A Refreshing And Exceptional Overview Of World History

An original vision of world history that reveals the larger patterns of human cooperation and conflict from the earliest times. Why did the first civilizations emerge when and where they did? How did Islam become a unifying force in the world of its birth? What enabled the West to project its goods and power around the world from the fifteenth century on? Why was agriculture invented seven times and the Internet just once? In a spirited contribution to the quickening discussion of world-historical questions such as these, J. R. and William H. McNeill explore the webs that have drawn humans together in patterns of interaction and exchange, cooperation and competition, since the beginning. Whether small or large, loose or dense, these webs have provided the medium for the movement of ideas, goods, power, and money within and across cultures, societies, and nations. Avoiding any determinism, environmental or cultural, the McNeills give us a synthesizing picture of the big patterns of world history in a rich, open-ended, concise account. Maps, 25 b/w illustrations.

The McNeills, father and son historians, have given us a superb history of the course of human civilization that is richly detailed in its survey of world cultures while living up to its billing as a "bird's-eye view." The dominant theme in this history is the emergence of webs binding societies together through transportation, communication, economics, politics, and interaction with the environment. Prior to 1450 the emphasis is on how cultures developed in every part of the world and the emergence of the "Old World Web" of cultural interactions in Eurasia and northern parts of Africa. After Columbus, the thesis is that the cultural webs began to merge into a single World Wide Web which characterizes life especially since 1870. The role of Columbus was central, for his "voyage stands as the most crucial step in undoing that ignorance and isolation, in fusing the world's webs into a single, global one, the most important process in modern history." (p. 163)

Except for the period 1914-1945, globalization has reigned supreme, they say. They present this as fraught with danger as well as offering great promise. The global economy has increased the divide between the haves and have-nots, they point out. Contemporary life is also characterized by upheaval, they say. "With the creation of a single web, it is as if history speeded up. Innovations and inventions, booms and depressions, pests and plagues rippled through a unified system .... So, as human history grew more unified, it grew more unstable and chaotic than ever, a condition with which we still live." (p. 178)

Two paramount emphases for recent times are the scientific and economic booms that have been going on since 1945 and human impact on ecology. The factor with the greatest potential impact for the future of humanity is the fact that, "in the process of trying to feed ourselves, make money, and protect ourselves from our fellows, we recast the biosphere dramatically, inserting ourselves as the main force shaping biological evolution." (286) They point out that the planet has seen five previous "extinction spasms" and that the twentieth century appears to be the start of a sixth, this one caused entirely by humanity. (p. 286) They conclude soberly: "It may one day appear that this ecological tumult, particularly climate change and the reduction in biodiversity, was the most important development in the period after 1890, more so than ideological struggles or world wars." (p. 288)

Highly researched and well written, this history is recommended for its scope and insight. This work put the past and present in a perspective that makes sense in our pluralistic yet increasingly global world.

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