



The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History

John Robert McNeill , William H. McNeill

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The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History John Robert McNeill , William H. McNeill World-historical questions such as these, the subjects of major works by Jared Diamond, David Landes, and others, are now of great moment as global frictions increase. In a spirited and original contribution to this quickening discussion, two renowned historians, father and son, explore the webs that have drawn humans together in patterns of interaction and exchange, cooperation and competition, since earliest times. 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. From the thin, localized webs that characterized agricultural communities twelve thousand years ago, through the denser, more interactive metropolitan webs that surrounded ancient Sumer, Athens, and Timbuktu, to the electrified global web that today envelops virtually the entire world in a maelstrom of cooperation and competition, J. R. McNeill and William H. McNeill show human webs to be a key component of world history and a revealing framework of analysis. 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.

The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History Details

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From Reader Review The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History for online ebook

Fletcher says

Do you need a quick refresher on human history from the rise of homo erectus to the fall of the Soviet Union? This book can get you there in just over 300 pages.

Mark Freckleton says

An ideal companion to Gun, Germs and Steel, this book looks into human history as an evolution from simple sameness to diversity and then toward complex sameness. First people lived in simple, small groups, spoke only a few languages, and pursued a narrow range of survival strategies. As groups spread out across the world, broader cultural variety - more languages, differing toolkits, more social complexity. Through the growth of interactive webs, best practices spread, diversity declined, and complexity became the rule - the new uniformity. Societies that resisted disappeared. Modern human society is one huge web of cooperation and competition, sustained by massive flows of information and energy.

Jim says

The best short history I've read. A great book to center your view of history to humanity as a whole. Some history books get lost in classroom academia with facts and a timeline. This one's focus is the story and the telling. It is short and to the point with an emphasis how we got to the present.

The McNeil's tell world history as an interconnected whole with the strands of the web increasing over time and pulling the disconnected parts together. They tell mankind's story in the same way as an individual goes through life learning and casting one's own web of discovery. A man matures in life from a reactionary to a problem solving, change agent. Mankind and its culture evolved from reacting to its environment to become his environment's greatest influence.

Telling history this way links the past to the present and it's problems the way the story of man should be told, the way he experiences it. I would recommend it for anyone who doesn't usually read history and wants to be knowledgeable of it. In my opinion, it is the best short world history book out there. if you only read one history book this should be it.

Tasneem says

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Actual rating: 3.5

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Faissal Bouagga says

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Marc says

A very interesting read, especially because it is so concise. And it's a useful introduction to looking at world history in a more global way, using the metaphor of the web. See my more elaborate review in my Sense-of-History-account: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Jer Wilcoxon says

A very good, very broad overview of human history, perfect for those looking for an outline of the driving forces behind mankind's recent evolution, and for anyone re-orienting themselves with the history they may (or may not) have learned in secondary education. A great book to start with if you've found a new interest in learning some history, but don't know exactly what time, culture, or place to start with; as the narrative covers all of historical time, as well as a bit of prehistory in the beginning, and touches on cultures around the globe. Though the style is reminiscent of standard textbooks, the voice is clear and unpretentious, without the dry, verbose language so many people avoid most history books for. The author(s) simple, straightforward style and flow make this an easy read. The theme works to show how the many different time periods of human history fit in context with each other, and provides a logical explanation for how and why history evolved the way it did. And though the narrative can get a little repetitious at times, I found that repetition very helpful in retaining the information being conveyed. Is this book an exhaustive explanation of human history? No, but it's not supposed to be. Used as a primer, a stepping off point, for further interest in learning history, it's nearly perfect. I suggest this book to anyone and everyone who has a vague idea that they might want to learn some history, but have little, or no, idea where to start.

Adriaan Jansen says

In just over 300 pages, "The Human Web" summarizes the history of humankind, from the first steps our ancestors took on the African savanna some 4 million years ago to the beginning of the 21st century. The authors, father and son McNeill, use as a framework the ever expanding networks of human interaction, networks of exchange of information, of cooperation and competition.

The advantage of describing all of humanity's history and of using these framework is that it allows them to describe long-range tendencies and broader contexts that history books that focus on a shorter period often can't provide. One example of something that I used to think of as isolated events but that the McNeills describe as a continuing, centuries-long phenomenon: The influence of steppe raiders. I used to think that the Huns who contributed to the fall of the Roman empire in the 5th century and the Mongol army that ravaged Europe 8 centuries later were unconnected, but "The Human Web" argues that Attila the Hun and Genghis Kahn were just examples of a centuries long influence, and often dominance, of steppe raiders on human development in Europe and Asia. Until the 17th century, these steppe raiders had military strategic advantages over the civilizations of the Eurasia. As a result, especially in Mesopotamia and India, many, if not most, civilized governments of Eurasia descended from steppe conquerors. The strategic advantage of the steppe raiders disappeared when city dwellers started to mass produce firearms.

Because of the focus on the development and growth of human webs of cooperation and competition, humanity itself becomes the agent of change in this book, rather than individual change agents. One consequence is that very few names are mentioned in this book: If you are looking for a "Who is who" of human history, this is not the book for you.

In broad strokes, the history of the humanity goes from low diversity to high diversity and then back to less diversity. This process of growth and then decrease of diversity starts with the arrival of Homo Sapiens around 200.000 years ago. Obviously, the web was then very small, and diversity was low. This started to change when the Homo Sapiens started to spread out over the world, some 60.000 years ago. New local webs formed, often with weak links to other webs. Consequently, diversity increased: different geographical, biological and climate-related challenges forced humans to adapt to local circumstances, which resulted in different cultures, languages, technologies. Around 5500 years ago, the first cities, and a little later, the first empires appeared, which resulted in bigger, tighter webs. At one stage, bigger and bigger webs started to absorb smaller webs. The sharing of information, from technologies to best practises to religion in these bigger webs started to reduce diversity. This decrease of diversity intensified over the last couple of centuries, especially after the unification of the 2 main webs, the Old World web of Eurasia and the web of the Americas, when Columbus discovered the New World in 1492. Accelerated globalization, first between 1870 and 1914, later in the second half of the 20th century, resulted in a further decrease of diversity.

One area where this decrease of diversity is manifesting itself clearly is in the disappearance of languages (see also <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/500> : The extensive and chronic decline of languages seems to have originated in the 15th century, as the age of European expansion dawned. At least 15,000 languages were spoken at the beginning of that century. Since then, some 4,000 to 9,000 tongues have disappeared as a result of wars, genocide, legal bans, and assimilation ... Millennia of human experience are wrapped up in the planet's many languages, and this linguistic diversity may be as essential to our cultural health as biological diversity is to our physical health. No language is an exact map of any other; each is, in a sense, its own world. By allowing so many of these worlds to slip away, we may be forfeiting a lot more than just words.)

Other long-term tendencies that "The Human Web" highlights are the impact humans have on their

environment and the ever increasing inequality throughout human history.

Human impact on nature started with the first use of fire to control the environment and the killing off of large land animals, and, as the McNeills don't fail to point out, continues today with, among others, the emission of CO₂ and other greenhouse gasses. Their book was published in 2003. It is sad to realize not much progress on climate change issues has been made since then.

Also still relevant are McNeills' remarks about rising inequality and its dangers, described 10 years before Piketty and other contemporary prophets of inequality became household names.

Some of the broad strokes of history in this book can also be found elsewhere. For instance, the McNeills give similar explanations for the dominant position Eurasian cultures had obtained by the 15th century as Jared Diamond did in his "Guns, Germs and Steel": The earliest differences arose due to geographical and climatological circumstances and coincidences, and these differences tended to favour Eurasia. In large parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, tropical diseases prevented the development of higher civilizations, and in the Americas, all agricultural work had to be done by human labour, simply because there were no big animals that could be domesticated to do the work. In Eurasia, its greater size, large amount of domesticable species, colder winters that killed off many tropical diseases and a more capacious communications web embracing its much larger population resulted in an accelerating rate of invention and change in the Old World. America's later start and weaker communications would have disastrous consequences after 1492 (described in more detail in Charles Mann's great books 1491 and 1493).

"The Human Web" also dedicates attention to the curious fact that several crucial inventions happened multiple times at different locations in human history. An eloquent example is domestication of plants and animals, which happened 7 times between 11.000 and 4.000 years ago at different places in the world. The McNeills note that "parallel pressures led to parallel solutions" (pag 7). These parallel solutions were necessary because the relatively localized webs were not yet sufficiently connected and information such as best practices about agriculture could not easily be transferred (and in the case of the Americas, could not be transferred at all). However, by the late 18th century, a global human web spanned the world. As a result, "the steam engine did not have to be invented 7 times" (pag 7).

A great book if you are looking for a broad overview of human history and the long-term and long-range tendencies that have determined the development of human civilization. Although more focused on broad developments than anecdotal details, interesting small facts are not absent from the book. Who knew that camels were crucial for the expansion of Islam in the 7th century? A great starting point for further thinking and reading.

martha says

The history of the entire human race in just over 300 pages. Dense and often slow but pretty interesting. I learned a lot about longstanding ecological connections between humanity and the planet: the domestication of wheat, goats, etc etc. It was good at drawing complex connections: alfalfa bacteria meant certain crops could be cultivated which could support certain types of horses which meant raiders could sweep into China from the steppes. Impressively done, alfalfa bacteria!

..... I know I had more to say but I finished this in September so WHO KNOWS what it was.

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Sense of History says

A World History in over 350 pages, some have done it, but not the way father and son McNeill have. They managed to put a new gridding over the complex evolution of mankind, namely that of evermore enlarging en more complicated webs, first locally (agrarian towns), than metropolitan (cities), followed by civilizations and finally the cosmopolitan worldwide web, starting from 1500 AD.

To look at history in this way is especially refreshing for the period between 3.000 BC and 1500 AD because it illustrates that civilizations and/or empires interact intensely. This said, I've got a bit of a problem in the use the McNeill's make of the term 'the old Worldwide web', suggesting that there already was an intense

interaction between the Roman Empire, the Parths and China; this seems to me exaggerated. Also, it's very odd to see that the Roman Empire only gets about 10 lines of attention, whilst the Chinese civilization gets ample attention in almost every chapter; perhaps a question of overcompensation? In short: this is a very thorough and brilliant book that gives new insight in the cohesion of human evolution, but sometimes is a bit unbalanced and forced.

Mikko Saari says

What a pleasant overview of human history in reasonably small number of pages – just 480 pages of loosely set text to cover everything from ancient times to the fall of the Soviet Union.

The McNeills seem to do a good job here, when they focus on how the emerging networks shape the human history. It's a broad view, but I think it gives a good overall understanding of why the world turned out the way it did.

Rein says

The idea is good. To describe not the outside of history, but the inside of it, the processes that direct the flow of events. And not from one particular point of view (as f.ex. Marxists do), but taking into account various mutually independent factors, such as the spread of diseases and the speed of communications in addition to economic, political or religious factors.

However, the actual book leaves a lot to be desired. First of all, there were too many factual mistakes in the areas that I know something about to let me trust surprising revelations in areas where I know less. Secondly, the choice of examples was quite often out of proportion. The book does not mention Charlemagne and deals in passing with Alexander the Great, but dedicates more than a page to the Taiping rebellion and more than half a page to Simon Kimbangu (while neglecting to mention any Mahdi rebellions in Africa). Once in a while the narrative got a bit tedious and another story of a migrating crop did not seem as important as it might have seemed to the authors.

That said, the book contains a lot of very astute observations and convincing explanations of phenomena and processes that really set me thinking. So yes, well earned three stars, but the ideal single volume on human history probably remains yet to be written.

Jan Cornelis says

The mission of father and son was to write a history within 200 pages, so people who do not have the time to read several shelves of books are able to learn about "how the world got to be the way it is". What a megalomaniacal task, and what a result. The task is done by reducing the manifold of facts by using the accumulation of human connections as an optic lens.

This works. McNeill sr. and jr., are able to include technological, communicative, environmental, biological, religious, economical and political developments that lead to our current day.

This macro view of course has its downsides. In the history millions of people are overrun by more developed and/or more aggressive people and the illnesses they brought with them. (You need a strong

stomach to deal with the abundance of suffering in world history). How did people include these great dyings in their cultural narratives? This was a question i found myself asking again and again. These topics are not explored.

Probably it is good that the writers don't lose focus. The book is condensed but not oversimplified. I learned a lot about the role of China in world history, about Polynesian communities. All histories is did not encounter in Highschool. Go read this book!

From here?

The book ends with the urbanisation which gives *"the acute challenges of our time, it seems sure, is the process of social, political, psychological, moral, and ecological adjustment to life in the big city."* Both writers have something to say about this adjustment in the afterword.

"We will have biological evolution, as well as cultural evolution, in our own hands. A great deal will depend on just whose hands" (Junior).

"I conclude that we live on the crest of a breaking wave. Luck, intelligence, and awkward tolerance may keep the web from breaking. Let's hope so" (Senior).

Both conclusions do not sound very optimistic to me and after reading the book and seeing the news every day, I do not have the feeling their is a lot of direction in 'my' or 'our' hands. I hope to feel less hopeless about the adjustments we can make and need to put more effort into investigating this. Any suggestions are welcome. :)
