

The King of Kings

Book Review: *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* by Jack Weatherford

Much of what we accept as recorded fact today is a result of the careful piecing together of scattered evidence by intrepid archivists and historians across several generations and viewpoints. The passing of time affords biographers the distance necessary to cultivate multiple perspectives of history's defining events and personalities, and a kind of 'truth' – if not in the details, then at least in its essence – eventually emerges from this mad scramble, if we are indeed so lucky. In the absence of a consistent narrative to bind together conflicting interpretations, however, the slim lines separating history and mythology start blurring. Ordinary people of extraordinary ability or courage are transformed by such a distortion into archetypal heroes, villains and gods; and an objective reading of their lives becomes increasingly difficult. Among the few great divisive personalities of popular lore, one who audaciously treads both historical and mythic paradigms is that most prolific conqueror of races – the world-beating Genghis Khan, last of the immortals.

In part due to the lack of reliable written accounts of his early life, in some measure because of regional politics at the time, and moreover as an ironic product of his own army's incredibly successful propaganda machine, the Great Khan's story has hitherto been subject to some rather dramatic speculation on the part of historians and storytellers. In 2004, however, with the publication of *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, an American academic named Jack Weatherford effectively rounded off a large chunk of this debate. A distinguished professor of anthropology at Macalester College and a specialist in tribal cultures, with a talent for simple and lucid explanations, Weatherford seems to have relied largely, much to his credit, on rational deduction to arrive at a surprisingly precise portrait of Temujin and his progeny. And the proof of this precision is in Weatherford's exhaustive data-gathering process.

While much of his kind prefers to sit around libraries gathering cobwebs around the ears, Weatherford followed the Indiana Jones Method of satiating curiosity. He travelled for several years in Mongolia and its neighbouring regions, retracing the routes followed by Genghis Khan's hordes, braving all manner of terrain and weather, covering a sizeable portion of it, like his quarry, on horseback. In the company of a group of Mongolian scholars and students, he managed to gain unprecedented access to the original homeland of the Golden family, the place of Genghis Khan's birth and eventual burial – *Ikh Khorig*, or The Great Taboo – a forgotten world sealed off from prying eyes for eight hundred years by various administrations up until, latest of the lot, the Soviet Russians. Weatherford studied the newly rediscovered *Secret History of the Mongols*, the oldest surviving history of Genghis Khan's tribe, which has only lately been translated into English and

other European languages after many years of obscurity. And through documentary analysis and his experiential understanding of the Mongolian landscape, he managed to reconstruct the life of the Mongol nation's founder into a believable persona which in every way refutes the commonly held perception of Genghis Khan as a wild barbarian king of limited subtlety and an unchecked capacity for violence. Through Weatherford's reimagining, the Khan's motives, ideas and actions cumulatively generate the picture of an astute leader with exalted goals and methodical designs for executing them.

Weatherford writes that our current notions of Genghis Khan stem from a systematic tarnishing of his image in the centuries following his death by various vassal states and former adversaries, and, furthermore, from an Occidental polemic targeting various Asian communities as a precursor to colonisation. Hence, for instance, retarded babies came to be referred to as 'Mongoloid' in the West, in an attempt to transfer the attributes of such a deformity to a specific race that the British people wished to subjugate. If anything, the Khan and his Mongol army were, according to Weatherford's research, the very embodiment of shrewdness and tact. Difficult lessons learnt while growing up had invested in young Temujin large reserves of high intelligence, pragmatism and resourcefulness. As we now know from his surviving personal correspondence and the written accounts of those in his proximity, the Khan never made a decision without careful deliberation on all its possible outcomes. A great manager of people, he devised a decimal system of ordering his tribe that channelised their energies efficiently both in times of war and peace. His campaigns were in equal parts fear-rousing propaganda and brilliant strategy. Often pitted against forces that far outnumbered them, the Mongols prevailed due to concerted application of speed and military ingenuity. The Khan's tactics, developed over a succession of hard-won battles, were later passed on to his sons and grandsons who went on to conquer all the lands between Eastern Europe and China. It is no wonder, then, that Chaucer dedicated an entire chapter of his *Canterbury Tales* in praise of Genghis Khan.

But the real genius of Weatherford's reinterpretation of Mongol history – and therein we find the real genius of the Khan himself – is in mapping their ruler's influence on global society as we know it today, bridging the past with our present via innovation. By sheer force of will and applied thinking, Genghis Khan redefined the geography of the world, established fresh patterns of trade, invented an international postal system, united many scattered tribes and cities into a mammoth empire, established universal religious freedom and a democratic process of election under his banner of the Eternal Blue Sky, initiated cultural and technological exchange between Europe and Asia, and pretty much rewired the world from a disparate collection of incestuous neighbourhoods into a massive integrated organism. And he achieved all this in less than eighty years, a remarkable feat that even the Romans couldn't achieve in over four hundred years of world dominance. Weatherford's style of writing, in explaining Genghis Khan's

rise to power, is imaginative, clear and extremely accessible, a genuine pleasure to read.

While *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* ably tackles a majority of the mysteries surrounding the first Mongol king, there are probably many more secrets that Temujin will, as might any charismatic figure in history, have carried with him to the grave. Indeed, the Great Khan's burial spot has never been found, and he has arranged it so, it is said, that we never will. That enigma is a fitting final legacy of so bold a man – in disappearing without a trace, he has bequeathed us the potential to imagine.

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