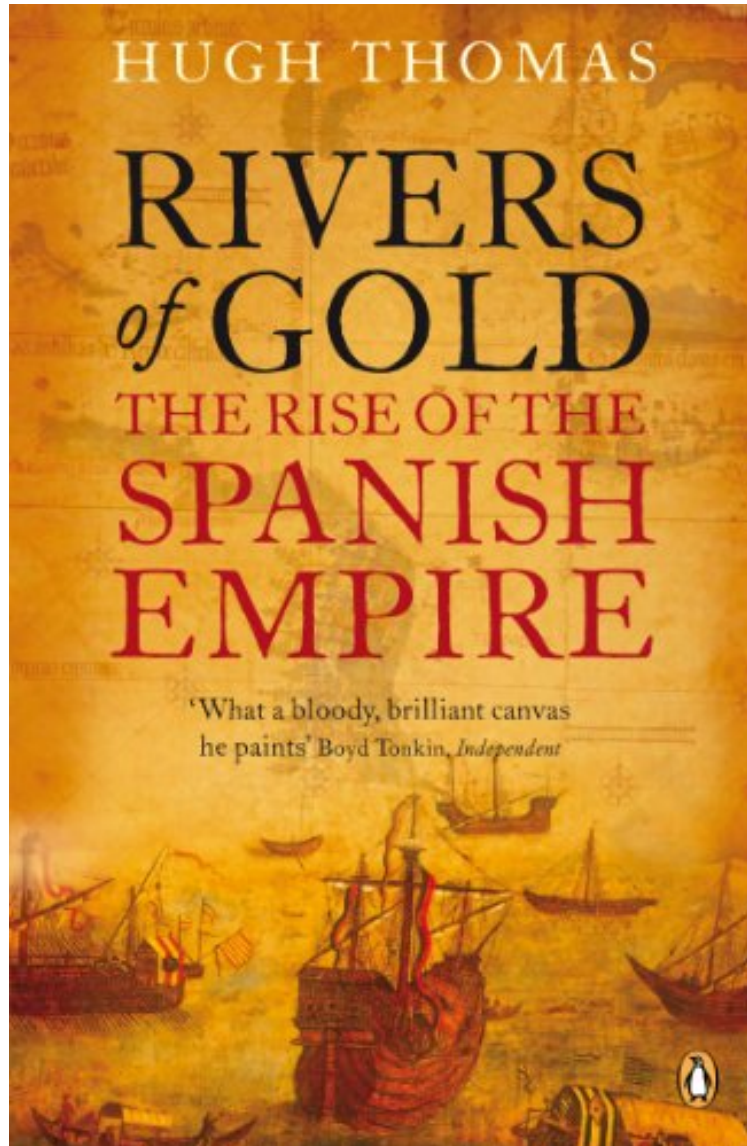


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Rivers of Gold: The Rise of the Spanish Empire. Hugh Thomas

Hugh Thomas

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Hugh Thomas : Rivers of Gold: The Rise of the Spanish Empire. Hugh Thomas before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Rivers of Gold: The Rise of the Spanish Empire. Hugh Thomas:

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Boring detail!By David C. GabrielLaborious detail and minutia... I expected more of a story, but this is all a listing of the battles, ships, killings, etc. No story about the adventure, battles, history of exploration, just lists of stuff. Very boring.0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Four StarsBy

CustomerBook is in good shape and met my expectations5 of 6 people found the following review helpful. uneven, too long, stuffily pedantic, but very interesting at its bestBy Robert J. CrawfordThis book has an odd mix of excessive detail, lack of analysis, and engaging stories that never quite add up to a coherent narrative. I started it with the greatest enthusiasm, as I was reading about a dazzling array of personalities I dimly remembered from middle school texts, but towards the middle of the book felt lost in all the aristocratic titles, complete cargo lists (!), painstakingly twisted theological disputes, and gruesome skirmishes with doomed Indian chiefs. The reader, or at least I, simply could not see quite where the author was intending to go with all the facts and figures. It was like he was not just mistaking the forest for the trees, but for individual leaves.Indeed, this is really two books. In the first 450 pages, in my reading, the author paints a tableau of the how the politics of a newly united Spain impacted first the explorers and then the conquistadors of the Americas. Fernando and Isabel not only united Aragon and Castille in a uniquely successful joint monarchy as sovereigns of their respective kingdoms as well as brought a highly independent aristocracy under tighter control, but they expelled the last Moslems as well as all non-converted Jews from southern Spain in 1492. These issues left them little time to pay attention to the explorers, though they (or Isabel) did seem to favor Columbus, who was granted unusually extensive rights. Their stories are successfully intermingled.Isabel's motives for authorizing Columbus' explorations were complex: spread the faith, open a new trade route, and find gold. While many modern accounts pay attention only to the secular motives - the early voyages were largely financed by private interests - they also included Catholic preachers who were skilled at setting up administrative infrastructures that would endure as Indians were herded into a kind of bonded serfdom (encomienda) under local Spanish rulers. This first contact between cultures is told in fascinating and appropriate detail, leading both to the genocide but also to ethical debates that certainly had some impact. Finally, as the Indians were proving poorly adapted to slavery in the gold mines, Thomas also covers the debate that eventually brought black slaves from Africa, which completed the demise of the Indians in the Caribbean.As Columbus proved an incompetent administrator, others began to claim their own geographical areas of influence, creating complexity completely ungovernable from the capital in Spain. It is here that wide-ranging experiments begin, from humane to unbelievably savage, all in the name of Christ and gold. Oddly, it appears that their consciences were clear: some fought for Indians' rights, others were content to massacre "cannibals". This is a fairly coherent narrative and worth the price of admission (to p. 300 or so).Unfortunately, the book begins to unravel at the accession of Charles V in the remaining 250 pages. Suddenly, the details of the European power struggles and courtly life come to the fore, and there is seemingly little to connect them to the Americas. Indeed, Thomas' coverage becomes erratic, and the reader gets lost in endless details of how many barrels of wine were included in cargoes, who was saying what in the policy debates, etc. Bored and confused, I began to yearn for the book to end, that is, about half way through it becomes an incomprehensible slog. Then it gets worse: in the last 100 pages, Thomas moves into summary mode, covering the conquest of Mexico in 40 pages and Magellan's voyage in about 15. It feels pasted on and superficial, like it was added at the behest of editors or Thomas simply ran out of energy. Finally, the conclusion does nothing whatsoever to tie it all together: instead, he enters into an elaborate description of the economy of Seville and its administrative apparatus, only implying that they determined how the new empire would be governed. This profoundly disappointed me and I believe I will have to seek answers to questions elsewhere, i.e. why did economic energy move from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic at that time? Why did the political regimes that emerged become so tumultuously violent and autocratic?Further, I was surprised at the stuffy hauteur of the book, at once arrogantly academic in its tiring details and pedantic in its spooning out of lessons that are often banal. (Yes, Columbus was a "great explorer", as we repeatedly learn.) In short, in my eyes, the author wrote like a snob and did not exercise the discipline that a good editor should have imposed on him. That adds up to failure for me.I cannot recommend this book to non-specialized readers. It is not a fun read, but the subject is worthy of effort.

The first part of his trilogy on the Spanish Empire, Hugh Thomas's *Rivers of Gold* brings the rise of Spain's global empire vividly to life, capturing the spirit of an ebullient age. Inspired by hopes of both riches and of converting native people to Christianity, the Spanish adventurers of the fifteenth century convinced themselves that an Earthly Paradise existed in the Caribbean. This is the story of the hundreds of conquistadors who set sail on the precarious journey across the Atlantic - taking with them wheat, the horse, the guitar and the wheel as well as guns, malaria and slaves - to create an empire that made Spain the envy of the world. 'Affirms Hugh Thomas's record as one of the most productive and wide-ranging historians of modern times' *The New York Times* 'Splendid ... bold and strong in its outlines, rich in fascinating details' Paul Johnson, *Literary Review* 'So steeped is he in the spirit of the time, so familiar with its people and places that we almost feel he must have been there at the time' *Sunday Telegraph* 'A vivid, dramatic and compelling narrative' Arthur Schlesinger, Jr 'As a historian, Thomas is master of the big picture ... *Rivers of Gold* sweeps us restlessly on' Jonathan Keates, *Spectator* 'An epic history of an extraordinary age' Michael Kerrigan, *Scotsman* Hugh Thomas is the author of, among other books, *The Spanish Civil War* (1962) which won the Somerset Maugham Award, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortes and the Fall of Old Mexico* (1994), *An Unfinished History of the World* (1979) and *The Slave Trade* (1997). The second volume of his planned trilogy on the Spanish Empire, *The Golden Age: The Spanish Empire of Charles V* was published in 2011.

"As a historian, Thomas is master of the big picture ! Rivers of Gold sweeps us restlessly on" - Jonathan Keates, Spectator 'As an intelligent and incisive narrative the book would be hard to better... It is unusual to finish so long a book wishing for more' Sunday Telegraph

About the Author Hugh Thomas is the author of, among other books, The Spanish Civil War (1961), which won the Somerset Maugham Award, The Suez Affair (1967), Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom (1971), An Unfinished History of the World (1979), Armed Truce (1986), Conquest: Montezuma, Cortes and the Fall of Old Mexico (1994), The Slave Trade (1997) and the first two volumes of his Spanish Empire trilogy, Rivers of Gold (2003) and The Golden Age (2010). From 1966 to 1976 he was Professor of History at the University of Reading, and from 1979 to 1991 chairman of the Centre for Policy Studies in London. In 2008 he was made a Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (France) and won the Gabarron Prize; he received the Calvo Serer Prize, the Boccaccio Prize and the Nonino Prize in Italy in 2009. He is a member of the Academia de Buenas Letras in Seville and a Caballero of the Maestranza of Ronda, and in 1981 became a life peer as Lord Thomas of Swynnerton.