
There are many ways of approaching this book. On one level, the book achieves a certain degree of success. It is a popular history which moves along at a good pace, consistently supported by a clear thesis which comes through loud and clear. On another level, the book is fatally flawed. Not only is the thesis itself full of holes but, even on the criteria it has set for itself, the book fails. The argument is that the geo-political formation of the modern world is a direct result of climatic changes which occurred in the sixth century due to the eruption of the Krakatoa volcano in South East Asia in 535.

For example, we read that the rise of the Anglo-Saxons in the sixth century was facilitated by their (relative) escape from the plague, with the plague being a result of the changed climatic conditions following the eruption. Subsequent Anglo-Saxon domination through to the English colonisation of America, India, New Zealand and Australia can also be explained as a consequence of this sixth-century realignment of power. Similar arguments are posited for Irish history, French history, and so on, with an unbroken genealogy from sixth-century ‘vent’ to twentieth-century ‘structure’ being the common motif. And I mention the ‘event’ and ‘structure’ quite deliberately, since these are two elements of history which Keys never addresses and, indeed, all too easily conflates. While anyone interested in Annales history is more than happy to accept the influence of climate on history, let it be stated here that this is not the book in which to find any thorough investigation of the matter; the book argues that the sixth-century climate change was critical in sowing the seeds for the modern world but, then again, one could equally argue the same for the Little Ice Age of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. Or, indeed, for a range of other players in historical change, such as technology, education, religious belief, and commercial practices, to name a few.

As a representative of a wider cultural phenomenon, this book is a prime example of some of the deep contradictions embedded in popular history-writing and reading at present. Nominally a ‘world history’ which investigates and analyses the big picture, the book is in fact history at its most conceptually restricted. That is, a single, unitary, confined and isolated explanatory mechanism is invoked as the origin and cause of all that succeeds it. A pervasive determinism is one result of this, but the problem also goes deeper. There is no conception in this book that history is complicated, that explanations are difficult to come by and, most important, that
explanations for something as sophisticated as modern geo-political relations can only
found in the interactions of various factors rather than in single events alone. This
book displays all the features of alchemical history, the belief that out of one item alone
we can create something which answers all our questions. Here Keys’ work taps into
and reflects a wider cultural phenomenon: the popular desire to find the ‘key to
history’. Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* has fallen prey to the ultimate irony in
having its main point (i.e., that this book is fiction) completely missed! Like Eco’s
book, which managed to posit genealogical links between the most divergent of
societies and historical events, *Catastrophe* also sees links everywhere: the climate
changes of the sixth century triggered the rise of the Turks (hence leading to the rise of
the Ottoman Empire), the climate changes led to the dominance of northern France
over southern France (hence leading to the evolution of modern France), and so on.
But, unlike Eco’s book, this book is presented as a genuine contribution to both past
history and future society. It is a book with a clear moral: climate has changed the
world in the past, global warming may do so in the future. But why is it that in our
highest morality we have to sum up the world at its broadest in concepts and
sound-bites at their narrowest?

The book does contain good selections from relevant primary documents,
usually medieval chronicles. These quotes introduce the general reader to a decent
range of written sources from the medieval period, and the endnotes direct the reader
to English translations where available. This is all to the good. On the other hand,
there is no guarantee whatsoever that the sources enlisted prove what Keys says they
prove. For example, does reference to desolation and destruction in thirteenth-century
Arthurian romances prove that there was famine and plague in sixth-century Britain?
Well, yes, according to Keys. Scholars of medieval literature and history will cringe;
what about the common literary motif of the wasteland? And Keys can only spend a
full chapter on this argument because he has already decided that these later medieval
Arthurian romances do in fact refer to a putative sixth-century past, a classic piece of a
priori reasoning all too common in studies to do with Arthur. And since when has
literature been a direct reflection of social history anyway?

Is this random use of primary sources important? For the reader who wishes
to be introduced to new sources, with the intention of then going out and reading
them more fully, then perhaps the book’s failings are not so severe. But, then again,
that is not why people are going to buy and read this book. In addition to any desires
for entertainment or whiling away long train journeys, people still read non-fiction
books with the expectation of learning something. And a book with a subtitle
promising an investigation into the origins of the modern world does set up a standard
for a thorough investigation, not a random and a priori one. Finally, then, this cause-
and-effect investigative style is where the book fails. Its adherence to a single cause and