

WESTERN

Civilization



R O B I W W I N K S



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Western Civilization: A Brief History



COLLEGIATE PRESS

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Preface

All textbooks are unique, of course, for all bear the stamp of their individual author's approach to subject matter. This book differs from other textbooks on Western Civilization in several regards. It is my conviction that today's students read history largely to account to themselves for why they are as they are, and why the world in which they live is as they find it. To help readers toward these goals, I have placed particular emphasis on those developments which most directly explain the nature of the modern world: social diffusion, group and national consciousness, technological change, religious identities—those aspects of intellectual history that have contributed most (and most directly) to our current dilemmas. In turn this means that there is more in my textbook about nationalism, or imperialism, or ethnic identities than there is about monarchies, feudalism, or diplomacy. While I do not care for the word “relevant” because of the fashionable, not to say faddish, connotations thrust onto the word by those who do not see that history is a process, a growth, I do consider that the guiding principles behind this book have been designed to provide the reader with the information and argumentation most necessary (and in that sense most relevant) to an understanding of how History has led us from There to Here.

The result of the strategic and intellectual decisions made with respect to this textbook is that its proportions are not the customary ones. Particular emphasis is placed on the early origins of civilizations, on Greece and Rome, and on the period of the so-called barbarian invasions, because it is by studying these periods that students may best learn how societies are formed. Particular emphasis is also placed on the period from the French

Revolution, for it is the events of the last two hundred years that have most closely shaped our present condition. Throughout the text emphasis is placed on humankind's search for security, whether of a physical or a spiritual nature, and it is this theme of the struggle to achieve security that binds the diverse subject matter together. One end in mind is to lead the reader to think as the historian thinks, to be able to apply the historian's long view to today's headlines.

This book also was written to be read. This does not mean that it should not be studied. There is a distinction, however: some textbooks are constructed deliberately to invite careful underscoring of factual data and massive memorization. It is my conviction that, while the work of memory is essential to history, students often confuse memorization with understanding, and that many textbooks encourage this confusion by their construction and their style. I would hope this book can be read, straight through and in its entirety, as an interpretive statement about Western history written by a person who knows a good bit about non-Western history, and who can thus throw into perspective the unusual, the commonplace, and the comparable in that sector of history conventionally labeled "Western." While the book is to be used as a text as well, serving all the customary functions, I hope that it will help the student to see that history is not a body of data to be memorized; rather, history is a set of arguments to be debated. The book draws upon over thirty years of discovering, in the classroom, what students themselves wish to ask about the past rather than what a body of good and greying scholars may have concluded they should wish to ask.

To this end I have had much help, of course. I want in particular to thank Professors Edward Peters of the University of Pennsylvania and Joachim Remak of the University of California, Santa Barbara, for helping enormously with early drafts of the text; without them this book would not have been possible. For reading and reacting to sections relating to their own areas of special competence, I wish to thank my colleagues at Yale, Jeremy Y. deQ. Adams (now of Southern Methodist University), Raymond Kierstead (now at Reed College), Ramsay MacMullen, and Henry A. Turner, Jr. The world's worst handwriting was deciphered by Ms. Rose Esposito, who typed the manuscript. My wife, Avril, helped enormously with the proof-reading; my children, Honor Leigh and Eliot, kept me moving toward completion by reminding me of how many hours I was spending away from them, and by reacting to sections of the text. None of the above are in any way responsible for any errors that remain, of course—and no one can be a historian for long without learning that such errors will occur. This text was first published by Prentice-Hall, where I had much help from the editor, Robert Fenyo.

The book has been updated to appear in its new form, and I am grateful to the staff of Collegiate Press for making this possible.

When deciding what to record in history, one must always interrogate the material with three questions: Is it true? Is it interesting? Is it significant? All these people helped me to put these three questions to my text, as I now put them to my readers.

Maps and illustrations. The maps and illustrations in this text are to be studied in direct conjunction with it; the captions to the latter extend the argument of the text and cannot be omitted from the study. As historians know, one cannot grasp the flow of history without a clear mental image of the landscape across which the flow takes place. Most of these maps have been adapted from those originally created by Vincent Kotschar for *A History of Civilization*, by Crane Brinton, John B. Christopher, and Robert Lee Wolff (5th ed., Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976), and they are reprinted here by permission. Through them the reader may create his or her own mental maps. I have also been fortunate in being able to walk over the ground of much of the history described in the pages that follow; descriptions are informed by personal visits to the sites, and in some instances I have used my own photographs for the illustrations.

ROBIN W. WINKS
June 1988

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Introduction: The Relevance of History

*The past is but the beginning of a beginning,
and all that is and has been is but the twilight
of the dawn.*—H. G. Wells, *The Discovery of the Future*, 1901

Every year on the bathing beaches of France, some twenty people—usually children and teenagers—are killed by buried land mines and unexploded naval shells. Even though more than two generations have passed since World War II, and nearly four generations since World War I, fully half the deaths on those French beaches result from undiscovered ammunition left buried these many years. The young people killed may have thought such distant wars irrelevant to them, but events have a way of reminding us that they continue to work their effects on our lives—and deaths. These instruments of destruction are among the many visible reminders of our past.

Each day we live enveloped in history as we are enveloped in the air we breathe. Many survive the day, knowing nothing of either air or history. Others enjoy their days more because they know something of why they and their community or country are as they are. To this degree, one of the delights of history is that it satisfies simple curiosity. It adds to our sense of who we are and why we do what we do.

Every person, every field of knowledge, has a history. Medical science grows from the discoveries, inventions, and mistakes of yesterday. The desire to build the Panama Canal led to the discovery of the cause of yellow fever. Experiments with cough medicine produced Coca-Cola. Britain's desire to occupy strategic river mouths in West Africa led to the development of tropical medicine and to the discovery that fever is a symptom rather than a cause of disease, thus reversing a long-held set of assumptions about cause and effect in health.

Slowly, the conventional wisdom of one generation is displaced by new insights, which in turn become conventionally accepted themselves, only to be displaced yet again by further discoveries and additions to human knowledge. Those who do not understand how causes operate upon them cannot hope to be in any measure free of their effects. Those who think themselves free of the need to know history are in fact the victims, who can never be free. They will be trapped because they do not know what they are trapped by.

Yet much of the past is irrelevant to daily decisions. To balance your checking account, you don't need to know the history of double-entry bookkeeping or the reason for its introduction by Italian accountants five hundred years ago. Nor must you maintain a storehouse of trivia. History is more than antiquarianism (knowledge of details of the past, purely for themselves). It gives us a sense of why things happened as they did. History helps us come to some understanding of cause-and-effect sequences and priorities that may govern our lives. Ignorance does not free us from history, but knowledge gives us a chance to work to free ourselves if we wish.

Then why study history if the specific history that shapes our daily lives is derived more from personal experience than from books? The question answers itself, for the shape of our personal experience is, in part, governed by the knowledge we bring to those experiences. The price of plums in China is relevant to the price of wheat in Kansas, just as a Middle-Eastern conflict may impinge upon the most isolated and ill-informed Americans, however uninterested they may be in events in that quarter of the globe. Suddenly things thought not worth knowing may become very important.

It is important, too, that someone be a detective searching through the past, reconstructing past events, past feelings, past ways of life, creating some tolerance for the change and confusion about us. This search supplies tools for adjusting to that change and confusion. We gain a sense of morality by which we may judge ourselves and our society. History does not provide a means for predicting the future, but it does give us clues. History is the human story written large—complex, often exciting, on occasion dull, and always decisive, for those who do not remember their history *are* condemned to repeat it.

Of course, history changes as new material about the past is brought to light from recently discovered manuscripts or through the application of newly formulated techniques for research. Also our perception of the meaning of events changes, as those events recede further into our past. One generation asserted that the major cause of the American Civil War was slavery; a later generation (of the 1930s), preoccupied with economic problems, argued that the principle cause of the war was incompatible regional economies. Yet a later generation, taken up with the immediate

problems of the civil rights movement, again saw slavery (now translated as racism) as the root cause of the war. All may be correct, though only one is wholly relevant to the moment.

Thus, historians are detectives, for they must reconstruct the act, the crime, the commission of the event, often from the flimsiest of evidence. Having done so, they must tell us what the event means in terms of our lives. To do this, historians must be concerned at once on two levels: interpretation and accumulation of factual data. The great British novelist and historian Dame Rebecca West wrote:

The facts that, put together, are the face of the age . . . [are those that matter to us] for if people do not have the face of the age set clearly before them they begin to imagine it; and fantasy, if it is not disciplined by the intellect and kept in faith with reality by the instinct of art, dwells among the wishes and fears of childhood, and so sees life either as simply answering any prayer or as endlessly emitting nightmare monsters from a womb-like cave.

The face of our age must never be based on fantasy. In any nation, those who remain children—exposed to the simple solutions of tyrants, to the panaceas of childhood, to the nightmare monsters of the extreme Right and Left—do not understand how to think in historical terms. Yet the central task of life is to learn to decode the environment around us so that we may move safely within it, contribute to it, draw from it, and pass it on in altered form to the next generation. To decode an environment is difficult if one is ignorant of how that environment came to take the shape it has. To understand society, we must understand social history. History and its study provide a means, if not entirely sufficient perhaps the best means nonetheless, to understand our environment and hence ourselves.

In reading history, one must remember that the historian has been forced to select the facts as they have been recorded. In any decision to speak of subject *x* and not of subject *y*, the historian places an interpretation upon the events. So, too, do newspapers. In reading history, one must remember that the historian chooses words—adjectives, adverbs—that color the acts described, perhaps choosing an emotive color which may be as powerful an influence on us as the facts themselves. So, too, does television. In reading history, one must remember that the historian is limited to the known, or to that which may reasonably be surmised from the evidence. In this he or she is less than scientific, but more than intuitive. The historian is humanist and social scientist, in search of objective reality; he or she must reconstruct the past on the basis of premises that may never be verified. The historian is, then, that most ambivalent of persons, one who must see all human action in the round, uncommitted to any final cause, any precise result.

To this end, as you read the material that follows, ask of any event, of any historical question, a series of subquestions. No event is without its economic aspects. None is without social meaning. None is bereft of intellectual significance. None is devoid of political purport. Ask of all events, then, what the economic, social, intellectual, and political aspects are that must be considered, remembered, argued, and ultimately placed into some pattern of priority. No reader who wishes to learn, to think, to grow through history will fail to interrogate every question put, every sentence laid out, every paragraph that follows. What if you were asked to comment on the following: "After its framers turned the United States Constitution into the first tragic compromise of American principles, was the Civil War inevitable?" You must know that you have been asked several questions at once and that you have already been led, perhaps intentionally, perhaps mistakenly, toward some implied answer. For this question, which the unsuspecting might simply translate into "What were the causes of the Civil War?" actually asks all of the following:

If the Constitution of 1787 compromised American principles, what were these principles, and how had they come to be? Were those principles embedded in the Declaration of Independence, which declared all men to be created equal? Was the compromise contained in the constitutional clause that permitted judging men with black skins as being less than equal? Or if a Civil War did, in fact, erupt, can those principles be called "American" rather than merely "regional"?

Were the principles referred to uniquely American, or were they not shared by other peoples?

If one accepts the argument that American principles existed and were compromised, did the Constitution compromise them? Was it the first compromise, or were there earlier ones?

Was the inevitability a civil war, or merely a conflict between regions in some form?

Was this conflict inevitable only after the compromising of those principles, or was the conflict inevitable even before, for other reasons?

Was the Constitution, in fact, a compromise at all?

May one refer to events as inevitable or might not some human agency have intervened to prevent the outcome taking the form that it did?

Only after asking ourselves the questions above may we move on to the "simple" question, now seen not to be simple at all: What were the economic, social, intellectual, and political causes of the Civil War? In what way has your life today been influenced by that war? Now, having seen how complex such a question is, we must understand why history is not a body of data to be memorized so much as a series of arguments to be discussed.

The example here has been taken from American history; the text that follows is largely of Western European history. This choice is deliberate, for the questions remain the same, the problems similar, the relevance

no less immediate: How did the world of which we are a part become the environment we must decode?

Until well into the nineteenth century, the United States was a fragment of European society. In many ways it remains aligned to that society today, even though it has developed a unique culture of its own. Thus, while we may feel that American history is in some way more relevant to our past than European history is, this is merely a relative judgment. The history of Africa and Asia are also of great significance to us in coming to an understanding, however imperfect, of why we are as we are. But by and large, through processes of acculturation, assimilation, and evolution, most of us bear a close relationship to the developments that arose in the world's first high-technology societies, those of Western Europe. Hence, our emphasis here on Western civilizations.

History must be read with care. One possible conclusion to a basic argument among historians already has been slipped to you in the paragraph above. It refers to Western civilizations, although many would argue that there is only one Western civilization.

That this book has an explicit thesis should, no doubt, be made clear at the outset, so that you need not beware of its words. A thesis does guide the selection of facts, of arguments, and of examples. The thesis is, quite simply, that history may best be seen as humankind's continuing search for security. This does not discount art or music or great literature, and it is not meant to embrace a materialistic view of history. The search for psychological and aesthetic security—for an environment of sights and ideas, of architecture, emotions, and feelings—in which one rests comfortably may be as important to individuals as the search for a purely physical or social security may be to animals (or was to early humans). We can best understand ourselves in relation to the growth of our own unique, individual definitions of security. We can best understand nations or social groups, tribes or religious movements in relation to collective thrusts toward mutually identifiable security systems.

To pursue such a thesis is to unite history in a way that may seem far too tidy to some. Yet history surely is something more than a series of random events (or the notion of cause and effect must be discarded from the social sciences and humanities), or a compound of "one damn thing after another." This does not mean that every event, every human action, must be interpreted in the light of a basic thesis, but only that the general-ity will be. Even if one believes that history has no meaning and man no ultimate purpose—a view rejected here—the cautionary observation of Sir Isaiah Berlin, an English historian, must be remembered: "The case against the notion of historical objectivity is like the case against international law, or international morality: that it does not exist." In short, even though daily headlines make it clear that international law does not exist,