The background of the book cover is a vibrant, abstract composition of thick, expressive brushstrokes. The primary colors are a deep, rich red and a bright, sunny yellow. The strokes are layered and textured, creating a sense of movement and depth. Some strokes are broad and sweeping, while others are more detailed and layered. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and historical resonance.

# A WORLD HISTORY

WILLIAM H. McNEILL

SECOND EDITION

# *HISTORY*

SECOND EDITION

*William H. McNeill*

1971 New York • London • Toronto

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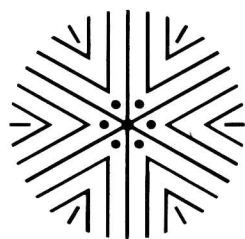
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# *A World History*

# *A WORLD*



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# *Preface*

Human societies, distinguished from one another by differing styles of life, are very numerous, and have existed from pre- and proto-human times throughout mankind's history. Civilizations are unusually massive societies, weaving the lives of millions of persons into a loose yet coherent life style across hundreds or even thousands of miles and for periods of time that are very long when measured by the span of an individual human life. Being both massive and long-lived, civilizations must perforce also be few. Indeed, from the time when human societies first attained civilized complexity and size, no more than four different major civilized traditions ever co-existed in the Old World; and in the New, where Amerindian development remained always weak and retarded, no more than three distinct civilizations ever emerged.

These facts allow an overview of the history of mankind as a whole. To be sure, the effort to hold simultaneously in mind what was happening in widely separated parts of the earth requires us to focus attention on certain aspects of reality and to pass others by. The same is true of the study of more detailed segments of the human past—think, for instance, of the local peculiarities of each town and village that are so ruthlessly neglected in our standard national histories! As in cartography, each scale has advantages and shortcomings, and an appropriate amount of detail. Too much information will obscure the whole; too little will deprive history of its verisimilitude and disguise the open-ended surprisingness of human experience. Historians of the nineteenth century



erected a frame for national histories that continues to command general assent; and in the twentieth century, American textbook writers arrived at a rough consensus concerning the history of something called Western Civilization. But for world history, an agreed criterion has not yet appeared. What to omit and what to pay attention to remain very much matter for debate and disagreement.

Because of these disagreements, it seemed worthwhile to write this brief account of mankind's past. The success of my book *The Rise of the West* (Chicago, 1963) made it plausible to believe that a shorter work would make my personal vision of the whole history of mankind more accessible to students and to general readers—a vision which, however imperfect, still has the virtue of being cohesive and intelligible, something that can be grasped and remembered and reflected upon afterwards.

The organizing idea is simple: in any given age the world balance among cultures was liable to disturbance emanating from one or more centers where men succeeded in creating an unusually attractive or powerful civilization. Neighbors and neighbors' neighbors were then tempted or compelled to change their own traditional ways of life, sometimes by outright borrowing of techniques or ideas, but more often by adjusting and changing things to suit the local scene more smoothly.

In successive ages the major centers of such disturbance to the world altered. It therefore becomes possible to survey the epochs of world history by studying first the center or centers of primary disturbance, and then considering how the other peoples of the earth reacted to or against what they knew or experienced (often at second or third hand) of the innovations that had occurred in the main centers of cultural creativity.

In such a perspective, geographical settings and lines of communication between different civilizations became critically important. Archaeology, technology, and art history provide important clues to ancient relationships which the surviving literary record sometimes disguises.

This book was written during the summer of 1964 and revised in the summer of 1965; the text was revised in the summer of 1970 for this second edition, enlarging the final part substantially. The Carnegie Corporation helped to finance its preparation and the reproduction of a set of readings for an experimental course in world history. I owe



special thanks also to Professor John A. Wilson of the University of Chicago, who read Part I, and to Professor Immanuel Hsu of the University of California at Santa Barbara, who checked the passages dealing with the Far East. Both detected errors and infelicities which I hope have been removed. In the preparation of the second edition I was helped greatly by Allan M. Schleich of Creighton University, Professor David Jones of the University of Minnesota, and Professor Bill B. Brayfield of the University of Hartford, who gave me detailed reports based on their experiences with the first edition, which they used in world history courses.

W.H.M.

*Chicago, Illinois*  
*January 1971*



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*Prepared by the Cartographic Department of the Clarendon Press, Oxford, and printed in Great Britain by Cook, Hammond & Kell, Ltd., London*

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\*Erratum: The dates under Coronado on this map should read: 1540–42.