

CON ARTIST?

The life of Kahlil Gibran

BOOKS

A brief history of time

The story of the calendar is not much more than a great yarn, says **Kristen Lippincott**

Like the fabled London buses, it seems that you wait decades for a book on the history of the calendar and, finally, three come round the corner all at once. The first to appear was Arno Borst's erudite study of the mathematics of the calendar, first published in German in 1990 and translated for English readers in 1993 as *The Ordering of Time: From the Ancient Computus to the Modern Computer* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993). Borst's recounting of the story of the development of the calendar merits nothing but praise. It is clear, concise, well-researched and wholly reliable — a valuable touchstone for those interested in the philosophy and mechanics of timekeeping.

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Next was Stephen Jay Gould's *Questioning the Millennium: A Rationalist's Guide to a precisely arbitrary Countdown* (New York: Harmony Books, 1997), an engaging, cheeky look at the absurdities of the calendar, written in a style that preserves all the excitement and immediacy of a well-crafted lecture. It is filled with insider's jokes and comic asides, while still managing to be fundamentally sound.

The most recent of the three, David Ewing Duncan's *The Calendar*, is a charming and well-written ramble through history. With a talent for evocative descriptions of distant times and places, he leads us from neolithic France to the fertile lands of Ancient Mesopotamia, from Egypt to Central America, Western China and the banks of the Ganges River, back through Islam to the re-awakening lands of the medieval Latin West, and onwards towards the Renaissance, the Gregorian Reform and, finally, to the adoption of Universal Co-ordinated Time in 1972. We encounter heroes and villains,



popes and emperors, damsels in not-too-great distress, cold and disgruntled Roman foot soldiers on the banks of the Rhine and lusty old monks, desperate to find the right date to celebrate Easter. We are told tales of positional notation and intercalary days, punctuated with the poetry of Hesiod, Chaucer, Petrarch and Omar Khayyam. He breathes life into numerous nearly forgotten historical figures, such as Dionysius Exiguus, the Gupta sage Aryabhata or the great Arabic astronomer Abu Jafar Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, whose existence and contribution to learning was, until now, fondly recollecting by only a handful of learned scholars. The book is a good read, deserves to be enjoyed by

a wide audience and it has the kind of pace and direction that could easily lend to its being re-crafted into a thoroughly enjoyable television series.

To take it from another perspective, however, one could argue that it is precisely these appealing qualities of the book that raise certain problems. In this age of "infotainment" and so-called "intellectual accessibility", one does begin to feel slightly prudish when one starts to question how books are constructed and presented. Thousands of people may well enjoy this book — some may even have their eyes opened to an unknown and fascinating world where philosophy, religion, astronomy and mathematics converge. But, for those of us who already live there, Duncan's book is a bit of a cu-

THE CALENDAR By David Ewing Duncan

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rate's egg. In his search for drama, he does tend to stretch one's credibility. But, when an author is searching for a key with which to unlock lazy minds, is it unreasonable for the scholar to question whether the exact schedule of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra's sex life really contributed to the history of the calendar — or to ask what several pages of excellent description of the "black bulls and blackes and strange black swalling the size of apples in their armpits, necks, and groins, oozing pus and blood" that signalled the arriv-

al of the Plague into 14th-century Europe has to do with Giovanni deDondi's *Astrarium* and the early stages of the development of the mechanical clock? Is it ungenerous to wonder what the original source of an illustration might be? And is it really evil to yearn for a footnote that might tell you where you can find the full text of a quoted passage?

It seems that many publishers today regard the footnote with the same suspicion that J. Edgar Hoover viewed subtitled, foreign films. Footnotes are not an ethical plot; they are a means by which the interested reader can follow the thinking of the author and trace an idea back to its original formulation or phrasing. For those who care whether or not what they are reading is true, reading a book without footnotes is like being forced to play Chinese Whispers while wearing earmuffs. It is very hard to understand, let alone trust, much of what you have been told.

Certainly, the citation of misspellings and typographical errors is the last refuge of the pedant, but the carefulness

with which a text is constructed and edited does tell you something about the author's attitude towards his sources. It may seem niggling, but how far can you trust an author who refuses to recognise that transliterations of Arabic carry rather significant diacritical markings (so leaves them out altogether), or who manages to create a rendering of the Latin genitive for "calendar" with two 's'? And can one have complete faith in the authority of a writer who includes *The World Book Encyclopedia*, *The Times Concise Atlas of the World* and *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* and a website called "Calendarland" among his primary sources? It's a tough decision to make. Duncan's book is easy to read and a lot of fun; but, personally, I am glad to know that Borst and Gould are still out there.

Kristen Lippincott is Director of the Old Royal Observatory in Greenwich and is preparing a major exhibition for the National Maritime Museum called *The Story of Time*, which is scheduled to open in December 1999.