

William H McNeill, prize-winning world historian, dead at 98

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A March 1964 file photo shows historian William H. McNeill. McNeill, the prize-winning scholar who wove the stories of civilizations worldwide into the landmark "The Rise of the West" and helped pioneer the history of disease and

epidemics in "Plagues and People," has died at age 98. McNeill died Friday, July 8, 2016, at his home in Torrington, Conn., according to Steve Koppes, associate news director at the University of Chicago, where McNeill was a professor emeritus. (AP Photo/J.L. Marchael)

William H. McNeill, the prize-winning scholar who wove the stories of civilizations worldwide into the landmark "The Rise of the West" and helped pioneer the history of disease and epidemics in "Plagues and People," has died at age 98.

McNeill died Friday at his home in Torrington, Connecticut, according to Steve Koppes, associate news director at the University of Chicago, where McNeill was a professor emeritus.

McNeill wrote more than a dozen books, notably "The Rise of the West," published in 1963 and greeted by The New York Times as "the most stimulating and fascinating" work of [world history](#) ever released. It won the National Book Award, sold well despite exceeding 800 pages and later was ranked No. 71 by the Modern Library among the 20th century's best English-language nonfiction books.

The title of McNeill's book was a direct challenge to Oswald Spengler's "The Decline of the West." But "The Rise of the West," its narrative extending from the Paleolithic Age to the present, was also born out of a Freudian struggle with McNeill's hero and father figure Arnold Toynbee, then the reigning scholar of world history. Toynbee believed that civilizations of the East and West had essentially developed independently and their stories were separate. McNeill countered that they were very much part of one story, one of "contacts and "exchanges" and the triumph of Western innovation over the stagnation of Muslim and Chinese culture.

"Indeed, world history since 1500 may be thought of as a race between the West's growing power to molest the rest of the world and the increasingly desperate efforts of other peoples to stave Westerners off," wrote McNeill, who also cautioned that another civilization could yet overtake the West.

McNeill was criticized for writing too favorably of the West and would acknowledge flaws. In a "retrospective essay," he noted that "The Rise of the West" was in part influenced by the Cold War and the United States' post-World War II ascendancy. He underestimated the Chinese, "gave undue attention to Latin Christendom" and showed "scant concern for the sufferings of the victims of historical change." He faulted the scholarship of the time, but also "the bias" of his education and "personal idiosyncrasies" that led him to favor stories of Western success. But he welcomed disagreement. The past, he was sure, would be captured with ever greater "precision, richness, and accuracy beyond anything previously possible."

McNeill always looked for new ways to explain the world. He did not track change through the feats of great men, but through everyday innovation, technology and the mixing of cultures. He documented the democratizing effect of the close-order military drill, the moldboard plow's transformation of agriculture, the impact of potato farming. He studied closely what happened when "clashes of custom collided," whether between rural and urban cultures, rival religions or rival countries.

McNeill regarded his future books as sequels and correctives to "Rise of the West." In the 1976 release "Plagues and People," he was among the first to examine the impact of infectious disease in history, from ancient Eurasia to the 20th century. He anticipated the AIDS epidemic that would break out a few years later and helped launch a field of scholarship that includes Jared Diamond, Laurie Garrett and Richard Preston.

His other works included "The Pursuit of Power" and a reluctant biography of his fallen idol, Toynbee, written on request by Toynbee's wife. In 2003, he collaborated with his son, J.R. McNeill, on "The Human Web: A Bird's Eye View of History." His memoir, "The Pursuit of Truth," came out two years later.

He was born in Vancouver, British Columbia. His father, John T. McNeill, was a theologian and Medieval historian who sought to find common beliefs among Christians worldwide; the younger McNeill would see his scholarship as a secular version of his father's calling. He was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, and a graduate student at Cornell University. His formal education was suspended in 1941 after the attack on Pearl Harbor and his enlistment in the Army, in which he served five years. But he continued to observe and absorb. He shared quarters with men of widely differing backgrounds. He learned cryptography and tasted the imperial power of being a commanding officer. McNeill especially valued his assignment to gather intelligence on the Communist uprising in Greece.

"What better experience could a historian have than to find himself observing revolution and counterrevolution close-up?" he wrote in his memoir.

After the war, he met and married Elizabeth Darbishire, whose father was a close friend of Toynbee's. In 1947, McNeill joined the faculty of the University of Chicago and remained for 40 years.

A turning point came in the early 1950s when he accepted Toynbee's offer to come to London and assist on a project about World War II. After two years, McNeill was disillusioned. He found that Toynbee resisted new ideas and "was sloppy in his scholarship." McNeill returned to the states and worked on what he knew would be his "big book."

"I typed the manuscript of 'The Rise of the West' on a portable Underwood noiseless typewriter that my parents had given me as a 21st birthday present," he wrote in his memoir. "It was accompanied by a verse my father composed inviting me to 'write a book of lasting worth.'"

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