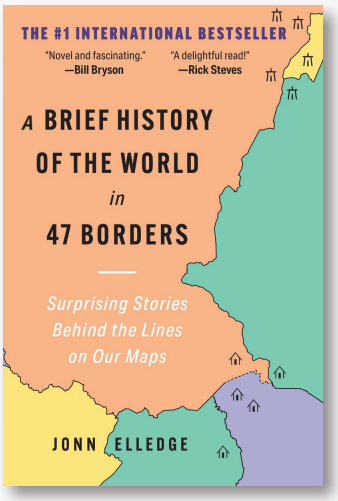
DOI: 10.14714/CP110.2141



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN 47 BORDERS: SURPRISING STORIES BEHIND THE LINES ON OUR MAPS

By Jonn Elledge, maps by Tim Peters

The Experiment, 2025

368 pages

Paperback: $18.95, ISBN 979-8-89303-082-2

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Jonn Elledge's *A Brief History of the World in 47 Borders: Surprising Stories Behind the Lines on Our Maps* is exactly what it tells you it is—a mostly chronological collection of short (on average, six- to eight-page) chapters exploring world borders that he finds amusing. The book is broken into three parts, in which "Part One: Histories" details the origins and evolution of the idea and manifestation of national borders, "Part Two: Legacies" explores modern-day conflicts and curiosities, and "Part Three: Externalities" questions the whole future of borders.

The book's intentions and background are well laid out in an "Introduction" detailing the history and impermanence of borders. The author caveats the messy slew of geopolitical history he has prepared for us with a warning that it is a product of his perspective as a white Westerner living in London, England. He proactively asks for forgiveness if his representations should disappoint the reader, and points out that, if the reader would only "buy copies of this book for all your friends and family," he might have an opportunity to redeem himself in a sequel (6). This casual, familiar tone carries the reader through the book, and reflects the style of other works by Elledge.

"Part One: Histories" takes us through some of the early empires of the world and as much colonialism as can fit into this first third of the book. The first chapter of this part describes the long, gradual process by which increasingly stable farm settlements along the fertile banks of the Nile led to the creation of a border between Upper and Lower Egypt, a demarcation Elledge calls the "first boundary in the world — possibly" (11). This origin story sets up further chapters on some of the many Chinese dynasties, the Roman and Holy Roman Empires, and the development of European colonialism at home and at large.

"Part Two: Legacies" oscillates, at times wildly, between weighty political conflicts and some of "the stupidest international borders in the world," like that described in "The Siamese Twin Towns of Baarle-Hertog and Baarle-Nassau" (0). Chapters on the South China Sea and the Demilitarized Zone of the Korean Peninsula depict present-day land and sovereignty disputes with wide-ranging global ramifications that feature political posturing at physical borders. Perhaps my favorite chapter, "The Curse of Suburbia and the Borders of Detroit," describes in depth the political machinations, explosive growth, and subsequent decline that led to today's largely emptied city.

"Part Three: Externalities" presents an unsurprising conclusion to this brief history by exploring the disputes around, and eventual standardization of, often taken-for-granted borders like the prime meridian, the international date line, or our mess of time zones. Elledge predicts new frontiers to be bordered—like the cloud of regulations and definitions plaguing borders at sea or in space. Here Elledge posits what borders will be next to appear in an increasingly divvied-up world.

The book concludes with discussions of the role borders play in the contemporary war in Ukraine and a look at the

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many questions relating to complexly overlapping borders in the author's home nation of the United Kingdom. We're left pondering what global borders, whether good or bad, will look like a century from now in this ever-changing world.

Over half of the chapters contain a map—created by designer Tim Peters, also from London (see Figure 1)—that is simple and to the point, depicting historical regions and contemporary borders in a consistent and minimalist grayscale. I find that, of the chapters with no map, many discuss regions that are likely less familiar to a Western audience, and an addition by Peters would have been quite welcome. I also wondered if including a few historical maps could have strengthened the reader's understanding of the evolution of mapping techniques often credited and blamed in the book for today's borders. Nonetheless, the maps that are included effectively illustrate the shape and context of borders as described in the text.

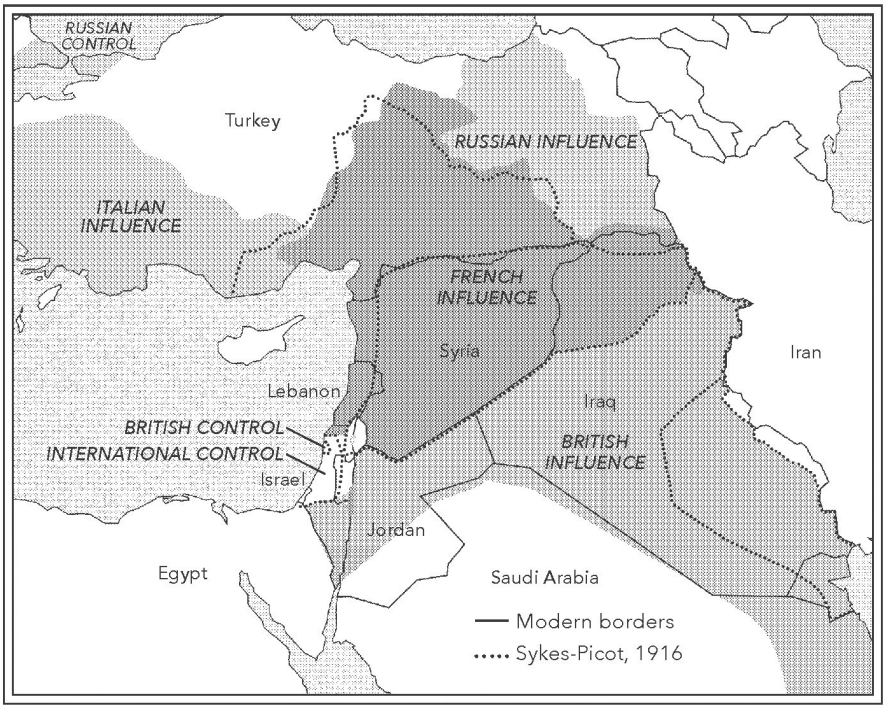


Figure 1. Map by Tim Peters, contextualizing European spheres of influence against modern borders in "Britain and France Carve up the Middle East" (137).

The *Brief History*'s short and at times disjointed chapters—jumping around the globe and occasionally leaping over whole centuries—made me quite aware of how much world history I have forgotten since high school. Reading this book will not spur you to marvel at how all of human history fits together, but, if you can name "that annoying Voltaire quote" (215), you may well enjoy the insider tone and high-level historical summary offered. Even though 47 borders are a few too many to recall all the details of, and the somewhat haphazard organization leaves it challenging to make broader connections, there are many interesting tidbits to glean from this book even for those without an extensive history background.

Given how brief most of the chapters are, the longest part of this book feels to be its title; even the weighty history between Israel and Palestine is afforded a mere eight pages (only slightly above average). Instead of a detailed notes section for this history-packed book, there are fourteen pages of "Further Reading," in case you'd like to track down the author's sources for yourself. Elledge names sources in-text when they are particularly funny or dubious, but unless you are prepared to pore over all the recommended reading and crosscheck back to the text, you are left to wonder about the precise source of the arguments that form the backbone of this brief history.

Elledge clearly has a love for—and is amused by—history. As mentioned, the entire book is written with a very familiar tone and casual language; a sentence or two from this book containing such phrases as "this whole thing is just silly" (27) or "yah boo sucks to you" (182) would fit right in as a casual text from a friend. In a book that seems to attempt a comprehensive description of such weighty conflicts as Israel–Palestine or the India–Pakistan border, however, such levity seems out of place, and renders any effort at reporting underwhelming.

There are, in fact, several places where Elledge's facetious asides seem more than a bit flippant. For example, in a chapter on Australian borders, he points out that "at no point in this process . . . has anyone mentioned those 500 or so Aboriginal groups" (248), after which he never

mentions them again. As a reader, I can't help but feel it is the author's responsibility to address any gaps present in the source material and the conventional telling of the histories he presents. In the chapter "The American Invasion of Mexico," Indigenous people are merely footnoted with the same sentiment that "you will be amazed how little those [Native American] guys will feature in our story" (104). After reading the phrase "the whole 'Trail of Tears' thing" two pages later, I am in fact no longer surprised this author didn't consider Native peoples to feature largely in the stories he chooses to tell.

Maybe I read too much into the author's choice of humor and am letting my reactions color my appreciation of the author's anecdotes. Maybe, too, these shorthand remarks about American genocides land a little differently for readers on the other side of an ocean. The brevity with which historical events are narrated, and the levity with which traumatic conflicts are depicted, left me feeling neither sufficiently informed nor gratifyingly amused. If quotations like "constantly bitching about the fact that he didn't give a shit about local tribal boundaries" (124) had also featured on the back cover, I might have gone into this review with more appropriate expectations for myself. In any event, I'll take it as my own fault for hoping for more nuance in a book titled *A Brief History of the World in 47 Borders*.