

## *William H. McNeill, Professor and Prolific Author, Dies at 98*

By SAM ROBERTS JULY 12, 2016



William H. McNeill, a professor and prolific author whose catholic exploration of world history widened the traditional Eurocentric approach to the subject, died on Friday in Torrington, Conn. He was 98.

His death was confirmed by his son John Robert McNeill, a third-generation historian, with whom he collaborated on “The Human Web: A Bird’s-Eye View of World History” in 2003.

Professor McNeill’s opus, “The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community” (1963), took 10 years to write. It became a best seller, won the [National Book Award](#) for history and biography and was lauded in The New York Times Book Review by the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper. “This is not only the most learned and the most intelligent,” he wrote, “it is also the most stimulating and fascinating book that has ever set out to recount and explain the whole history of mankind.”

Professor McNeill conceived “The Rise of the West” in 1936 as an antidote to Oswald Spengler’s gloomy “Decline of the West” and Arnold Toynbee’s “A Study of History,” which postulated that civilizations marched to their own drummers, largely unaffected by foreign influences.

Professor McNeill’s book looked beyond Europe to argue that the dynamic give and take between civilizations and nations over five millenniums defined global history and spurred the rise of the West since 1500.

“It exploded the notion that a civilization or country’s history was a self-contained unit; cultures and people did not exist in a vacuum,” Meredith Hindley of the National Endowment for the Humanities wrote when Professor McNeill [was awarded](#) the National Humanities Medal in 2009. “The book’s title comes from McNeill’s assertion that the West emerged as the dominant force in the world, because its political and religious restlessness and the advent of industrialization required it to periodically renew itself.”

On many campuses, Western civilization courses were rebranded World History.

“The Rise of the West” was one of more than 20 books Professor McNeill wrote in a career that included four decades of teaching history at the [University of Chicago](#), where he was also chairman of the history department.

“Teaching is the most wonderful way to learn things,” he once told Humanities magazine. “You have to get up before a class at 10 o’clock the next morning and have something to say.”

When he was only 10, he posited a theory to his father on the development of medieval kingdoms. While assimilating emerging research, he refused to discount the cultural contributions of early Asian and Middle Eastern cultures just because original sources were not as plentiful as they were for their later European counterparts.

“Inferences and large doses of imagination actually have allowed the construction of a far more adequate understanding of the cosmic and human past than earlier generations achieved,” Professor McNeill wrote in 2005 in “The Pursuit of Truth: A Historian’s Memoir.” “I believe that this is the central intellectual accomplishment of the 20th century.”

Truth, he wrote [in an Op-Ed article](#) in The New York Times in 1981, “does not reside in exact recording of every detail. It never has. Instead, it resides in myth — generalizing myths that direct attention to what is common amid diversity by neglecting trivial differences of detail.”

“Indeed,” he continued, “the principal reason for studying the past is that it promotes the formulation and reformulation of useful myths about the conduct of public affairs, creates and confirms public identities, and offers models of behavior for leaders and followers alike that help to guide us through present perplexities.”

William Hardy McNeill was born on Oct. 31, 1917, in Vancouver, British Columbia, the son of John Thomas McNeill, a Presbyterian minister and historian of Calvinism, and the former Netta Hardy. When he was 10, the family, which had moved to Toronto, moved again, to Chicago.

He graduated in 1938 from the University of Chicago, where he was editor of the student newspaper and was inspired by the anthropologist Robert Redfield. He earned a master’s degree there, too, after completing a thesis on Thucydides and Herodotus.

He was drafted in 1941 and served with the Army in Hawaii and the Caribbean and as assistant military attaché to the Greek and Yugoslavian governments-in-exile in Cairo, where he met his wife, the former Elizabeth Darbishire. She died in 2006. In addition

to his son John, he is survived by another son, Andrew, and two daughters, Ruth McNeill and Deborah McNeill; and 11 grandchildren.

After the war, he earned his doctorate at Cornell University (his dissertation was on “The Influence of the Potato on Irish History”). He was hired by the University of Chicago in 1947 and remained there until he retired in 1987 and moved with his wife to Colebrook, Conn.

His other books included “Plagues and Peoples” (1976), “The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000” (1982), “Arnold J. Toynbee: A Life” (1989), “Hutchins’ University: A Memoir of the University of Chicago, 1929-1950” (1991) and “Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History” (1995).

Refuting Francis Fukuyama’s premise in “The End of History and the Last Man” in 1992 that the American model of a liberal, capitalist democracy had become the paradigm for governance, Professor McNeill wrote in The New York Times Book Review: “I do not believe that human nature is uniform and unchanging. Rather, whatever penchants and capabilities we inherit with our genes are so malleable that their expression takes infinitely diverse forms.”

“When Asian models of social and economic efficiency seem to be gaining ground every day, and when millions of Muslims are at pains to sustain the differences, great and small, that distinguish them from Americans,” he continued, “it is hard to believe that all the world is destined to imitate us.”

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