

The Looming Tower
Al-Qaeda's Road to 9/11 by Lawrence Wright.
Penguin Allen Lane 2006.

The literary world is awash with books on Islam, Al Qaeda, Islam, Islamism and Islamic Terrorism, so much so that no intelligent person has any excuse for failing to understand what is going on today in the troubled interface between the Islamic and Western worlds.

The Looming Tower is different; it is not just about the events of 9/11, though they are touched on at the end, it is not just about the origins of Islamism, though it touches on this too, it is about the origins, development and activities of Al-Qaeda, its principal figures, its successes and its failures.

In 20 compelling chapters Lawrence Wright tells the story of the key men in Al-Qaeda, their background and personal history, their motivation, their religious philosophy, their relationship with close colleagues and their attitudes towards their enemies. What makes The Looming Tower an even richer read than would already be the case is the fact that Wright also writes about the major protagonists of Al-Qaeda in the United States, quintessentially the FBI man John O'Neill who died, by the cruellest irony, beneath the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

Everyone who reads this amazing book will take something away from it that stays with them: for me, two things stick out particularly: first, the number of times that Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri might have been killed, but somehow escaped, and second, the criminal negligence of the officers of the CIA who withheld vital information from the FBI that might have prevented 9/11, and much more besides, and who kept it to themselves for reasons of pride and inter-institution mistrust.

The Looming Tower is a book anyone who seeks to understand the defining event of the 21st century MUST read.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh