

WILLIAM H. McNEILL
PRESIDENT

AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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William H. McNeill, president of the American Historical Association, has enjoyed a remarkable career spanning four decades of teaching and writing at the University of Chicago. The son of John T. McNeill, a distinguished scholar of Protestant historical theology at Chicago and later at Union Theological Seminar in New York, Bill McNeill graduated in 1938 from the College of the University of Chicago, having attended the College during the most exciting years of Robert Maynard Hutchins's revolution on behalf of general education. From the stimulating atmosphere of critical, inter- (and often anti-) disciplinary debate which Hutchins provoked, and from great teachers in history and the social sciences, emerged a young scholar with the ambition to write a history of the world. After taking his M.A. in the history of culture at Chicago (with a thesis on the structure of the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides), McNeill studied modern European history with Carl Becker and Edward Whiting Fox at Cornell University, receiving his Ph.D. there in 1947. The subject of his doctoral dissertation at Cornell was the significance of the potato in Irish history. His historical studies had meanwhile been interrupted by the Second World War, during which he served as a military attaché in Greece (attaining the rank of Major), but McNeill returned to Chicago as an instructor of history in 1947. One of his first projects, anticipating his later ventures into world history and the comparative study of civilizations, was to organize with Christian Mackauer and Sylvia Thrupp the famous Chicago Western Civilization Program, a year-long course intended to oppose the anti-historical drift of general education in the Chicago College. Out of this course emerged McNeill's famous History Handbook of Western

Civilization, now in its sixth edition with the University of Chicago Press, and the original, multi-volume version of the Readings in Western Civilization. In 1949, McNeill was appointed assistant professor in the College, and in 1955 was promoted to a tenured associate professorship in the Department of History. He became a full professor in 1957, and in 1969 was named Robert A. Millikan Distinguished Service Professor of History. In the Western Civilization project, as in all of his subsequent scholarly and professional undertakings, Bill McNeill received devoted support and informed criticism from his wife, Elizabeth McNeill. His second book, Report on the Greeks (1948), was co-authored with Elizabeth (and with Frank Smothers).

The range and impact of McNeill's service at the University of Chicago has been extraordinary. Known for an almost sovereign detachment and for an enviable equipoise on the seas of academic politics, he undertook many challenging administrative assignments. Perhaps the most important was his tenure as Chairman of the Department of History from 1961 to 1967, during which he was instrumental in renewing a first-rate department and adding to its traditionally strong core in European and American history a pronounced emphasis on the history of the world beyond Europe and America. McNeill's impact on graduate training at Chicago was equally profound, as the list of his many students bears witness. A lifelong, almost Periclean advocate of an ethic of responsibility which affirms civility, humanity, and intellectual rigor in the academic polis, it was not surprising that in 1963 he dedicated his major work to "The Community of Scholars constituting the University of Chicago 1933-1963."

McNeill's magnificent ability to synthesize large amounts of complex historical data into elegant and persuasive interpretative frameworks was apparent in his first major scholarly book, America, Britain and Russia: Their Cooperation and Conflict, 1941-46, written under the auspices of and published by the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London in 1950-53. This book, described by Philip Mosely as "an indispensable guide to the tangled politics of the Second World War" is still a fundamental source for our understanding of wartime diplomacy and the onset of the Cold War. In its global perspective and in its freedom from prevailing orthodoxies America, Britain and Russia anticipated the capacious scope of McNeill's later writings. McNeill's next book was a long interpretative essay, Past and Future (1954), which outlined prominent themes in inter-civilizational history which would define his scholarship over the next decade. From 1954 to 1962, with the help of a Ford Faculty Fellowship and a special five-year grant from the Carnegie Corporation, McNeill produced The Rise of the West. A History of the Human Community. Published by the University of Chicago Press in 1963, this book won the National Book Award and the Gordon Laing Prize in 1964. Hugh Trevor-Roper wrote that "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." A brilliant history of the human community which revealed both extraordinary erudition and penetrating judgement, The Rise of the West commenced with the remarkable postulate that "it is

only when others take aspects of what an author has thought and said in order to develop, twist, and reinterpret his ideas to fit their own predilections and answer their own problems that the cold type of a printed page leaps to life: and if this happens often enough, a single book such as this may become a real force in the cultural history of mankind. Without irony, therefore, I hope my book may be richly and repeatedly misunderstood."

With The Rise of the West, McNeill became the foremost advocate of world history in the Anglo-American world. Appropriately, in the scholarship which followed its publication he sought to extend the analytic implications of its original, diffusionist paradigm and to refine them for more specialized subjects of research. Hence the later 1960s, the 1970s and the early 1980s were particularly impressive for McNeill's corpus of scholarship: Europe's Steppe Frontier (1964), Venice: The Hinge of Europe (1974), The Shape of European History (1974), Plagues and Peoples (1976), The Human Condition: An Ecological and Historical View (1980), The Pursuit of Power (1982) and The Great Frontier (1983). He also continued his long preoccupation with the fate of contemporary Greece (first represented by his prescient study of the political dilemmas faced by post-war Greece in 1947) with The Metamorphosis of Greece since World War II (1978). His research reflects the admirable breadth and the unique courage of his scholarly interests. In an age of increasing scholarly specialization, McNeill stands out for his marvelous ability to discern the enduring patterns in the large span of human experience and to focus his work on questions and issues that cut across national and disciplinary boundaries.

The 1960s and 1970s also saw McNeill renew his commitment to the importance of history as a component of general education in America's colleges and universities. He now argued that world history was the most appropriate vehicle to convey both historical literacy and substantive historical knowledge to young Americans destined to live their lives in the twenty-first century. From 1968 to 1973 McNeill edited (with various co-editors) a ten volume series of Readings in World History and also authored several texts on world history, including A World History (1967) and The Ecumene: Story of Humanity (1973). Whether his expansion of the western history of the 1940s into the world history in the 1970s will prove as pedagogically decisive for the profession at large as McNeill has hoped is still an open question, but his insistent advocacy of quality, coherence, and meaning in undergraduate history programs has put the profession in his profound debt. Historians, as McNeill has written, must articulate some history "worth teaching to undergraduates en masse: something all educated persons should know: something every active citizen ought to be familiar with in order to conduct his life well and perform his duties effectively."

During his career William McNeill has been the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including two Guggenheim Fellowships, fellowships from the Rockefeller, Ford and Josiah Macy Foundations and from the Carnegie Corporation, and appointment as corresponding fellow of the British Academy of Arts and Sciences, as fellow of the Royal Historical Society, as member of the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences, and as member of the American Philosophical Society. He has also been accorded several honorary degrees and has

held visiting professorships at the Universities of Washington, Frankfurt and Hawaii, and most recently the George Eastman Professorship at Oxford University. His professional activities have been as diverse as his intellectual interests, from membership on the board of editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica and U.S. delegate (representing the AHA) to UNESCO's Scientific and Cultural History of Mankind, to membership on the national committee for the American Farm School, in Thessaloniki, Greece.

Arnold Toynbee wrote of McNeill's accomplishment in The Rise of the West that "ability alone would not have enabled McNeill to attain his objective....As I see it, McNeill has been successful because he has been realistic and because he has been brave. These two virtues are complementary to each other. McNeill has had the realism to recognise that anyone who is setting out to try to take a panoramic view of history will not be able to make a completely accurate and detailed survey of more than a patch of the vast landscape. At most, he will be able to do this in a rather small number of patches here and there. McNeill has also had the courage to take the panoramic view all the same, knowing in advance that fellow historians who are specialists on different patches (and are perhaps no more than that) will be able and eager to make valid criticisms of his survey when this traverses their special preserves. A humble recognition and acceptance of the limitations of the human mind's powers is the first of two keys to success: the second is de l'audace, et encore de l'audace."

William McNeill's career has spanned four decades of creative insight for the world of scholarship, of generous support for colleagues and students, and of dedicated service to the profession of history. Great teacher, loyal colleague, courageous scholar, Bill McNeill has upheld and enriched the calling of history in the United States by his life's work.

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