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238 pages. $7.50

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By Milton Covensky.
About two years ago, Fischer Bucherei KG of Frankfort, Germany, began to issue a many-volume history of the world by continental scholars. These began to appear in English translations from Weidenfeld & Nicolson of London the following year, and from Delacourt Press, a subsidiary of Dell Publishing Company of New York, this year. The first of the latter volumes, Fieldhouse’s “The Colonial Empires,” was reviewed in The Star on April 2, “The Near East,” the second in the series, is the first of three volumes which will cover the history of the ancient Near East. After an introductory chapter by Falkenstein, which is inadequate and badly translated, it has four chapters on Mesopotamian civilization (three of them, solid and scholarly, by Edzard), and six chapters on Egypt by Vercoutter.

This volume has little to contribute to the American reader. Its point of view is narrow and old-fashioned, and clearly out of date. Its audience is ambiguous, since it assumes knowledge which the ordinary reader will not have and has nothing new to offer to any reader with the background it assumes. Its point of view is obsolete, concentrating on dates of kings, sequence of dynasties, battles and invasions, which are of little interest or significance today.

At the same time, it says little about the military organization, belief, or economic organization, which are of vital importance. Worst of all, the authors ignore any areas outside their subject and do not define terms they use: Falkenstein thinks that domestication of animals and "nomadic pastoralism" was earlier than "settled agriculture" (p. 15) when it was later by 3,000 years; he dates the sailboat and chariot both before 4000 B.C., which is dubious, calls cuneiform "a 'word-script' in which each sign corresponds to a single word," when he means "syllable," and refers to our choice between two systems of chronology for the Near East as being "one Venus period" apart, without explaining that the transit of Venus across the face of the sun, recorded in the reign of Hammurabi, is the chief key to Near East Bronze Age chronology.

On Mesopotamia

Edzard's three chapters on Mesopotamia are solid and trustworthy within their limited view of history as largely "past politics," but the serious reader who is interested in this area from this point of view would do better with the chapters of the New Cambridge Ancient History now being published, as they are available, in separate pamphlets by the Cambridge University Press.

The general fault of the volume (narrowness, undefined terms, and isolation from knowledge of other areas) is also true of Jean Vercoutter’s Six chapters on Egypt. To give examples, he says that the Mesolithic period is missing from Egypt, posits the possibility that the valley was uninhabited between the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic, and then describes the Palaeolithic in terms which are entirely Mesolithic (complete with kitchen middens, fishing, use of the bow, and gathering and grinding of "wild grain"). He seems to know nothing about the Neolithic Outside of Egypt and seems to think that its crops and domestic animals were developed locally, when it is universally agreed that all of these are of Asiatic origin; he tells us that this Egyptian “Neolithic Revolution” was “achieved around 4500 B.C.,” but clearly does not know that Asia Minor had a fully achieved Neolithic village, but without pottery, about 7000 B.C.

The interested reader will be glad to know that better books than this one, in many cases the best books on the subject, are available in paperback. Among these are the basic book on ancient Egypt, Sir Alan Gardiner's "Egypt of the Pharaohs" (Galaxy Paperback, 1964), as well as Walter Emery’s “Archaic Egypt” (Penguin; 1961), and James Mellaart's wonderful "Earliest Civilizations of the Near East" (McGraw-Hill Paperback, 1966).
More Paperbacks

Covensky's paperback is another of this type. In 109 small pages of text, he gives a remarkably clear and adequate introduction to the history of the whole Near East, with some indication of the differences in outlook of these from each other and from us. He has read the best authorities, digested their works, and sees the real problems. If the reader is still interested, his future reading on the subject will find no better guide than Covensky's 15-page annotated bibliography, all paperbacks.

Of course, on any subject, even the beginner needs to turn to hardbound volumes eventually. In ancient Near East studies Fiore's "Voices From the Clay" is one of these. Translated from a German edition of 1956, and based on an intimate firsthand knowledge of early Mesopotamian literature, it shows, through extracts and commentary, the spiritual, literary, and speculative life of the cuneiform period. It is both interesting and revealing.

One of the most prolific, if not most reliable, writers on the ancient East is the English amateur, Leonard Cottrell. This is his 27th book, and, like most of them, it is journalistic, dramatic, and intimate. In this one, the author tries to reconstruct the lives of five queens of Egypt. This is not easy to do, in view of the limited evidence, but Cottrell manages to get a full-size book by explanation of the methods of archaeology and the domestic life of the Egyptians.

—CARROLL QUIGLEY.

Please email the editors (editors@carrollquigley.net) with corrections, questions, or if you have other works by Professor Quigley you would like to see posted.

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