

## History

### The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs transformed Western Civilization

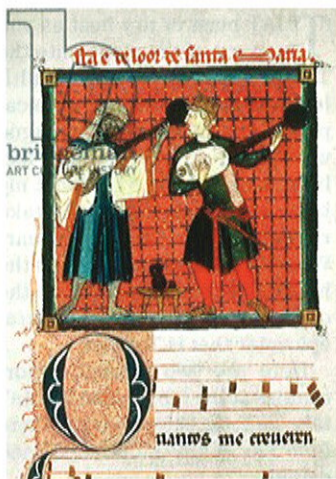
Jonathan Lyons  
(Bloomsbury, £20)

*THE HOUSE OF WISDOM* is a book for book-lovers, brimful of excitement at the fragile intellectual connections that crisscrossed the medieval world. Its heroes are the wandering scholars and freelance translators who kept the ancient learning alive in the face of an indifferent, if not actively hostile, world. For the pyres and judicial inquisitions burned just as fiercely in the East as they did in the West.

The two geographical centres of *The House of Wisdom* are the vast multi-cultural libraries that were assembled by rival caliphs in Baghdad and Cordoba. Although the book reaches back to Aristotle and forward to Copernicus, the heart of the inquiry is centred on the 200 years between the First Crusade (1099) and the death of St Thomas Aquinas (1274). Jonathan Lyons' detailed, accurate and elegant scholarship convincingly chronicles the extraordinary debt that Western civilisation owes to the Arabs. He also entertains us in the process, fleshing out the figure of Adelard of Bath as he digs around Crusader-held Antioch looking for manuscripts, and returns all wise and mysterious-looking in his long cloak of green matched by an emerald signet ring.

We learn how to handle an astrolabe, and to ponder on the wobble of stars and the irregularity of the Moon. We listen in on that terrifying first interview between Averroes and his sultan, which sparked off the greatest scholarly achievement of the age—Averroes' 38 Great Commentaries on Aristotle, in line-by-line detail, backed up by the *Epitomes*, a more accessible summary for the general reader.

We also encounter another unlikely medieval friendship: between the Scots 'wizard'



A symbol of friendship that is as powerful today as ever: 'A Muslim and a Christian playing a duet on the lute, from thirteenth-century Spain. This work was dedicated to Alfonso the Wise, the Christian ruler of Castile, Leon and Galicia'

Michael Scot (who played the lyre in order to fund his early travels) and his munificent patron, the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II. This Sicilian-born emperor was feared for his scorching intelligence, but also ridiculed for turning a crusade to the Holy Land into a brilliantly negotiated peace with the 'enemy'.

*The House of Wisdom* also has a rich cast of villains—that familiar huddle of power-hungry priests and ambitious warlords who maintained their position by encouraging ignorance and fuelling hatred.

*Barnaby Rogerson*

## Books on war and insurrection

**Brothers in Arms** Iain Gale  
(Harper Collins, £14.99)

**Letters from the Trenches**  
Bill Lamin (Michael O'Mara  
Books, £14.99)

**Summer of Blood** Dan  
Jones (Harper Collins, £20)

**Operation Snakebite**  
Stephen Grey (Viking,  
£16.99)

**Marcus Aurelius: Warrior,  
Philosopher, Emperor** Frank  
McLynn (Bodley Head, £20)



China's plantations have supplied tea for the English since 1650

## History

**The True History of Tea**  
Victor H. Mair and Erling Hoh  
(Thames & Hudson, £14.95)  
**For All the Tea in China**  
Sarah Rose (Hutchinson,  
£18.99)

TAKE A SUBJECT as comprehensive as tea, chart its development from the year dot, and you get a sweeping world history. *The True History of Tea* starts in Ancient China with such oddities as the Song dynasty's Tea and Horse agency of 1074, where tea was swapped for Tibetan war horses to control the Mongol hordes. There's also early evidence of human contradictoriness with one set of 17th-century doctors warning that tea is deadly, as another lists its huge benefits. And, if we think our tea ceremony (the milk-in-first controversy) is complicated, just read the chapter on what the Japanese get up to.

Tea arrived in England in about 1650, and now, like New Zealand, Japan and Morocco,

Britain drinks more than 100 million litres a year (China drinks no more than 59 million). This is a book to be as treasured as a Japanese tea bowl.

Robert Fortune gets but a single mention in *The True History of Tea*, but he's the hero of Sarah Rose's *For All the Tea in China*. And what a hero he is, disguising himself as Chinese with a long black pigtail to venture into China's alarming hinterland to smuggle out tea plants. He was accompanied by two Chinese servants, with Pidgin their only common language. He had to face all 19th-century China's perils—bandits, cannibalism, fevers and pirates. This, and the detailed description of how tea is made from raw camellia leaves, will ensure you value your cuppa as never before.

*Leslie Geddes-Brown*

## Don't miss...

**The Old Boys' Network:  
A Headmaster's Diaries  
1970-1986** John Rae  
(Short Books, £17.99)



Tea clippers such as the *Titania* could cross the Atlantic in 14 days