

Persian Fire - The First World Empire and the Battle for the West by Tom Holland. Little, Brown 2005

With his much acclaimed Rubicon Tom Holland established himself in the front rank of popular historians; Persian Fire cements that position and enhances it.

Persian Fire tells in engrossing detail the story of the Persian Empire, built on the foundations of its Babylonian predecessor and surpassing it in every way. It is a story of visionary rulers of enormous power, Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes and the means by which they ruled one of the most sophisticated empires the world has ever known.

Holland does not restrict his focus just to Persia however, for a key aspect of the empire's history was its attempt to extend its power across the Mediterranean by conquering Greece.

In spite of an ominously positive beginning, including the extraordinary engineering feat of bridging the Hellespont, in spite of overwhelming superiority in numbers, and in spite of the recidivistic tendencies of the Greeks to hate and kill each other rather than their Persian enemies, the empire failed to achieve its goal.

Persian Fire is thus also a tale of Sparta and Athens, of Leonidas and Themistocles, of Marathon, Thermopylae and Salamis.

Tom Holland brings wit and insight to his writing, illuminating a crucial period in world history in a manner that should be attractive to anyone who likes good prose or is engaged by a fantastic story that is superbly told.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh