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### William McNeill *A World History*

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William McNeill  
*A World History*  
Oxford University Press, 1999

“A book that remains in print for more than 30 years must have something going for it.” McNeill opens his latest preface with this basic observation which dominates my brief review of the fourth edition. The new sections are two pages of updated preface and Chapter 30, his rush through the manifold changes since 1945. But I concur with his summary judgment, which he extends to suggest that 1) a single, simple point of view, and 2) superior brevity compared to most texts are the keys to the longevity of his review of world history.

The word “Civilizations” begins the second sentence of his traditional preface and dominates the first paragraph, which should be of special interest to civilizationists. He uses the civilizations lens to “allow an overview of the history of mankind as a whole.”

We all recognize how profoundly ambitious it is to attempt writing anything claiming to be a world history in one volume, much less 6 as Geiss or 12 as Toynbee. But millions of students depend on just such efforts to compress the totality which is incomprehensible into more accessible blocks. McNeill did this well, as evidenced by his continuing readership. I especially liked his use of bibliographic essays in four parts. These were more like annotated bibliographies with detail on why he made certain selections, which can help the serious scholar and enlighten the dilettante.

In Chapter 30 he runs through many of the major trends which have set the post WW II world apart from all others--the era of the Cold War, decolonization and the rise of so many new nations, the arms race and powerful derivatives, like the opening of space. McNeill must necessarily be superficial (or at least we can see it more easily here) because so very much has happened during this period which we can remember first hand. McNeill chronicles the flux of change in the Middle East (one of the four classic and long-standing civilizations), the rise of Japan, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the pervasive effect of population pressure on these and other changes, the flux in Iran and the rise of Islamic nationalism. McNeill notes the biggest ethnic conflicts in Africa, Rwanda, the Congo, etc., and the long-running struggles involving indigenes of Latin America. His section on Social and Cultural Changes since 1945 highlights again how rushed he must

be as he flies by medicine transformed (including transcendent effects of birth control), changing family patterns, urbanization, computers and the whole information and transportation revolutions. His closing thoughts are about the profound uncertainty of looking ahead, unparalleled promises, yet dark potentials of fearsome magnitude as well.

It's an adventure, and quite manageable for the serious reader. I recommend *A World History* highly.

MICHAEL ANDREGG