only an individual right but a collective obligation of civil society. The saying attributed to Voltaire, 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it', enshrines a modern Western notion of public speech which had barely begun to make headway even in the nineteenth century, but which is today the entire basis of the Internet.[7]

The third stage of history as the story of liberty is closely related to the second, namely **religious** liberty, which emerges out the Reformation. As scholars have shown, it has conceptual links both to medieval conciliarism and the Renaissance.[8] But those links were also severely tested by decades of sectarian violence and bloodshed that put today's Middle East in the shade. Yet, after more than a century of religious wars and centuries of religious persecution

and bigotry after that, another clear principle emerged which is fundamental to modern Western culture: that of religious belief as a matter of private conscience rather than public obligation.

Finally, by 1750, we come to the fourth stage: the idea of **social and economic** liberty. It may even be the most crucial discovery of the eighteenth century. For the first time, enlightened minds came to accept that free individuals interacting in free markets in pursuit of their own self-interest did not add up not to a social minus, as previous centuries of philosophers and theologians had asserted, but a social plus.

The struggle continues

The *summa* of this line of thinking is, of course, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations.* However, Smith's thesis went beyond merely justifying the material efficiency of free markets. His further point was that, thanks to the division of labor, free markets release an energy in society, a dynamism, which quickly spills over into other aspects of human activity. Once human beings have mastery over their lives in the economic sphere and make their own decisions, they begin to expect and demand the same in other spheres. Under the conditions of what the eighteenth century called 'commercial society', and the nineteenth century called 'capitalism', human beings moved from a state of dependence on others to independence: in politics (it is not entirely by coincidence that the American Declaration of Independence appears the same year as *Wealth of Nations,* 1776); in intellectual and religious matters; across the social landscape—eventually (as Smith's disciple John Millar pointed in *Order of Ranks in Society*) even gender relations.

This was the singular insight of Adam Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment of the eighteenth century: to conclude that economic liberty was actually the tap root of all the other forms of liberty, and to draw a close correlation between the progress of trade and commerce in Europe and the progress of human freedom. It was the achievement of nineteenth century historians like Macaulay and Guizot to frame that progress as a distinct historical process, linked to specific events and key personalities of the past, all part of a

panoramic but relentless struggle in which the idea of liberty would finally emerge as reality.

But this begs the next question. Emerge from *what*? And struggle against what? Here again we can turn to Smith's friend and mentor David Hume for guidance. In his *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* (1759) comes a passage which may be one of the most important ever written in the eighteenth century—indeed, perhaps *the* most important. In discussing the origin of government and the progress of freedom in Europe, Hume points out that, 'There is a perpetual intestine struggle, open or secret, between AUTHORITY and LIBERTY, [and while] liberty is the perfection of civil society … authority must be acknowledged essential to its very existence … and [therefore] neither of them can ever absolutely prevail in the contest.'[9]

In short, the dynamic of history revolves around the clash between the impulse for liberty, of doing what we, not others, want, and ideas and institutions that *deny* that impulse, insisting that:

- human beings are happiest when they submit to an order imposed from above, not arrived at naturally or spontaneously from below;
- rampant individualism is a menace and danger to the safety of the group; and
- man's basic instincts for creative freedom must be channelled, controlled, or even eliminated all together.

Battle of ideas

This struggle, in fact, defines all four stages of the history of liberty. In the ancient world, it takes the form of the struggle of political liberty against what the Greeks termed tyranny, or rule of one man. In the Renaissance, it was the battle between intellectual liberty and various forms of religious and cultural dogma.

In the Reformation, it emerges as the struggle between liberty of conscience and coerced conscience (the latter embodied in Catholic Europe by the Inquisition and in Protestant England by the Act of Uniformity). It is even possible to see the entire history

of the eighteenth and nineteenth century West, including the French Revolution and American Civil War, as an ongoing contest between social and economic liberty and a range of entrenched inequalities and hierarchies, from landed aristocracies and guilds to that 'peculiar institution'—and survival from Europe's traditional past—chattel slavery.

Finally, in the twentieth century, we have the greatest epic battle of all: the defence of the four forms of liberty, which had become embedded in modern Western culture, against the furious onslaught of what Jean-Francois Revel called the totalitarian temptation, from Nazism and fascism to Communism. It was a battle that the Western democratic 'open societies' only just barely won; and one which is being at least to some degree renewed today in the fight against Islamofascism, or what is misleadingly if understandably termed 'the war on terror'.

Yet David Hume's point ran even deeper. Authority and authorities, he was saying, whether religious, political, social or cultural, cannot be completely abolished. Kings, popes, censors, police, regulators, bureaucracies: liberty has to impose limits on all of them in order to exist. But liberty itself also needs limits, in order to survive. History as the story of liberty still stands as a cumulative process, much as the Whig historians argued. But thanks to Hume, we can see that liberty advances not as a irresistible juggernaut, but through a progressive series of compromises and reconciliations with authority and the institutions which embody it.

This seems hardly a new discovery. But in each case the historical turning point seems to come when Authority agrees or is forced to agree to submit to the test of Liberty, rather than the other way around. This test is what distinguishes the fate of Einstein from the fate of Galileo; or Charles De Gaulle from Louis XIV; and the trial of Jan Hus from the trial of Saddam Hussein. It is what separates modern from pre-modern societies; ultimately, it is I would say what still separates the modern West and its Westernising offspring from older and other forms of social, political and religious organisation.

Yet what was our struggle in the West, is now theirs. When we turn on the television, what do we see? Developing countries

struggling with the impact of a globalising economy; with failing political institutions; with burning social resentments and deep-seated ethnic and religious rivalries; with endemic disease coupled with exploding demographics—so that the median age in so many societies in Africa and the Middle East is in the mid-twenties.

Where have we seen all this before? In France and Germany in the sixteenth century, England in the seventeenth century, Russia in the eighteenth century. How these countries came to deal with these problems and overcame them (or, as in the case of Russia, failed to do so) represent a powerful set of lessons for the future of countries like Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria, Pakistan and elsewhere.

Take the specific example of globalisation. It is worth bearing in mind that Europe's own plunge into the World Economic System in the years 1450–1650 caused massive social and economic dislocations. The cliché about a monolithic West descending on the rest of the planet like a blighting cancer could not be more misleading. The truth was some empires rose and other empires fell; some economies thrived while others went bankrupt.[10] On one side, huge catastrophic mistakes were made, like the creation of the African slave trade and its explosive growth from 1550–1700 in order to reap the rewards of wealth in the new continent of America.

Yet on the other, out of the process emerged a Europe stronger and more powerful than ever. Today, the reason is clear. Those societies in which individual liberty was allowed the freest play, like England and Holland, developed the mechanisms for adapting to change and turning change from a catastrophe into an opportunity—just as modernising societies do today. It was precisely the West's cultivation of institutions that protected and nurtured liberty as well as authority, that give that civilisation its resiliency and flexibility—a powerful lesson for countries that today face those similar challenges.

How many of the crises affecting Third World countries today, including the Middle East, arise from the clash between the desire and impulse for liberty on the one hand, and the assertion of traditional political, social, religious and cultural authorities on the other? I would venture to say almost of them.[11]

This leaves open a clear role for the West, including Australia, New Zealand and the United States. This is to foster those institutions

abroad that foster liberty, while making it clear that these conflicts are not a zero-sum game. Liberty and authority must and will live side by side, but only when those authorities realise they have submit to the test of consent, and to the test of experience instead of the assertion of dogma—or naked coercive force.

We in the West have already reaped what David Hume and others called 'the harvest of liberty'. The powerful difference is that today the non-West can learn from our historical mistakes, and still benefit from the results. Who would have guessed thirty years ago India would be emerging with one of the fastest growing economies, and financial and technological sectors, in the world? Who can guess where Indonesia or Algeria or Iraq could be in the next thirty years—*if* they take similar steps to the ones Western European countries did three hundred years ago.[12]

A world that seems on the brink of disaster, looks very different seventy years, or even a decade later. This is a key theme of the whole of European and Western history: change is constant and constantly shifts our perspective. This lecture opened with words from Jacob Burckhardt, now it can close with them. 'A peculiarity of higher cultures,' Burckhardt wrote in *Reflections on History,* 'is their susceptibility to renaissances.'[13] The power of renewal, of a Renaissance and renascence; this too is part of the power of liberty, and the secret of the West's resilience and strength. By becoming a force for liberty, the West can also renew itself, and remain a vital force in the world. It has powerful gifts, and a crucial lesson to offer. That is the power of liberty to shape the world for the better, and to bring a final accord to the people of a society and to the societies around them. ■

Endnotes

[1] Jacob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1979), p 250.

[2] See Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

[3] The exact quote is: 'The white race is the cancer of human history', quoted in *Idea of Decline*, p 365.

[4] Most recently my thinking on this matter has been shaped by reading Claude Nicolet, *Le métier de citoyen dans la Rome républicaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

[5] See Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), Vol II, pp 114–23.

[6] Indeed, the most succinct statement of medieval conciliar theory may be in the opening sentences of the American Declaration of Independence.

[7] It takes its original form in a letter to the ultraorthodox Abbe le Riche on 6 February 1770, 'I detest what you write, but I would give my life to make it possible for your to continue to write.'

[8] Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250–1500* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

[9] 'On the Origin of Government', in *Moral and Political Philosophy* ed. Henry Aiken (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p 313.

[10] The classic example is Spain, which reaped the benefits of instant wealth from American bullion, like oil-rich countries in the Middle East and South America today, but neglected the productive sectors of its economy. The net result is that when the gold and silver ran out, Spain wound up a poorer country than when it started.

[11] Including of course the clash between European colonialism and indigenous societies in the past. In other words, the history of imperialism itself fits into our model.

[12] Iraq, it seems to me, is an excellent test of this model. All the forces I mentioned are in full play there—although what the final outcome will be, is impossible to predict. However, by concentrating all their attention on the US's role there, everyone has missed the real story. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein

was in effect a slave revolt, from the perspective of the country's majority Shia population. For the first time in the Arab world, they hold the power, not their Sunni masters. It is, as analyst Fouad Ajami has said in his most recent book, a seismic event—one which has stirred or chilled the hearts of populations all across the Middle East. The crucial question is: will that power be one controlled by a stifling Islamicist radical orthodoxy, or will it be one guided by a Western model of liberty and diversity? For a retooled Reformation historian, all this has a familiar feel. From our perspective, Iraq looks like a mess. But then what would the history of England 1650–1750 look like viewed headline by headline?

[13] Burckhardt, *Reflections*, p 105.

Vote of Thanks

Sir Rod Eddington

I have the pleasant task of proposing the vote of thanks to our guest speaker Dr Arthur Herman and in doing so, I am conscious of Australia's greatest historian, Professor Geoffrey Blainey who has done so much to raise the consciousness of Australians about history in the broader sense, including our own history.

But Arthur let me thank you for not only such an extraordinary presentation but also for the honesty with which you handled the question and answer session. I was much relieved at the beginning of the presentation that you, like me, enjoy talking to taxi drivers. I suspect that we have slightly different sorts of conversations.

Most of my life was in the aviation business and when I got into taxis I mostly heard about lost baggage and inadequate meals. But in the early 1990s, I realised China, where I spent most of my working life, was going to be OK after talking to a taxi driver who was taking me from Beijing airport into the city. I had asked him what was going on and what the current temperature was like in Beijing and he told me that one of China's most prominent political critics had just been arrested and sentenced to 15 years in prison for standing on the corner and calling out that Li Peng, then Premier of China, was an idiot. I asked him why the sentence and he said, 'Well he was given five years for criticising a member of the Politburo and ten years for releasing state secrets.' You, like me, clearly value what they have to say.

But let me thank you too for your support of The Centre for Independent Studies because this is the second time you have come

to us. I certainly hope it won't be the last because the sorts of issues that you talk to and about and the challenges you present to us are the very core of what this body believes to be important. The issues that you talked about tonight have substantial resonance in particular because we are at a fascinating time in this planet's journey. I think that the importance of liberty and its role in civilised society is never more important than it has been today.

Thank you for coming to us, thank you for being so generous with your time and your thoughts and we look forward to welcoming you back for a third time. ■

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