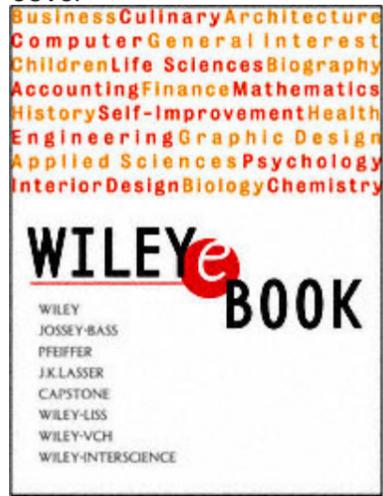
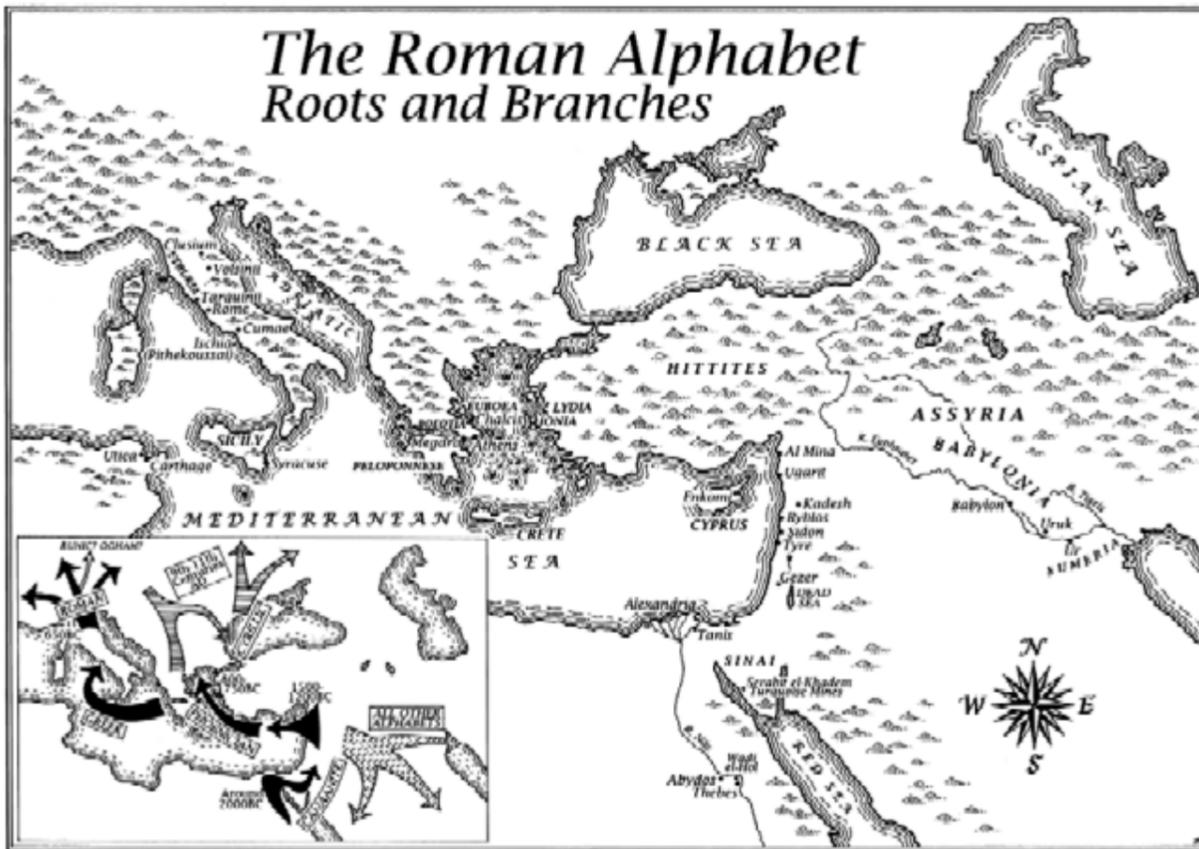


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ALPHA BETA

HOW 26 LETTERS SHAPED THE

WESTERN WORLD

JOHN MAN



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For Timberlake and Dushka

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FOREWORD

This book is about one of humanity's greatest ideas – the idea of alphabet – and its most widespread form: the system of letters you are now reading. Three features of the idea stand out: its uniqueness, its simplicity and its adaptability. From the alphabet's earliest manifestation 4000 years ago, all other alphabets take their cue; and all reflect the idea's underlying simplicity.

This is not the simplicity of perfect design. The strength of the alphabet as an idea lies in its practical imperfection. Though it fits no language to perfection, it can, with some pushing and shoving, be adapted to all languages. Like our own big-brained species, which can be outrun, outflown and outswum, but not outthought, by other species, the alphabet is a generalist. In software terms, its success lies in its 'fuzziness'. But where did this idea of alphabet spring from? How and where did it

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spread as it matured into the Roman-letter system that is now the world's most familiar script? How did we discover the answer to these questions?

It is a good time to examine such things, because the roots of the alphabet are still emerging. It seems increasingly certain that this revolutionary, one-off concept arose in Egypt, about 2000 BC. These discoveries will remain controversial until more evidence is found, interpreted and accepted, but one thing you can bet on: as archaeology becomes ever more effective, astonishing advances are still to be made. One day, perhaps, some cache of scrolls or inscriptions will reveal the genii – perhaps even the individual genius – who mined the first treasure-trove of letters from Egyptian hieroglyphs.

I focus on the idea and its transmission from culture to culture, from Egypt, to Rome, to us. It seems to me that I had little option in this choice of theme, for otherwise there would be no end. A full history of the alphabet would be a library, with specialist sections on scores of alphabetical systems and their cultures, on the impact of literacy down the centuries, on the psychology of reading, the techniques of writing, the strange worlds of magi who turned the ABC into 'abracadabra'. Each letter has its own history. There is little in this book about technical advances or grand historical processes – the papyrus trade, printing, imperialism, the Internet. These are the tides that carry the western alphabet across the world, but they have little impact on the

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Roman alphabetical code, let alone the underlying idea that unites alphabetical scripts from Abaza to Zulu – that all human speech can be symbolized by two or three dozen meaningless marks.

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**INTRODUCTION:
OF GIANTS AND
GENIUS**

As a child, I went to an old-fashioned little boarding school in Hastings where the headmaster was a one-eyed giant. He was 6' 4" and weighed 280 pounds and he had a glass eye. I have no idea how he lost the real one. The glass eye had the disconcerting habit of oozing liquid, so that in mid-tirade, on the verge of applying the cane, he would produce a handkerchief and wipe away a crocodile tear. It was rumoured, though I never saw it for myself, that he could take his eye out, polish it and replace it.

So when I first heard of the Cyclops, the one-eyed ogre in the Odyssey, I knew exactly what Odysseus was

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up against. I see myself as an eleven-year-old in grey flannel shorts, tie with horizontal yellow-and-black stripes, knuckles raw with some winter rash, sitting at one of those old wooden desks with a sloping, lift-up top, on which someone has carved his initials, 'CP'. Kennedy's Latin Primer, long since turned into 'Eating' Primer by a schoolboy scribble, lies in front of me, unopened. Mr Marshall is an enlightened teacher and, although this is double Latin, it being Wednesday afternoon, he has chosen, as usual, to abandon Latin for the Odyssey. This is not a Greek lesson exactly – the language is only for the scholarship boys – but a reading of the newish translation by E. V. Rieu. Its images, vivid as film, transport me ...

... to the cave where Odysseus and his men have been trapped by the shambling Cyclops. Illustrations show him with a single eye in the middle of his forehead, but I see him as our headmaster, minus his glass eye, dressed in skins instead of his brown pin-striped suit. The Cyclops (meaning 'round-eyed') blocks the cave mouth with a rock that twenty-two four-wheeled wagons could not have carried. He seizes two of the Greeks, dashes their heads against the floor, splatters the rocks with their brains, tears them limb from limb, and crunches them up, ravenous as a lion with a new kill. Odysseus watches, stricken. I had an inkling of how he felt. Once, guilty of talking after lights out, I had stood in line outside the headmaster's study, hearing the six-fold thwacks on

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friend after friend. I knew the dread of approaching doom. Now here was Homer, showing me what it was like to be cunning, brave and strong enough to save friends from giants. Odysseus offers wine and then, when the Cyclops falls into a drunken stupor, prepares a stave, huge as the mast of a twenty-oared ship, heats it in the fire and, with five of his men, rams it into the Cyclops' single eye. 'I used my weight from above to twist it home, like a man boring a ship's timber with a drill ... In much the same way we handled our pole with its red-hot point and twisted it in his eye till the blood boiled around the burning wood. The fiery smoke of the blazing eyeball singed his lids and brow all round, and the very roots of his eye crackled in the heat. I was reminded of the loud hiss that comes from a great axe or adze when a smith plunges it into cold water – to temper it and give strength to the iron. That is how the Cyclops eye hissed around that olive stake.' I glance round, exchange grimaces, and feel the glow of a shared response. Yes, we all love every gory, vengeful detail. From those vivid readings, from the fact that Mr Marshall made time for them, from their emotional impact, I received a clear message: this story – speaking so directly from so remote a time – mattered. Not that I knew why. I had no idea that I was being given an introduction to the roots of a culture in which my own was rooted. In the introduction to his own translation, T. E. Lawrence, a classical scholar as well as co-liberator

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of Arabia, called the Odyssey 'the oldest book worth reading for its story and the first novel of Europe'. It was the start of a line leading another three centuries right to the burst of creative energy that made the Athens of the fifth century BC a cornucopia of philosophy, science and literature, pouring out creations whose effects rippled down the centuries and across continents.

The consequences are all around. The fields of study founded by the Greeks or coined from Greek words run from astronomy and biology all the way through the alphabet to xylography and zoology. When looking for their roots, European cultures (except perhaps the Basques) quickly dig up Greeks. So do most white – or even Latino – Americans, Australians and other scattered ex-European lineages. So, in lesser ways, do Muslims, because their scholars were translating Aristotle into Arabic when Europe was still in its post-Roman limbo. To Afghans and Uzbeks, Alexander the Great is a vivid folk memory. Anyone learning a European language or studying the history of anywhere from the Hebrides to the Hindu Kush will come across the Greeks eventually. In language, the Greeks are with us still, as real and as forgotten as a childhood taste. You could probably write a novel using only ordinary nouns and verbs derived from the Greek, certainly a dissertation, because its root-words so readily form techno-speak, as in: 'Genetics and character: The use of cybernetics in psychological analysis.' Today's coins have a head on one side and a symbol on

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the other because that was the way the Greeks did it.

Why this tide of Greekness? Were there special things about ancient Greek genes or society or technology or food or climate, or any combination of these, that created the intellectual bloom? Of the many answers, one intrigues me. It is the suggestion that Homer and his successors had an impact only because their words were recorded in a form that allowed their thoughts to be transferred easily from generation to generation. The Greeks, so this argument runs, would not have been so influential but for the invention that fixed their writings, the invention that they named after its first two signs, alpha and beta – the alphabet.

The alphabet? It is a little hard to know what exactly the 'the' refers to, because there are many so-called alphabets which do not begin with a and b. Ogham, the Old Irish system, began BLF; Germany's medieval script, Runic, started with six letters after which it is named, the futhark ('th' being a single letter). Ethiopic began h-l. Some early 'alphabets' broke down after the first two letters into abjads or abugidas. But despite the changes, an ideal runs through them all: that the sounds of speech can be captured by a collection of two or three dozen single signs, each of which corresponds to a spoken sound. In fact, as we shall see, this is a vain hope. But the ideal

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remains, a dream of the perfect written communication. It is this ideal that inspired this book, which examines the emergence of our own alphabet from its Egyptian roots through to the Latinized form which you are reading now. This book takes as its subject the alphabet as a unit, not dealing in depth with the overwhelmingly vast subjects of writing, the technicalities of script or the histories of individual letters.

Many have been convinced that the Greek alphabet was the best of the lot, because (they claim) it was the direct cause of the flowering of Greek genius and all that followed. This suggestion was most forcefully put in the 1970s by the Anglo-American academic, Eric Havelock, the late professor of classics at Yale. The alphabet, he maintained, was one of the great leaps, a stroke of genius which, like the invention of fire or the wheel, ensured that life in the western world would never be the same again.

As a result, he said, the Greeks were able to turn works of recitation into works of literature. The Odyssey and the Iliad, which would otherwise have been lost, were the first major works captured for posterity, like photographs of birds in flight. Havelock would have told me that it was not merely Homer's genius, or Greek genius, that guaranteed the survival of his works. It was the fact that a scribe, or team of scribes, had been able to fix the stories in a form of writing that no culture had fully exploited before. With this new-fangled intellectual device, the

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Greeks could record their own thought processes, become self-aware, refine ideas, exchange them, build upon them, create systems of ethics, philosophy and science, evolve new forms of poetry, pioneer history and biography. In brief, it was the alphabet that allowed the ancient Greeks to lay the foundations of civilized discourse as Europe and its descendant cultures came to know it.

Inventions like this are rare: intellectual tools that are both independent of technology and explosive in impact. Writing itself is an equivalent, perhaps, and the invention of the 'Arabic' numbering system (actually, it was originally Indian), in particular zero, which formed the basis of modern mathematics. Perhaps grand ideas like monotheism and evolution have had a comparable effect. Yet such ideas spring up in many different guises, often in different times and different places, before they are accepted. Writing was invented perhaps four times: in China, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Central America ('perhaps' because there are those who argue that the Egyptians took over the idea, though not the form, from Mesopotamia). The base-ten numbering system also emerged four times independently: in Babylon, China, India and Central America.

Monotheism arose independently in the Old and New World (a generalization I can defend, in a small way, by citing a tribe with which I spent some time in 1979–80, the Waorani of the eastern Ecuadorian jungle; they believed in a

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single god, Waengongi, from long before the arrival of Europeans). And evolution had an evolution of its own from long before it was formalized by Darwin.

But the alphabet, despite its multifarious forms, was a unique idea, arising only once, spreading across cultures and down centuries. There are many other writing systems, but they are all ideographic or syllabic. Other than the unknown scribes who originated the first tentative form of the alphabet around 2000 BC in Egypt, no culture or person ever independently dreamed up the idea. All those hundred or so who have ever used an alphabetical system either distilled it from a previous system, or inherited or adapted an established alphabet, or heard of the idea, and made up their own on that basis. In Havelock's words, it was a uniquely efficient way of recording human speech, and 'once invented, it supplied the complete answer to a problem, and there has never been a need to reinvent it'.

Havelock's claim seems to agree with everyday experience. Our letters are so simple and practical that we give the shapes to babies to play with and turn the sounds into a song with which two-year-olds charm proud parents. The consequences have been fundamental to all the world, directly to those of us who use alphabets, and indirectly to those who don't, because