Who is Naoíse Mac Sweeney’s new history of the West for?

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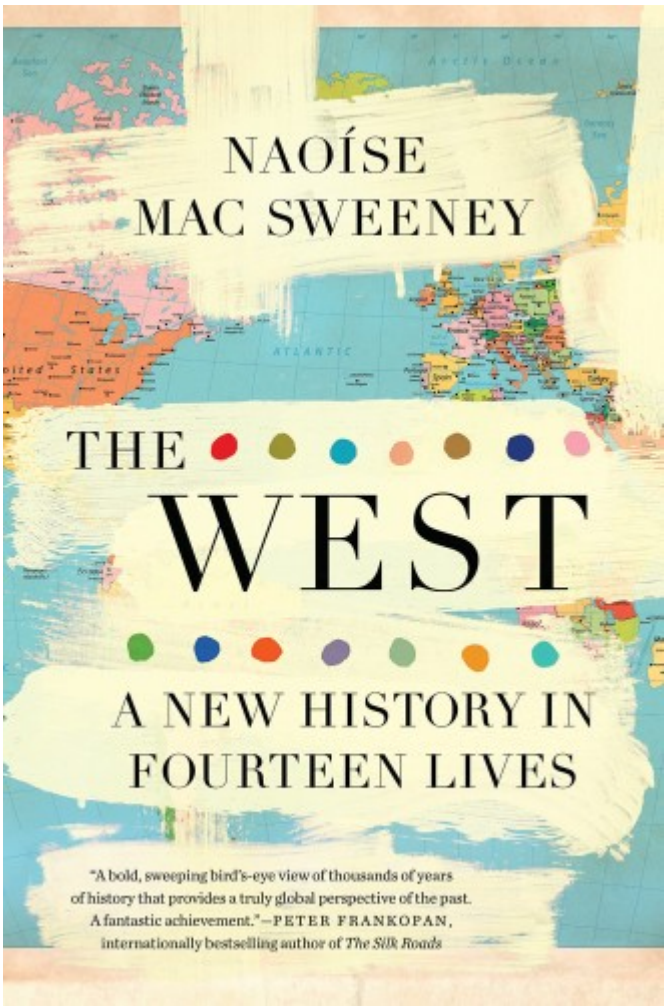
by Tony Jones in the July 2023 issue

In Review



The West

A New History in Fourteen Lives

By Naoíse Mac Sweeney

Dutton
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How do you feel about Martin Luther? Ambivalent? Me, too. I love 90 percent of what he did (the theology, the biblical translation, and standing up to the magisterium) but his antisemitism makes me nauseous. How about John Calvin? I appreciate his theology but I'm discomfited by his involvement in the execution of Michael Servetus. And Thomas Jefferson? I love the Declaration of Independence but hate that he owned slaves.

I think it's safe to say that many Christians share my ambivalence about these and a host of other historical figures. In fact, these days many of us feel conflicting feelings about the entire history of Western civilization. On the one hand, its legacy includes individual rights, liberal democracy, constitutional government, freedom of religion, and industrial advancement. On the other, there's oppression, imperialism, warfare, racism, sexism, and a growing wealth gap between the richest people and the rest of us.

Which makes me wonder exactly who Naoíse Mac Sweeney's *The West: A New History in Fourteen Lives* is written for. The heart of the book—the 14 relatively unknown historical figures whom she profiles—is profound and engaging. But the motivation for the work is so polemical that it might leave you scratching your head. Like so many books today, it seems aimed at convincing an audience that will never read it, thereby leaving actual readers like you and me to wade through the polemic to get to the good stuff.

And there is plenty of good stuff. Mac Sweeney has chosen 14 highly influential people, and she offers a mini-biography of each of them. Her subjects range from the relatively famous (Herodotus, Francis Bacon, William Gladstone) to the little known and underappreciated (Al-Kindi, Njinga of Angola, Carrie Lam). The book covers 25 centuries, an impressive feat. All the more impressive is the depth with which Mac Sweeney writes these histories, never cutting corners and only occasionally imputing to a historical figure thoughts that are pure conjecture.

One of her subjects, Livilla, was a major player in first-century Rome. Chosen by the first emperor, Augustus, to marry his grandson, she was on the path to power. When Livilla's husband died, those plans were derailed, but she quickly remarried another potential successor to the imperial purple, the son of the new emperor, Tiberius.

However, it wasn't long before her rivalry with her sister-in-law, Agrippina, heated up to full boil, exacerbated by Livilla's affair with the politician Sejanus while her husband was away fighting.

Livilla and Agrippina waged a war of publicity campaigns. While Agrippina seems to have won over Rome (and ultimately produced a son who would become emperor), Mac Sweeney finds great interest in an inscription at Troy that sings Livilla's praises rather than Agrippina's. Livilla, it seems, portrayed herself as the genetrix, the ideal mother, known for virtue and purity. And, Mac Sweeney notes, Livilla looked beyond Rome itself to its ancient Asian origins in Troy for support, thus weakening the empire's claim of Whiteness.

Another subject is Phillis Wheatley, an 18th-century slave who, much to the surprise and consternation of her fellow Bostonians, published a book of poetry in 1773—but only after a council of judges (including John Hancock) was convened to determine if she was really the poet. They ultimately concluded "that the POEMS . . . were . . . written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*." With the help of her owners, Wheatley traveled to London and published *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*.

One of the characteristics of Wheatley's writing that so vexed her contemporaries was her knowledge and mastery of Latin and Greek, which many thought to be the exclusive purview of Europeans. It was "shocking that someone like Wheatley, who could not belong to the imagined genealogy of the West, could still gain such mastery over its cultural and intellectual legacy," Mac Sweeney writes. "Wheatley challenged the ideology of a biological West by the simple fact of her existence."

Mac Sweeney's goal with each of these biographies is to problematize the idea of the West as a monolithic behemoth of our inherited culture—a purely White, European phenomenon. But for a historian who is so careful with the stories she tells about individuals, it's surprising that she resorts to phrases like "the story that the West tells about itself" when referring to larger cultural forces. Who, in a statement like that, is "the West"? To personify the West in order to vilify it is the very definition of a straw man argument.

Mac Sweeney may have in mind the sweeping popular histories of Western civilization by authors such as right-wing culture warrior William Bennett and classical education advocate Susan Wise Bauer. But we don't know who Mac

Sweeney is taking on because, she writes, “I shall not mention individuals by name here, because this book is not about them.” She does more than once call out Samuel P. Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, an influential but problematic book that overstates the discreteness of cultures and underestimates the interdependencies of civilizations.

In the end, Mac Sweeney claims that “the traditional grand narrative of Western Civilisation . . . has long been disproved on a factual basis,” whereas her history in 14 lives is “based on facts” and has been presented “in a way that avoids, as much as possible, the distortion of value judgements.” It’s an exercise in temerity to assert that in a sea of subjective historians, you’re the objective one, and it’s that temerity that ultimately undermines Mac Sweeney’s project.

This article was edited on July 19 to correct a mischaracterization of Susan Wise Bauer’s work.