



4-1-2006

The Years of Rice and Salt by Kim Stanley Robinson

John J. Reilly
admin@johnreilly.info

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>

Recommended Citation

Reilly, John J. (2006) "*The Years of Rice and Salt* by Kim Stanley Robinson," *Comparative Civilizations Review*. Vol. 54 : No. 54 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol54/iss54/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

The Years of Rice and Salt

BY KIM STANLEY ROBINSON

BANTAM PAPERBACK 2003 (HARDCOVER 2002) 763 PAGES, US\$7.99

What would the world be like if there had never been a European modernity? To answer that question, Kim Stanley Robinson has written what may be the finest example thus far of Alternative History.

Let us suppose that the plague in 14th century Europe was so absolutely lethal that the whole continent was depopulated. When the story starts around 1400, a deserter from the horde of Timur the Lame gets an inkling of the disaster as he wanders through the deserted landscapes of Hungary and the Balkans. The conceit that holds the book together is that people are reincarnated, so we meet this pious everyman again and again for the next 700 years. Some interesting discussions occur in the bardo state, between incarnations, when he and his karmic companions meet to compare notes. The Perennial Revolutionary sometimes tires of the Pious Man's historical optimism: "We may be in a hallucination here, but that is no excuse for being delusional."

The 15th century discovery of the Americas is cancelled, but a Chinese fleet sent out a century later to establish a base in Japan discovers the Inca Empire. Not long thereafter, oceanic explorers from Firanja, a Europe resettled from North Africa, discover the east coast of the western continents. These penetrations from Eurasia are slow enough, however, to allow the politically ingenious people around the northern continent's great freshwater lakes to adapt to the new diseases and to organize defenses. In later years, their model of democratically representative federal government would become the best hope of mankind.

In Samarqand, in what would have been the late 17th century, an alchemist notes that different weights fall at the same speed; soon there is a mathematics to express acceleration. A century later, and scholars in the fracture area between China and Islam were trying to reconcile the intellectual traditions of the two. The result is the beginning of a secular, enlightened science of humanity. A noble passage from their work runs thus:

"History can be seen as a series of collisions of civilizations, and it

is these collisions that create progress and new things. It may not happen at the actual point of contact, which is often wracked by disruption and war, but behind the lines of conflict, where the two cultures are most trying to define themselves and prevail, great progress is often made very swiftly, with works of permanent distinction in arts and technique. Ideas flourish as people try to cope, and over time the competition yields to the stronger ideas, the more flexible, more generous ideas. Thus Fulan, India, and Yingzhou are prospering in their disarray, while China grows weak from its monolithic nature, despite the enormous infusion of gold from across the Dahai. No single civilization could ever progress; it is always a matter of two or more colliding. Thus the waves on the shore never rise higher than when the backwash of some earlier wave falls back into the next one incoming, and a white line of water jets to a startling height. History may not resemble so much the seasons of the year, as waves in the sea, running this way and that, crossing, making patterns, sometimes to a triple peak, a very Diamond Mountain of cultural energy, for a time."

The Hindu regions of India were the first to master mechanical industrialization, techniques that soon spread universally. The fractious Islamic world unites to meet a supposed Chinese threat. The result is the Long War, which starts in the closing decades of the decrepit Qing Dynasty. It pits eastern and southern Asia against the rest of the Old World, continues for 67 years, and kills a billion people. Even in the middle of what would have been the 21st century, the world had still not recovered psychologically.

In postwar Firanja, disgruntled intellectuals chatter in cafes about the history of everyday life and the perennial oppression of women. There is a subplot about how physicists collude to avoid building an atomic bomb. At a conference of historians, a panel on the nature of the plague that destroyed Europe comes no closer to explaining what happened. We get a discussion of reincarnation as a narrative device and, better still, of narrative structures in historical writing, particularly in narratives of historical progress.

In the erstwhile 21st century, Timur's deserter, now an elderly historian, settles into semi-retirement at a small college in a region that is not called California. In a way, he had reached the world of perpetual light that people like him had always hoped for, but the eschaton is more like that of Francis Fukuyama than of any of the great religions.

In "It's a Wonderful Life," Stephen Jay Gould contemplated the effect of catastrophe on biological history, concluding that evolution

after each catastrophe is unpredictably random. Kim Stanley Robinson comes to the opposite of Gould's conclusion: the most remarkable effect of the deletion of the West is that there is no qualitative effect.

Gould may have been wrong, but that does not mean Robinson was right. The West did not decisively influence the internal affairs of China and the Ottoman Empire until well into the 19th century. Late Ming sailors could have discovered America, but even if they had, China was no longer looking for adventures. Similarly, there is no reason why the physics of Galileo and Newton could not have been discovered in Central Asia in the 17th century, if all that was necessary was cultural cross-fertilization and a frustrated interest in alchemy. Why did real-world India not begin the process of industrialization? It was not just a question of technique. Industrial development requires financial sophistication and acceptable political risk. India was kept from developing by an inadequate political culture.

Toynbee defined civilization as a class of society that affords an intelligible unit of historical study; we see even in the dates in this book that something literally does not compute. Most are given in the Muslim reckoning, but the allusions to historical Chinese emperors are more helpful because of the difference between the lengths of the lunar and solar years. (A Muslim century, if memory serves, is only about 97 Gregorian years.) The omission of the Christian calendar makes world history almost inconceivable.

This does not mean that there is no world history other than the history of the West. As Toynbee also noted, civilizations come in generations, and the generation that includes Islam, the West, and China were all, in principle, universal. During their periods of expansion, Islam and China almost but not quite reached around the world. The Western Age of Discovery finally did encompass the globe, and so created the possibility of a genuinely ecumenical society.

Omit the West, and China during the last 500 years would still have been winding down from its Sung climax. The Ottoman Empire was losing control of its hinterland without Western interference; the empire would still have unraveled, perhaps with the caliphate surviving as a venerable anachronism. It is a commonplace that the English in India stepped into a vacuum left by the decline of the Mughals. As at the end of the Bronze Age, Earth by the middle of the 20th century might have seemed like a planet with a great future behind it. However, it would have been just a matter of time before one or more societies wove together the "unlosables" (to use William Ernest Hocking's term) to

make a new start. That would make a good story, too.

John Reilly
admin@johnreilly.info