

WILLIAM H. MCNEILL:  
LUCRETIUS AND MOSES IN WORLD HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH: A HISTORIAN'S MEMOIR. By William H. McNeill. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005. Pp. viii, 189.

I

The 1963 publication of William McNeill's *The Rise of the West* was a great step forward for global historiography.<sup>2</sup> The widespread attention to the book amounted to recognition of world history as a valid field of discourse both for the reading public and for historical scholars. Hugh Trevor-Roper, the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford and one of the most visible scholars in the historical profession, wrote a highly positive review in the *New York Times* Sunday book review section; *The Rise of the West* subsequently won a National Book Award.<sup>3</sup> The book conveyed a compelling statement of past and present on a grand scale, a global vision accessible to a North American reading public that had just passed through the terrifying brinkmanship of the Cuban Missile Crisis; its author became a public intellectual.<sup>4</sup> The book also facilitated discussion of broad patterns in the past by professional historians and confirmed McNeill, already a well-established historian of Europe, as the leading authority in world history, a field whose emergence owed much to his own work.

The term "emergence" is, I think, appropriate. World history had long existed as a stimulating but marshy mix of narratives, compendia, theories, and pronouncements—arguably at the creative frontier of historical analysis but, realistically, below the surface of academic discourse in history. The volumes of Oswald Spengler, H. G. Wells, and Arnold J. Toynbee, substantial in themselves, had gained wide attention among the general public but achieved little more than disdain among professional historians. With McNeill's *Rise of the West*, the interpretation of world history broke through the aqueous surface and climbed onto the terra firma of historiography. McNeill's orderly synthesis of civilizational connections made it possible for historians to consider world history as academically feasible,

1. The author expresses his gratitude to Ernst van den Boogaart for his highly informed and imaginative commentary on earlier versions of this essay.

2. William H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

3. H. R. Trevor-Roper, "Barbarians Were Often at the Gates," *New York Times Book Review* (6 October 1963), 1, 30.

4. McNeill did not become a public intellectual of the first rank, as Albert Einstein already was and Noam Chomsky became, but was called upon to make statements for his field and across fields. The 1996 Erasmus Prize provided formal recognition of his role as a major figure in European and world culture.

and not simply philosophically speculative.<sup>5</sup> Henceforth, study of world history could grow by itself, if slowly.

*The Rise of the West* had certain immediate effects, as I can attest: I was among those young scholars and teachers who took inspiration from the book by adopting the identity of world historians in addition to our more obvious regional specializations. In September of 1963, on entering graduate school, I found that Philip Curtin had assigned the book, hot off the presses, for his Expansion of Europe course at the University of Wisconsin, and I read it along with other grad students in African, Latin American, and Asian history. I bought an additional copy and sent it home to my parents, along with the works in African history with which I was most impressed. In the years since, I have read and taught the book under various circumstances.

Precisely four decades after the appearance of this magnum opus, McNeill published another substantial interpretation of world history, *The Human Web*. This volume, co-authored with his son, J. R. McNeill—well established as a global historian of the environment—reached American readers two years after another great crisis, the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington.<sup>6</sup> This synthesis, addressing a longer span of time in a smaller book, enables the reader to gauge the development of William McNeill's global historical thinking over more than a generation. Among the obvious changes in the second overview are greater attention to societal interaction and greater attention to the environmental context of human society.

After another two years McNeill, nearing his ninetieth year, published a concise memoir, organizing the telling of his life story around the writing and publication of his “big book,” as he called it. The memoir sets this peak experience in the context of a long and eventful career and makes an argument of its own, captured firmly yet enigmatically in the title, *The Pursuit of Truth*. This memoir provides the occasion for the present review of McNeill's career and commentary on his field of study, world history.

In philosophical outlook, McNeill can be identified as a secular materialist whose view of historical dynamics gives rather more attention to natural processes than to human agency, and who believes that human spiritualism is a result rather than a guiding force of historical change. His philosophy includes a vision of how best to present this understanding of the world. In his method and work style, McNeill has sought to present syntheses of the issues he addresses, linking issues not commonly combined.<sup>7</sup> In writing he has given priority to chronologically based narratives, emphasizing synthetic statements of overall patterns in the past.

5. McNeill's vision of the modern world appeared to be consistent with that of the leading textbook, R. R. Palmer's *A History of the Modern World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), written within a secular, liberal framework. The difference, for those who chose to see it, was that Palmer treated European expansion as a history in itself while McNeill saw it as part of a larger history of civilizational contacts.

6. J. R. McNeill and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's-eye View of World History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

7. In describing one of his books, he argued that, “As usual, I brought together what had previously been mutually insulated bodies of learning.” McNeill, *Pursuit of Truth*, 101.

In the logic and rhetoric of his synthetic writing, McNeill has played the role of Lucretius, the brilliant Roman poet and devotee of Epicurean philosophy. Lucretius exceeded his austere master in articulating Epicureanism by presenting it in the form of a long poem in hexameter verse. In *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) he conveyed a radical vision of materialistic philosophy at levels from atoms to individual souls to the cosmos, but in language elegant and attractive to those of different viewpoints.<sup>8</sup> So too did McNeill espouse a philosophy of secular materialism in history at the global level. In smooth and cosmopolitan Lucretian mode, McNeill conveyed his world-historical approach by clothing it in garments of the existing consensus: narratives of civilizational advance that audiences in North America and Europe could treat as consistent with the received wisdom about the triumph of Western civilization. The interpretation encompassed liberal notions of European cultural destiny and global modernization in a long-term narrative that replaced chosen peoples with the encounters of competing civilizations. His narratives brought respectful echoes: McNeill's writing evoked either resounding approval or bland acknowledgment, in contrast to the ferocious though often narrow-minded responses to Arnold J. Toynbee's *A Study of History*.

Yet in other writings, McNeill echoed the prophecy and lawgiving of Moses. That is, McNeill enunciated laws of historical process and laws—though not quite commandments—for the behavior of his community, that of professional historians. This Mosaic voice is evident in prefaces written throughout his life, and appears more fully in essays written in his later life. In “Mythistory” and other law-giving statements, in impatiently Mosaic mode, he preached to historians of the need to write at broad and mythic levels and he threatened them with the punishment of irrelevance. (McNeill, of course, spoke on the authority of the natural laws of history, rather than on divine authority.) He called on historians to look beyond their daily work in the archives, to take cognizance of their role as creators and sustainers of myth in society, and to assemble large-scale interpretations of the past as the key element of that myth. The message of his secular prophecy was an understanding of humans and nature through attention to global patterns.

In *The Pursuit of Truth*, McNeill speaks in both Lucretian and Mosaic voices. He conveys a smooth, chronological summary of his life, deftly tracing the story of his own intellectual development but not hesitating to give direct and pithy expression to his irritations, judgments, disappointments, and vanities. But the book also addresses very big issues in history. The reader is privileged to have the observations of a lucid scholar in his eighties: writings composed that late in life can reveal a distinctive balance of insights into the personal and the societal as well as the experience of young and old. More than any leading historian before him, McNeill was willing to identify himself as a world historian. His memoir recounts the story of what led him to that place and sustained him in it.

8. *De Rerum Natura* is the only known work by Lucretius (c. 95–c. 50 BCE). Epicurus (341–270 BCE) preceded him by two centuries. E. J. Kenney, *Lucretius* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977); Monica Gale, *Myth and Poetry in Lucretius* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

## II

Across the stages of McNeill's life, two great continuities reappear. First is his concentration on large-scale historical synthesis and analysis—a consistent emphasis, as he expresses it, from his nineteenth year forward. Second is the University of Chicago, where he lived and studied for virtually a half-century, from the beginning of high school to his retirement, with breaks only for doctoral study at Cornell, service in World War II, and collaboration with Toynbee.

In the sections to follow, I focus first on the quarter century from his college days to the publication of *The Rise of the West*. McNeill makes a relatively convincing argument that most of his efforts in that time were focused on preparation of the “big book.” This era also included McNeill's formal education, his military service, and his interaction with each of the men whom he considered as models: his father, Carl Becker, Arnold J. Toynbee, and, perhaps, Robert Maynard Hutchins.

In the next quarter century, up to his retirement in 1987, McNeill moved from one focus to another, all of them arguably spinoffs of *The Rise of the West*. He took up institutional leadership as chair of his department and then as editor of the *Journal of Modern History*. He wrote textbooks in world history, publishing them especially from 1967 to 1973. Then in the years from 1976 to 1983 he completed thematic works, each developing an argument within world history—most notably, *Plagues and Peoples*.<sup>9</sup> His 1984 presidential address for the American Historical Association initiated the stage of his Mosaic pronouncements: his vision of “mythistory” called on professional historians to write at breadth far exceeding what they could do with archival sources. He later accompanied this manifesto with biographical studies assessing the careers of historians from Lord Acton to Toynbee.

In yet another quarter century, McNeill lived in retirement in semi-rural Colebrook, Connecticut. There he read, perhaps more broadly and leisurely than before, and wrote further thematic studies, especially on dance and drill. At the turn of the century these reflections led to a second overall synthesis, *The Human Web*, and then to his memoir. There may yet be more.

In a concluding section, I offer thoughts on McNeill's principal contributions to historical studies, and argue that there has been more change in his outlook than first appears. At the most basic level, his objectives in the study of history remain the same, but the priorities in topic, in timing, and even in rhetoric changed with time as he wrote and learned. The questions he began posing in his undergraduate years led him by stages from Western civilization to civilizational history to an environmentally focused human history. The historical meanings of “myth” and “truth” remained elusive but became more fascinating during the course of his life.

## III

William H. McNeill was born in Vancouver in 1917 to highly educated parents of Scottish ancestry: his father, from Prince Edward Island, and his mother, from British Columbia, were each valedictorians at McGill University. Young William went to elementary school in Toronto, visited his grandfather's potato farm in

9. William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1976).

Prince Edward Island as a youth, and then moved to Chicago at about age ten, when his father took a position at the University of Chicago. McNeill's father, a historian of Protestant religion, took the unusual approach of surveying Protestant churches generally rather than focusing on a single denomination. McNeill's mother became an academic spouse and served as intellectual mentor to her bookish, eldest son. McNeill thus drew on both sides of his family from the Scottish traditions of education and migration and also, it can be argued, on a Scottish tradition of setting firm roots into one's land of settlement. Yet at age fifteen he quietly but firmly recognized that he did not believe in God: natural forces rather than the will of man or god determined the course of history, he concluded, and thus began "my effort to understand the world on my own" (9).<sup>10</sup>

From high school at the University of Chicago Laboratory School he entered directly into the university, still living with his parents. He was a history major throughout, and thus encountered the classical and humanities curriculum designed by President Robert Maynard Hutchins. His time as editor of the student newspaper seems to have been crucial in establishing his style: he took pleasure in speaking out forcefully on big issues, yet was able to forge cordial relations with Hutchins and other university leaders.

By the time he finished his B.A. degree, as McNeill tells the story, he was already fixed on a career as a historian with the intention of writing a survey of history that would emphasize cyclical patterns. He dashed off a ninety-five-page version of this survey, entitling it "Nemesis."<sup>11</sup> His main excursion beyond course work in history was summer study with anthropologist Robert Redfield, just after his senior year. Redfield's analysis of town and country in Yucatán impressed McNeill, and he read in addition from the works of Ruth Benedict and others (23). McNeill stayed on for one more year at Chicago, completing a Master's degree and reading in ancient and classical Mediterranean history. His Master's thesis compared the structures of the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, working mainly with translations. In this time he began more serious work in reading European languages.

In 1939 he entered the Ph.D. program at Cornell, with the intention of studying with Carl Becker, the historian of colonial America whose textbook in European history he had read in high school.<sup>12</sup> McNeill describes his disappointment with Becker as an aging, fallible person, as compared with the intellectual giant he had met through the printed word; yet McNeill did serve as Becker's last teaching assistant, in 1940–1941. In that year he wrote papers (mostly for his own purposes, it appears) on Plato, classical philosophers, truth, and medieval European towns.<sup>13</sup> The last of these papers, inspired by the work of Marc Bloch, centered on the

10. To my knowledge McNeill did not publish this statement, a rather significant one, until 2005.

11. He indicates that he was exposed to the work of Spengler, but was not impressed by Spengler's cultural analysis of discrete civilizations.

12. The text to which McNeill refers is presumably Carl Lotus Becker, *Modern History: The Rise of a Democratic, Scientific, and Industrial Civilization* (New York: Silver, Burdett and Company, 1931).

13. McNeill's early papers, including these papers of 1939–1940 and his earlier Master's thesis and "Nemesis," would surely make interesting reading in a fuller assessment of his intellectual development.

argument that the mouldboard plow had enabled the remaking and draining of the European plain from the Loire to the Elbe. For his second year at Cornell, McNeill's memoir identifies three main additions to his ideas. First was the notion of dynamic equilibrium in human society as articulated by Vilfredo Pareto.<sup>14</sup> Second was his growing interest in the contrast in historical patterns of the eastern and western portions of Europe. Third was his discovery of the initial three volumes of Toynbee's *Study of History*: McNeill describes three days of nonstop reading in the Cornell library, motivated by feelings of excitement and envy. Gradually, he reformulated his plan for creating a global synthesis to make it different from what Toynbee was doing. Meanwhile, for his formal training during this second year at Cornell, McNeill turned to early modern Europe and to research on the expansion of potato production (focusing on Ireland) as a sequel to the medieval changes wrought by the mouldboard plow. He would later write up these notes as his Ph.D. dissertation.<sup>15</sup>

McNeill's training in history, in many ways, typified graduate study in history in the 1930s: he read the works of major authors and conducted empirical research for his dissertation. The uniqueness of McNeill's graduate study was that he took a year each for the study of ancient, medieval, and modern history, and then moved on to the next. Thus his graduate study included history of politics, philosophy, civilizations, and technological and social change. Events were to move him next to the study of contemporary politics.

World War II redirected the life of McNeill as it did for so many young men of the time. He was drafted in August 1941 and spent time in Hawaii and the Caribbean as an artillery officer. In 1944 he was called to Washington and then sent briefly to Cairo and then to Greece, where he served as an intelligence officer until June 1946. There he was an observer of the civil war of 1944–1945 and the early stages of the Cold War. The description in his memoir tells of his meetings with Greek peasants and provides a sympathetic and historically grounded interpretation of their support for Communist rebels; the reader, however, can well imagine that in the 1940s he was focused rather more on the anti-Communist policy needs of the U.S. military. Greece, meanwhile, brought McNeill more than exposure to political conflict: it led in 1946 to his meeting with Elizabeth Darbishire, a 1943 Swarthmore graduate in linguistics whose Kentucky family included Arnold J. Toynbee among its intimates. Their courtship overlapped with the hurried writing of McNeill's first book, on *The Greek Dilemma*. In 1946–1947 the newly married couple settled in at Cornell University while he finished his dissertation and also wrote a second book—co-authored with leftist journalist Frank Smothers—on politics in Greece.<sup>16</sup> McNeill's wife, like his mother, became a model of the highly educated, responsible, and supportive wife and mother.

14. This reference to the impact of Pareto's ideas rings true, in that McNeill applied visions of dynamic equilibrium in subsequent writings, for instance in his description of patterns of disease in *Plagues and Peoples*. His approach to social science was generally to grasp an attractive concept—notably Pareto's concept of dynamic equilibrium and Redfield's notion of urban-centered clashes of urban and rural belief systems—and elaborate it further on his own rather than through deeper study of theory and method in the discipline from which the insight came.

15. McNeill gives no mention to the obvious link to his grandfather's potato farm.

16. Frank Smothers, William Hardy McNeill, and Elizabeth Darbishire McNeill, *Report on the*

By the middle of 1947 McNeill, at age thirty, had published one book on current Greek politics for a general audience, was near to completing a second, and had completed his dissertation on potatoes.<sup>17</sup> He wrote President Hutchins at the University of Chicago to ask for a job and, on gaining assent, settled down for forty more years at the university. For the first seven he was an instructor in the College of the University of Chicago, teaching Western Civilization, and by 1949 he had published an orderly handbook on the course.<sup>18</sup> Then in 1951 came an opportunity, arising out of contacts through the Darbishire family, for McNeill to work in London as collaborator with Toynbee on a survey of World War II. This fit both Toynbee's continuing task of writing current history and McNeill's work on Greece, and it brought the two together.<sup>19</sup> In the meantime, the second three volumes of Toynbee's *Study of History* had appeared, and with them became evident the development of Toynbee's search for global spirituality. McNeill, whose resolute secularism was long since established, found a disappointment with Toynbee to match that with Becker and, perhaps, his father.

McNeill's promise as a scholar was now such that he moved with apparent smoothness to the Department of History in 1954. From this point he was able to concentrate mainly on his big book. He gained a 1954–1955 Ford Foundation grant for faculty enhancement, and participated in a Frankfurt workshop in the spring of 1956. He was able to negotiate a reduction in his teaching load for several years running to complete the book. He encountered the work of Braudel and found it impressive, but did not reorganize his own work significantly in response.<sup>20</sup>

In his years of work on the book, his approach remained relatively consistent: identify topics, read widely, take few notes, and write up his interpretation.<sup>21</sup> His vision of the overall interpretation had accumulated inspiration, successively, from Becker's European history, Toynbee's early volumes, and teaching on Western civilization. McNeill had rehearsed, in various of his books, the ideas and techniques he would apply on a larger scale: his three books on Greece, his Western Civ handbook, his detailed World War II survey, and his schematic *Past and Future*.<sup>22</sup> The chronological interpretation of *The Rise of the West* relied on

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*Greeks* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1948). In his memoir, McNeill describes the tensions between himself and Smothers, and says that he then swore never again to co-author a study in history.

17. He never published his dissertation, but wrote a brief note: "The Introduction of the Potato into Ireland," *Journal of Modern History* 21 (1949), 218–222.

18. Teresa Neal, "William Hardy McNeill: His Life in Time" (M.A. thesis, San Diego State University, 2006). I am grateful to Ms. Neal for permission to read her excellent thesis.

19. Prior to World War II, Toynbee wrote annual surveys of global political affairs. McNeill's portion of their collaboration appeared as *America, Britain, and Russia: Their Cooperation and Conflict, 1941–1946* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953).

20. It is tempting to describe McNeill's philosophy and life in Braudelian terms: his fascination with the *longue durée*; the centrality of the unconscious *conjuncture* of varying forces that brought American centrality in the Cold War and an era of economic growth; the many ironies of the *histoire événementielle* that brought him to Chicago, to Toynbee, the National Book Award, the AHA presidency, and the Erasmus award.

21. Throughout the memoir McNeill pursues a discourse on note-taking in history, mostly emphasizing that he avoided or minimized note-taking. McNeill, *Pursuit of Truth*, 24, 42, 63–64.

22. William H. McNeill, *The Greek Dilemma; War and Aftermath* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1947); Smothers, McNeill, and McNeill, *Report on the Greeks*; W. H. McNeill, *Greece: American Aid in*

four successive paradigms: early urbanization, civilizations in connection, the expansion of Europe, and the great-power rivalries in the twentieth century. These conveyed a sense of long-term social evolution divided into successive eras, with distinctions between central and peripheral regions. His apparent political and intellectual centrism balanced his topical and chronological breadth, and the result was a book that appealed widely to audiences curious about the world as a whole. Trevor-Roper's review, entitled "Barbarians Were Often at the Gate," argued 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. . . . it is a history of the world, written to show how and where civilization arose, how it developed and was transferred from place to place, what laws, if any, regulated its progress, why certain civilizations thrive at the expense of others, and finally, why, since 1500 A.D., European civilization imposed itself on the whole world. . . . Until 1400 this pressure of the steppe on the more or less equally balanced civilizations of the temperate zone gives continuity to world history. The barbarians imposed on their betters methods of defense and forms of society to sustain that defense. They also acted as carriers between one culture and another.

After 1500, with the conquest of the oceans by the West, the terms change. The Eastern societies which, for 2,000 years, had organized themselves through contact and for conflict with the land-invaders from the north, found themselves pressed by equally mobile sea-invaders from the south. The place of the steppe had been usurped by another single, self-contained, enormous, unifying area, the ocean. . . .

Mr. McNeill does not believe that civilizations have an internal rhythm. He is not a "cyclical" historian. He is far too sophisticated, too close to the evidence, for that. Essentially he believes in economic organization and in "diffusion." . . . If the West now stabilizes its victory, as the Roman empire and Han China stabilized theirs, may not humanity lose its dynamic quality?<sup>23</sup>

In the first of these paragraphs, Trevor-Roper observed that the book transformed civilizational history into world history; in the second paragraph, he argued that McNeill gave a world-historical explanation of the rise of the West; the third paragraph concluded by expressing fear of another wave of barbarians. Trevor-Roper thus identified succinctly the long-term interpretation, linking civilizational interplay to European expansion in modern times. He saw that McNeill's focus on the "barbarians" gave both creative and destructive roles to those beyond the gates. In a clear jab at Toynbee, Trevor-Roper argued that McNeill's synthesis was based on historical evidence rather than on hypothetical cycles. And while the comparison of modern and Roman dynamics reminds us that Gibbon trod some of this ground, Trevor-Roper came down squarely in support of McNeill's secular materialism and the breadth of his civilizational analysis.<sup>24</sup>

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*Action, 1947–56* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1957); W. H. McNeill, *History Handbook of Western Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948); McNeill, *America, Britain, and Russia*; W. H. McNeill, *Past and Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

23. Trevor-Roper, "Barbarians Were Often at the Gates." The review is roughly a thousand words in length.

24. Trevor-Roper had definite ideas about where to draw the line on admitting barbarians to history. At much the same time he dismissed African history as no more than "the picturesque but unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes." Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).

As *The Rise of the West* incorporated modern Europe into its civilizational narrative, so also did it avoid any bow to American exceptionalism. McNeill embedded North American colonization in a comparison to Brazil, passed over the American Revolution rapidly, and set U.S. industrialization in parallel to that of Germany. Even American post-World War II dominance is set in parallel with that of the USSR. In sum, McNeill offered a subtle but unmistakable statement that the U.S. has experienced an accompaniment and not an exception to the general pattern of modern history.

The interpretation followed the model of the interpretation of Western civilization from ancient to present times: the difference was that it added parallel narratives of civilization in Southwest Asia, South Asia, and East Asia, and linked them especially with the nomadic “barbarians” who dominated the Eurasian steppes. Historians of modern Europe could accept a modified interpretation that made Europe the heir to a complex tradition of civilizational interplay rather than the direct heir to the classical Mediterranean. Historians of the U.S. could accept an interpretation that ratified the U.S. as the legitimate heir of Europe, facing a Soviet competitor that had emerged from the same process, as W. W. Rostow argued, out of a “disease of the transition.” Historians of civilizations before 1500, finding their subjects honored with recognition in the global narrative, were not positioned to protest and were little heard at all.

McNeill’s dense but lively narrative succeeded in aligning itself with various other viewpoints, in the expectation that his own line of argument, being most systematically laid out, would win over readers. This was the Lucretian strategy. Thus, McNeill was able to take advantage of the logic of “modernization,” then rising rapidly in academic popularity among supporters of Talcott Parsons, though McNeill probably did not accept Parsons’s timeless dichotomy of tradition and modernity.

The interpretation of the twentieth century was nevertheless a weak point of *The Rise of the West*. Its Cold War formulation, focusing on the opposition of dictatorship and democracy, addressed a central issue but deviated from his long-term narrative and gave rather too much weight to the agency of political leaders. In his 1990 reconsideration of the big book, he acknowledged that his conclusion was too focused on current politics, although he did not yet offer a revised interpretation of the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup>

*The Rise of the West* is a work of synthesis *par excellence*. Like others, McNeill sought to expand the frontiers of his analysis. To achieve the breadth of this work, he had to struggle against limits he identified as those of microhistory or empiricist history, the reluctance of historians to speculate and synthesize, and the limits of his disciplinary knowledge, notably in cultural affairs. There were no real answers to *Rise of the West*, and certainly less debate about it than had met Toynbee’s *Study of History*. But a number of volumes of the 1970s can be interpreted as drawing on its framework: studies by Alfred Crosby and Immanuel

25. William H. McNeill, “*The Rise of the West* after Twenty-five Years,” *Journal of World History* 1 (1990), 1-21.

Wallerstein and, at greater distance, the world-historical works of Andre Gunder Frank and Samir Amin.<sup>26</sup>

## IV

For the quarter century from 1963 to his 1987 retirement and beyond, McNeill was the authoritative spokesman on world history and on the place of Europe in world history. To carry out this role, he undertook positions of institutional leadership as well as pursuing his research and writing.<sup>27</sup> He became chair of the department of history 1961 and served until 1967; with the support of university president George Beadle he was able to increase the size of his department substantially.<sup>28</sup> But the structure of the department did not change, except that factions emerged within it.<sup>29</sup> Chicago in the 1960s underwent the unhappy transformation of urban renewal and the turmoil of 1968. McNeill moved to a different sort of institutional work when he served as editor of the *Journal of Modern History* from 1971 to 1979; here he played the role of Europeanist rather than world historian. In a high point of academic stagecraft he and the journal launched the 1972 English translation of Braudel's magnum opus, in a meeting that included Braudel, medievalist J. H. Hexter, and Trevor-Roper.<sup>30</sup>

A related work of synthesis, McNeill's college-level textbook, *A World History* (1967), remains too often outside the discussion of the significance of his work. This text and his secondary-school text, *The Ecumene*, broadened the ground for world history at the secondary and college levels in the U.S.<sup>31</sup> McNeill's texts had authority because of their association with *Rise of the West*, and by extension gave authority to its competitors. The number of purchasers must not have been high in its early days, but when those at the political center in the U.S. agreed to add world history instruction as a near-universal requirement in the 1990s, text-

26. Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974); Andre Gunder Frank, *World Accumulation, 1492–1789* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978); Samir Amin, *Le Développement inégal; essai sur les formations sociales du capitalisme périphérique* (Paris: Editions de minuit, 1973).

27. One path that McNeill did not follow was the systematic training of graduate students in world history, though he did serve on dissertation committees. His contemporary, Philip Curtin at Wisconsin, launched a graduate program in Comparative Tropical History, out of which came a number of active world historians of the next generation. For Curtin's memoir, see his *On the Fringes of History: A Memoir* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005).

28. McNeill's term was virtually the same as George Beadle's term as Chancellor and President of the university. Beadle had won the Nobel Prize in medicine 1958 for his work in genetics; he supported McNeill's approach to history and the expansion of the department of history. The decade of the 1960s was generally a time of expansion in employment of historians.

29. In 1965 the radical U.S. historian Jesse Lemisch was denied tenure, and the department became polarized for this and other reasons.

30. William H. McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 222.

31. William H. McNeill, *A World History* [1967], 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); McNeill, *The Ecumene: Story of Humanity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), later published as *A History of the Human Community* [1986], 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998). In addition, McNeill and various co-editors published twelve volumes of *Readings in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968–1973).

books and teachers for the course were there in sufficient numbers because of the example of this text.

In his scholarly work, McNeill took up thematic analysis. Rather than take on another large task, he wrote several small studies extending the argument of *Rise of the West*. The first, appearing in 1964, traced the closing of the steppe frontier of Eastern Europe by the advance of agriculture and bureaucratic empire.<sup>32</sup> Another, addressing Venice from the eleventh through the eighteenth centuries, appeared in 1974 with a dedication to McNeill's father, "whose ecumenical view of Europe's past nurtured my own." (The elder McNeill published in the same year a book on Celtic Christianity 200–1200.) Most attention, however, came to his 1976 *Plagues and Peoples*. This book developed a strikingly thematic dimension of the big book, sketching out the great patterns in disease and history. McNeill's method, as before, was to read across boundaries and think big. As McNeill acknowledges, it followed on Crosby's 1972 *Columbian Exchange*, itself arguably a response to *Rise of the West*. His interpretation brought to the Old World the parallels to tales of epidemic that Crosby had told for the Americas. More than Crosby, McNeill went beyond the stories of biological change itself to link them to political change.<sup>33</sup> So also in later works did McNeill conduct thematic interpretation with gunpowder, migration, dance and drill, and environmental issues. He learned more and got more interested in these with time.<sup>34</sup>

McNeill was nominated and elected in 1983, and served as president of the American Historical Association in 1984–1985. The election set McNeill against Eugen Weber, a leading national historian of France whose prominence as a Europeanist made him a televised lecturer on Western civilization. In his memoir, McNeill calls his election a "fluke" because he was known to a member of the nominating committee. But his was no more a fluke than the other such nominations, and his election (by 2041 votes to 1241) confirmed that he was widely recognized in the profession.<sup>35</sup> For his December 1984 presidential address, McNeill chose the topic of "mythistory." His address enjoined historians to write broad interpretations of the past, arguing that such syntheses of history enabled societies to face difficult times with courage.<sup>36</sup> He accompanied his plea with a brusque

32. William H. McNeill, *Europe's Steppe Frontier, 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964). Though Max Weber's work on bureaucracy was gaining renewed popularity in this time (*Economy and Society* appeared in 1956 in German and in 1968 in English) McNeill did not cite him in this work.

33. The absence of Africa in McNeill's treatment of world history is easily noted. In an interesting exception, however, this volume gives an insightful if speculative portrayal of the place of disease in early African history. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 15–56.

34. In interpreting themes, McNeill offered well-developed interpretations but stopped short of theorizing or formally modeling. For instance, *Plagues and Peoples* and *The Human Condition: An Ecological and Historical View* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) adopted the term "macroparasites" to explore social exploitation, but he chose not to develop this insight in detail in later works.

35. Vote tally from the American Historical Association archives, as provided by Research Director Robert Townsend.

36. William H. McNeill, "Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986), 1–10. The address invites comparison with Carl Becker's 1931 AHA presidential address, another broad statement on the mission of historians, but one that resonated throughout the historical profession as McNeill's did not. Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own

critique of national and local history, especially the focus of its practitioners on finding truth by assembling and scrutinizing all available documents on a given topic. The address was republished in a volume also including essays defending large-scale views of Western and world history and concluding with assessments of Lord Acton, Becker, Toynbee, and Braudel as each had influenced McNeill's outlook.<sup>37</sup>

With this pronouncement from the pulpit of the American Historical Association, McNeill spoke firmly in his Mosaic mode. Ideas guardedly expressed in prefaces to earlier works were now trumpeted. As presented in "Mythistory," myths appear as statements about national character, and not just how we got to be who we are. He identified three levels of interpretive results: documented history, patterns of the past, and myth or lessons from the past. McNeill rejected the notion of abstract, eternal truth, but affirmed the existence of general historical truths that can be established, though with variability.<sup>38</sup> He urged historians to get beyond their dedication to written texts, and make space for combination with myth, to get closer to historical truth. In McNeill's view, at least, the historians listened politely and gave no response.<sup>39</sup>

McNeill retired in 1987; it was not a sharp transition, as he had begun cutting back on his teaching in 1977, perhaps relying on income from his textbooks. He published his biography of Arnold J. Toynbee in 1989 and his memoir of Hutchins and the University of Chicago in 1991. These respectful analyses nonetheless confirmed McNeill's intellectual disappointment with these two major figures in his life, following a pattern already set for Becker and, with greater ambivalence, his father.

## V

McNeill and his wife left Chicago to settle in Colebrook, Connecticut, in a house she had inherited years before. Though he had moved far from the Midway, it was to be an active retirement. From 1986 to 1994 he served on a series of national commissions that proposed the form of secondary-school courses on world history; he was more consultant than organizer for these efforts, but his participation gave dignity to reports that were later to become controversial.<sup>40</sup> In these same years he spoke often to groups of teachers.<sup>41</sup>

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Historian," *American Historical Review* 37 (1932), 221-236; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 252-260.

37. McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays*. Becker's earlier such volume included assessments of Henry Adams, H. G. Wells, and Frederick Jackson Turner. Carl Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics* (New York: F. S. Crofts & Co., 1935).

38. For references to "truth" in this essay, see McNeill, "Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians," in McNeill, *Mythistory*, 7, 9, 12, 17, 18, 19, and 21.

39. In one articulate response, Gilbert Allardyce concluded that McNeill attributed exceptional agency to historians in calling on them to construct myths. Allardyce, review of *Mythistory*, *American Historical Review* 92 (1987), 377-378.

40. For a review of the work of commissions and the later controversy, see Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1994).

41. For instance, he came in 1998 to present to a group of more than forty Massachusetts teachers preparing (in a workshop I directed) to teach a new state-mandated curriculum in world history. He

McNeill's study and reflection continued even in retirement, and in the 1990s he extended his conclusions on environmental history and on basic human characteristics. He learned more about the role of speech in history from the speculations of Ernest Gellner, then developed speculations of his own on the role of dance and drill in history.<sup>42</sup> This idea, sparked by his wartime experience with drill and morale, applied most obviously to early modern military history, but McNeill extended it much further back, suggesting that dance nurtured the creation of larger human communities. These new thoughts, integrated with his previous outlook, gradually expanded his framework from civilizational contacts to human history, with strong attention to ecological issues and with attention to the previous and parallel episodes of geological and biological evolution.

The great recognition of McNeill during his years in retirement was the 1996 award of the Erasmus Prize. This prize from the Dutch government—"awarded annually to a person or institution that has made an exceptionally important contribution to European culture, society or social science"—acknowledged the full corpus of his work. The Erasmus Prize confirmed that McNeill had reached a European audience and, arguably, it treated his presentation of European and world history as contributions to "truth" and "mythistory." In any case the award echoed with McNeill's heritage, as his father had been a great devotee of Erasmus.

Still, it required an extended debate to develop his new insights and honors into a coherent interpretation. In 1998, at the invitation of his son John, William McNeill went back on his long-term promise never again to collaborate: he joined to assist his son in completing a concise overview of world history. McNeill *père* wrote a typically rapid draft of his chapters, the first half of the book, but then the two men debated, for years, the differences between civilizational and global frameworks, the balance of environmental and political history, and more. Finally, at the end of a three-day conference on world history and geography in February 2000, the two saw a basis for common effort in John's term, "human web."<sup>43</sup> At the end of his career, and in interaction with his son, McNeill was at last involved in the sort of debate that moved his interpretation to the next step. Each of the authors wrote a brief coda to the resulting work, revealing their remaining differences in style and interpretation, but also showing that they had indeed worked out common interpretive ground.

One may wonder what Lucretius would have written, had he lived and debated for another forty years—and, indeed, how he would have written in collaboration with his son. In the case of William McNeill, the second synthesis on the human

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sent ahead the draft of his chapters of "A Very Short History of the Whole Wide World"—the beginnings of what became *The Human Web*—and asked that we collect a page or so of comments on it from each participant. On arriving in Boston he read over the comments, then presented his response to their comments. His talk had the impressive effect of making the teachers feel involved in world history at a high level, especially when he was able to acknowledge a teacher who had made a factual correction to his text.

42. William H. McNeill, review of Ernest Gellner, *Plough, Sword, and Book: The Structure of Human History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), in *History and Theory* 29 (1990), 234-240; McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

43. The conference was the World 2000 conference in Austin, Texas. McNeill, *Pursuit of Truth*, 154.

community was far more concise, more wide-ranging, and more fully integrated. Yet it was not to have the grand reception of *The Rise of the West*. The logic of webs of human connection is presented and sustained throughout the book, with historical and typological differentiation among what the authors label as the first worldwide web, smaller webs, metropolitan webs, the Old World web, and the current cosmopolitan web. The McNeills use webs as a way of emphasizing communication and cooperation, and of showing how humans shaped the earth's history as well as human history.

Early human days and the rise of food-production each have full-fledged chapters, though civilizational history still gets central billing. A wider range of peoples comes under consideration, though the big civilizations dominate the early sections of chapters and the little ones congregate in later sections. The "barbarians" have disappeared, replaced by specialized pastoralists: an elegant passage argues that the Iranian-speaking Parthians, relying 2,000 years ago on alfalfa fields to sustain their heavy cavalry, diverted the invading Huns from the Iranian plateau both east to China and west to Europe.

The most dramatic shift of *The Human Web* from *The Rise of the West* is in the interpretation of the twentieth century—the period that McNeill first presented through short-term political narrative and a focus on great-power rivalries. Instead, the concluding chapter of *Web* focuses on communication, language, religion, urbanization, energy, and the marriage of science and technology. The political narrative, banished to the end of the chapter, is set in the context of these factors plus macroeconomic change.

This updated synthesis, in effect, proposes a secular cosmology for humanity. It presents humans as part of nature as much as tamers of nature. The notion of the expanding web of human interconnection, attractive in its generality, undergirds a history of linkages, transformations, and consequences, not of destiny. The authors label it as a "bird's-eye view," a view from the heights. Yet therein lie some of the limitations of the book's approach. The narrative is at times vague in that it rarely describes the specific constituents or dynamics of the web. The notion of the web gives too much emphasis to continuity, and thus loses the episodic character of McNeill's earlier notion of the closure of the ecumene. The detached Lucretian outlook is thus put in tension with a trace of Whiggish optimism, in that the problems at each stage of history appear to be resolved and one is left with the expectation that today's concerns too will be successfully resolved, though not necessarily in a hurry.

For an interpretation of global interconnection, *The Human Web* still gives a lot of attention to centers of innovation. Yet these treatments sometimes convey interconnection brilliantly. For instance, the section on Sumeria provides the best statement in the book of the interdependence of the cities on nearby agricultural areas, distant populations that controlled herds or mines, and commercial networks. The section on classical Greece gives the best portrayal of social strata and their contradictions, but also the way in which the Athenian navy, entailing the labor and political participation of lower-class oarsmen, brought both greater cohesion in the short run and the rise of empire and devastating warfare later on. And the section on the Northern Renaissance shows the development of ideas not

just in centers of creativity, but through complex interchange over distances. Indeed, these three historic situations stand out particularly, in *The Human Web*, as instances in which debate and ideas, given free rein, brought great creativity. One may ask whether the authors see them as examples of humanity at its best.

## VI

The field of world history has grown and changed, and not always in response to McNeill or following his approach. One may say that subfields of world history grew more vibrantly than did the overall study of world history as McNeill had sought to define it. Historians of modern Europe have had much to say on world-historical patterns, emphasizing European impact on the wider world.<sup>44</sup> Area-studies historians made up a great deal of ground, gathering evidence and proposing the existence of global historical patterns independent of or responding to modern European influence.<sup>45</sup> The contrasting views of world history from the core and the periphery set up the first big controversy, mostly among U.S.-based world historians: the 1990s debate on Eurocentrism and the related antagonism between national and world history.<sup>46</sup> This debate, however, was contained within the modern era, and McNeill did not participate in it. In the study of U.S. history, the paradigms of frontier and environmental history contributed to world history, although most U.S. historians remained distant from global interpretation.<sup>47</sup> Historians and archaeologists of premodern societies were able to contribute evidence to global interpretation, but rarely succeeded in entering major debates. Scholars from disciplines outside history shifted the discourse repeatedly with new sorts of evidence—on human genetics and paleontology, on climate change and, less forcefully, on culture—but rarely wrote broad interpretations.<sup>48</sup> Only the textbook writers attempted to join McNeill in surveying the full scope of human history.

The greatest strength of McNeill's historical writing has been that which I have associated with Lucretius: elegant presentation of a systematic view of the past, presenting radically different ideas as a version of the existing consensus. The second strength, closely associated, is his preference for addressing long periods of time. McNeill's easy movement across the millennia is an interpretive skill that most other historians have found difficult—or unattractive—to emulate. Third, he has not only emphasized interactions among societies but has sought out patterns in those interactions, from his youthful interest in cycles to his midlife articulation

44. Among these were Fernand Braudel and his associates (Pierre and Huguette Chaunu, Frédéric Mauro, and Vitorino Magalhaes-Godinho), and such others as C. R. Boxer, E. J. Hobsbawm, and Charles Tilly.

45. In this group were included Philip D. Curtin, Andre Gunder Frank, Eric Wolf, and, later, Kenneth Pomeranz and R. Bin Wong.

46. James M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993); Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); David S. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Others So Poor* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).

47. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

48. The physiologist Jared Diamond has been successful, in recent years, in interesting general readers in large-scale issues of the past.

of the periodic closure of the ecumene to his portrayal in later life of the successive expansion of human webs. Fourth, his abiding interest in technology led not to a technological determinism but to exploration of long-term patterns in disease, migration, and communal dance.

For a second set of strengths in McNeill's work, I have made the parallel with Moses. Moses was a leader all his life, but a prophet and lawgiver only after long experience. Even then, his community never got over doubts and misgivings about his message. Similarly, McNeill has prophesied the need for broad-scale studies of the human past and has posed laws for the behavior of historians who would meet this need. The community of historians has responded respectfully but hardly obediently to his proclamations. Moses is said to have retired for long periods to compose the scriptures contained in the Torah; McNeill composed an ample oeuvre that is open to further study.

McNeill's strengths in these areas necessarily left alternative approaches unexplored. The points on which McNeill has fallen short, in my opinion, are his reliance on diffusionist dynamics, his downplaying of social history and social conflict, and his reluctance to utilize theory. The diffusionism of *Rise of the West* remained evident in *The Human Web*. Thus, while the principle of interaction was elevated steadily in McNeill's writings, and while the ecology of the whole world clearly became important in his history, the interactions he traced were one-way influences from the centers of power to other regions, and other areas appear as recipients of influence. While the logic of interaction grew in McNeill's general statements, in practice his principal historical dynamic was diffusion of influence from populous and powerful centers.

On the issue of social conflict in history, the distance and occasional sparring between McNeill and Marxists appears at several levels (15). McNeill's secular materialism left him suspicious of the tendency of materialist Marxists (as of other political and religious factions) to believe in mind-over-matter politics—the idea that forceful application of human will could divert the course of history. At a more philosophical level, McNeill saw the locus of historical change as the interaction of people from different societies, while Marxist analysis gave priority to the contradictions within any social or other unit as the locus of change. One can imagine an analysis attentive to both sorts of interaction: McNeill hinted at it in his experimentation with the idea of “macroparasitism” as a description of certain sorts of elite behavior.<sup>49</sup>

On the use of theory, McNeill has been content to use the results of analysis in various fields without exploring in depth the associated theories. His emphasis on the big picture—on avoiding the black holes of minutiae—put him at risk of missing major distinctions. His approach has downplayed the specific dynamics of various types of experience, which have been the subject of theory. For instance, in encompassing the various levels of evolution, he argued that “the process of symbolic evolution does not appear to be fundamentally different from biological evolution any more than biological evolution was fundamentally different from the physical and chemical evolution of the cosmos that preceded and sustained

49. He discussed this concept in two books: *Plagues and Peoples* (1976) and *The Human Condition* (1980). For a discussion of the concept, see Neal, “William Hardy McNeill,” 85-99.

it.”<sup>50</sup> The statement, while an admirable identification of similarities, glosses over important distinctions: the mechanism of natural selection in biological evolution operates with quite different rates and directions than the process of symbolic (or social) evolution, and differs again from the physical processes of cosmological evolution. McNeill is definitely more of a lumpner than a splitter. But his emphasis on synthesis rather than theory has led him away from the question of how to verify his broad statements on the past. Ultimately world historians will have to address this issue.

What has changed in McNeill’s interpretation of world history? His overall objective of articulating a broad interpretation of world history has continued throughout his life. The term “a history of the human community” persisted, but its meaning expanded with time. When it first appeared as the subtitle to *The Rise of the West*, the meaning in fact applied principally to the civilizations of Eurasia and the pastoral peoples who interacted with them. By the time of the *Human Web*, the application of the term had broadened considerably in time, space, and in human activities, going back to the era in which language emerged, and including the interactions of humans and their natural environment in most areas of the world.<sup>51</sup>

What has changed in McNeill’s vision of the social role of historians? McNeill’s second overall objective, expressed in his argument on myth in history, has been to recognize the social need for broad interpretive statements of history. The two audiences of *The Rise of the West* were the reading public of the U.S. and professional historians. He had great success with the former; the latter responded with respect but little emulation. The audience for *Mythistory* was professional historians based in the U.S. But as McNeill’s own framework expanded from its civilizational origins to a more generally human framework, the intended audience ought logically to have expanded as well: national myths ought to be supplemented if not replaced with global myths. The next logical step was to write history for a global readership. But neither the institutions nor the rhetoric for a global readership in human history had developed in the late twentieth century. McNeill’s own readership had extended to Europe, but not beyond. Further, the reading public of today, while greatly interested in globalization, remains concerned principally with the future. On the other hand, professional historians in many parts of the world are turning in larger numbers to study of the global past.

*The Pursuit of Truth*, McNeill’s concise memoir, assembles all of these pieces into a chronological outline, according to the author’s custom. The memoir comments in frank and at times earthy terms on the various steps of his life. Yet here, as in all his work, we see an ability to choose and to simplify complex issues. He emphasizes the continuities in his life, the importance of patterns set early in his life, and the contingency associated with many steps in his life. It is a life of an individual historian, a life of one building world history. In a sentiment that will

50. William H. McNeill, “Passing Strange: The Convergence of Evolutionary Science with Scientific History,” *History and Theory* 40 (2001), 7. In addition, McNeill serves as a member of the editorial board of *History and Theory*.

51. This helps explain McNeill’s admiration for the “big history” approach of David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Christian, however, has involved himself deeply in natural-science theory.

be familiar to many historians, he was left feeling that his ideas were largely neglected. *The Pursuit of Truth*, in this sense, is a sequel to *Mythistory*.

But there is also a more upbeat way to conclude: in his 2001 article in this journal, McNeill argues that the twentieth century brought a transformation in which all of the sciences relinquished the search for eternal truth and became historical, thus setting up the question of whether the sciences would now absorb history or history absorb the sciences.<sup>52</sup> This profound observation provides a justification for the title of his memoir: if McNeill's own pursuit has been that of contingent and evolving historical truth, he is now well placed to argue that truth in any field of study is contingent and evolving, and that historians may aspire to at least a period of broad intellectual leadership.

Near the end of his memoir, McNeill expresses his approach to writing history as "read, read, read, and scribble, scribble, scribble" (159). To this one must add his practice of linking bodies of knowledge not commonly set in contact and putting these activities in the service of a determined search for patterns in history over long periods of time. He stands as a model for his initial achievement of a successful synthesis, and a model again in his reformulation of a global historical synthesis. Further, his orderly academic life contains no shortage of complexity and mystery, and historians might do well to puzzle further over his life as he has done for those who were models for him.

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52. McNeill, "Passing Strange," 5.