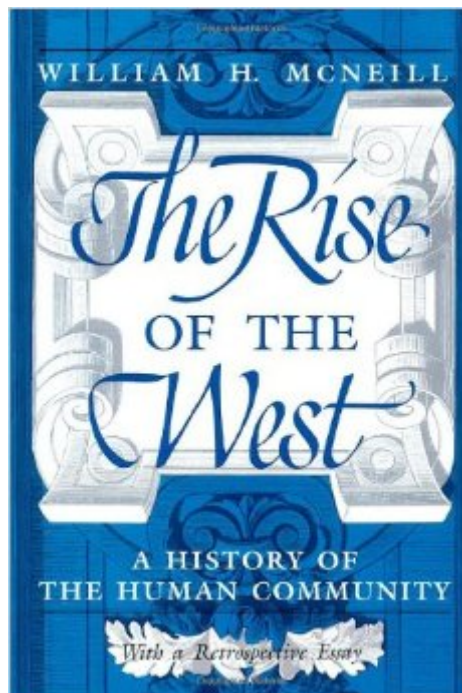


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The Rise Of The West: A History Of The Human Community; With A Retrospective Essay



Synopsis

The Rise of the West, winner of the National Book Award for history in 1964, is famous for its ambitious scope and intellectual rigor. In it, McNeill challenges the Spengler-Toynbee view that a number of separate civilizations pursued essentially independent careers, and argues instead that human cultures interacted at every stage of their history. The author suggests that from the Neolithic beginnings of grain agriculture to the present major social changes in all parts of the world were triggered by new or newly important foreign stimuli, and he presents a persuasive narrative of world history to support this claim. In a retrospective essay titled "The Rise of the West after Twenty-five Years," McNeill shows how his book was shaped by the time and place in which it was written (1954-63). He discusses how historiography subsequently developed and suggests how his portrait of the world's past in The Rise of the West should be revised to reflect these changes. "This is not only the most learned and the most intelligent, it is also the most stimulating and fascinating book that has ever set out to recount and explain the whole history of mankind. . . . To read it is a great experience. It leaves echoes to reverberate, and seeds to germinate in the mind." —H. R. Trevor-Roper, New York Times Book Review

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Customer Reviews

The insights into how and why certain developments took place in history that are presented in this book make it fascinating. It spans the early civilizations of the Middle East to modern times and the rise of Communism and totalitarianism, dealing with topics like art, literature, political systems, and religion, and how all these things tied together to shape history. One of the best aspects of the book

is the way it provides insights into how developments in one civilization affected others. The way it shifts views from one major civilization to another and spans thousands of years gives the reader a sense of perspective and a realization of the depth and complexity of history. Besides the high scholarly value of the book, the writing style is excellent and easy to read. I luckily ran into it and read it purely by chance, only to learn later that it is considered a history classic.

To the reader criticizing the "Eurocentrism" of this book, with a title like "Rise of the West" what did you expect? The past 500 years has basically been the story of the Western European nations and later America surpassing overall the other historic civilizations of the world in all aspects of culture, society, political organization, science, technology, art, music, etc. That's not something for some to brag about or feel superior about but neither is it something to bemoan or deny; rather it's there to understand the how and the why it happened. The modern world we live in (and personally I dislike much of it) was shaped in the West and whether you like it or not understanding who we are--we being the entire world which is either part of the West, becoming or already is "westernized", or is feeling the pressure to do so--requires a knowledge of history that is centered on the West. That's not to deny other civilizations and their contributions to the world their due respect, but there are reasons for keeping a larger focus on the ancient Mediterranean civilizations (Greek, Roman and others) and Western Europe from the Renaissance onward; it's what made the world we live in and should be expected in a book titled "The Rise of the West." As far as McNeill's book goes it's actually far less Eurocentric than you might think from the title, and a central theme of the book is how various cultures have interacted and McNeill does give plenty of attention to Islam, India, and China. It's only in the last half of the book that it gets Eurocentric, and not because it "ignores" other cultures/civilizations but deals with "the rise of the West" in those chapters, like any grand narrative history dealing with the past 500 years would. While not perfect it deals with its subject in a readable narrative.

This is an excellent Eurocentric history. McNeill acknowledges his Eurocentrism in his retrospective introduction and provides an excellent critique of his own book: he underplays the significance of Chinese and other civilizations east of the Oxus. Regardless, McNeill expounds a sound theory that civilizations didn't evolve in isolation, but that the interplay of different cultures enabled their progress. McNeill weaves migrations, conquests, international trade, and technological innovations into a riveting story on how modern civilization rose from the fields of the fertile crescent. The book reads like an epic novel -- albeit with lots of footnotes -- in that it weaves over 5,000 years of history

into a single story. This has been the most fascinating history book I have ever read.

McNeill belongs to that category of historians who not only bring an enormous treasure chest of knowledge, but who present it in a writing style so direct and compelling that the reader cannot help but admire their work. "The Rise of the West" is a monumental book. McNeill's knowledge of history, of facts, his erudition--all leave the reader in a kind of suspense and disbelief. Can one man know this much? Apparently he can. McNeill's vast lore is a proof of commitment to scholarship and historical discovery. Whether or not the West has a special status and a claim to a special place in human civilization (as I believe it does) is something that is for you, the reader, to decide. McNeill makes his arguments and then reassesses them years later in this new edition; and he is less upbeat about the special position of the West. But that is theory, perspective, possibility, interpretation. Whatever interpretation you embrace, you won't regret reading this book for its facts, its comprehensive narrative, and its gift of widening historical perspectives and imagination.

This epic magisterial volume deserves no less than to be required reading for all citizens of the Western World. McNeill employs deft understanding and sensitivity equal to the herculean task. The author is no Western apologist, but shows how global civilization is developing into a mosaic largely driven by Western ideas. Beginning just before the dawn of the agrarian transformation and spanning its eventual blossoming (and fading) into civilization, McNeill takes the reader on a journey that answers questions you never knew you had. The Western way eventually remade the world, and McNeill shows why and how and when. Using evidence from art, archaeology, anthropology, politics, commerce, science, and religion he paints confident, broad strokes that nevertheless are rich in detail. It is a masterpiece of staggering scope, rendered in a noble voice. The only important criticism is an undeniable Eurocentric bias (readily admitted by the author). But this becomes understandable and quite forgivable as the reader follows the author wrestling enormous epics of civilization into a readable form. Regardless of this necessary perspective Rise of the West can certainly stand as comparable, perhaps even superior to similar works by Spengler, Toynbee, Braudel, or Diamond.

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