

Occasional Paper 14

Editor: Neni Panourgiá

In memoriam

William Hardy McNeill.

1917–2016

William Hardy McNeill was the first editor of the Journal of Modern Greek Studies. Occasional Papers is hosting a two-part memorial on Professor McNeill contributed by John Iatrides and Ioanna Laliotou. In Occasional Paper 13, John Iatrides reviews McNeill's five books on the history of Greece in the two decades of the Second World War and its aftermath. In Occasional Paper 14, Ioanna Laliotou gives an assessment of McNeill's contribution to historical science.

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“For the times, they are a-changin’”: William McNeill and the Transformation of World History

Ioanna Laliotou

This is a section of the Journal of Modern Greek Studies hosting occasional papers on current Greek matters. Some of these are interviews, others are short commissioned position papers, yet others are reports on collaborative projects.

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William Hardy McNeill died recently at the age of 98. His intellectual legacy covers an extraordinary scope of historical inquiry in the field of world history. Author and editor of more than twenty books, his work paved the way for major historiographical shifts that reshaped the ways in which we currently conceive global and world history.

His opus *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (1963) is rightly considered a milestone in the historiographical trajectory of world history during the second half of the twentieth century. This book was written against the grain of the dominant historiographical narrative at the time that had been articulated by Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918–1923) and Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* (1934–1961). McNeill opposed the idea that civilizations constitute concrete and airtight units that develop in relative isolation from one another and nurture their own idiosyncratic strengths and weaknesses. To counter-argue this position he explosively enlarged the scope of his investigation both temporally as well as geographically, and he positioned the rise of Western hegemony within the context of a wide range of interactions and influences on a global scale. The rise of the West was thus historicized and attributed not so much to the intrinsic characteristics of Western culture and civilization as to the interactions between Western and non-western conglomerations of power.

Almost three decades later, McNeill reflected on the historiographical implications of his approach in his article “The changing shape of world history,” published in the journal *History and Theory* (McNeill 1995). In this article, he argued that nineteenth century historiography presented world history as a series of national histories victoriously advancing towards freedom. In his terms, this liberal conceptualization of world history constituted a Eurocentric narrative grounded on specifically Western definitions of freedom. As he put it,

This liberal, progressive view of world history (as well as the inside-out inversion thereof) was a naïve secularization of the Christian epochs. Freedom replaced God as the governing, supernal actor; and privileged free peoples played the terrestrial role assigned to faithful Christians in the divine drama of salvation. In so far as the professional pursuit of history finds its meaning in this scheme (or in its inversion) we clearly remain bounded by the Christian inheritance, however faint it has become contemporary consciousness. (12)

McNeill also argued that World War I constituted a deep anomaly in this narrative of progress towards freedom. The sheer brutality of this war could not easily be assimilated within an optimistic vision of Western history as a triumph of continuous and unimpeded march towards progress. McNeill explained Spengler's and Toynbee's return to the idea of circular historicity as an attempt to conceptually manage the anomaly of World War I. McNeill understood circular historicity as a device employed by historians in order to explain cycles of birth, rise, and decline. His own approach diverted from this conceptual framework. He refuted the framework's fundamental assumption, when he argued that civilizations and cultures did not develop in a vacuum, but in relation with others. Thus, rise and decline should be attributed to changes and transformations of the broader historical context defined by exchanges and contacts.

World system theory became greatly influential in the social sciences and the humanities during the second part of the twentieth century. A great number of historians—despite the diversity of their

perspectives—shared the impact of world system vision on historical change and politics. According to this framework the world was conceived as a constellation of zones of interaction. Historians turned their attention to influences, exchanges, sites of contact, and communication. Communities, geo-cultural formations, and political institutions that were previously thought of as isolated and independent were now revisited from the perspective of commerce, mobility, transfer of technology and knowledge, cultural and literary exchanges, biological fusion, and environmental interdependency.

The gradual intensification of contact and exchange between remote areas of the planet became of shared interest for world history scholars. In the conclusion of his reflective article, McNeill extended his historiographical interest and addressed an even broader question that concerned the deeper cultural transformations of his own times when he wondered in the same article,

How to reconcile membership in vivacious primary communities with imperatives of an emerging cosmopolitanism in, perhaps, the most urgent issue of our time. . . . how firm adhesion to primary communities can be reconciled with participation in global economic and political processes is yet to be discovered. . . . I suspect that human affairs are trembling on the verge of far-reaching transformation. . . . [W]hat sort of communities may prove successful in accommodating their member to global communications, worldwide exchanges and all the other conditions of contemporary (and future) human life remains to be seen. (25)

McNeill's questions marked the emergence of a new form of global history in the mid-1990s, as historians were eventually forced by history itself to revisit the past in global and planetary terms. As two other important historians of the time, Charles Geyer and Michael Bright, were arguing in their own article "World History in a Global Age," published the same year in the journal *American Historical Review*, "a naturalized 'imperial' feel for 'the world' had replaced world history" (Geyer and Bright 1995: 1035), and historians were now impelled to work in order to de-naturalize hegemonic worldliness that had become dominant in Western historiography.

Indeed, up until the 1970s, there were very few critical historiographical approaches that attempted to undermine this naturalized imperial feel for the world. On the contrary, professional historians had integrated this type of vision and incorporated it in comfortably Eurocentric historiographical frameworks. It is not a coincidence that in their aforementioned article Geyer and Bright paid tribute to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) as a milestone in a long intellectual endeavor to introduce to the humanities frameworks critical of eurocentrism. A new historical context was emerging, defined by postcolonial forms and practices of globalization: the decolonization of large areas of the planet, the intensification of human mobility from the former colonies to the former metropolises, the postcolonial readjustments of capitalism, and so on. The impact of these developments on institutions of higher education and research was inevitable. Despite Western historiography's fierce resistance to the critique of Eurocentrism, the latter gradually eroded Eurocentric historical frameworks and delegitimized some of the traditional foundations of European history and history of the West. Historians gradually engaged with the study of globalization, while historiographical interest shifted away from the idea of European progress and towards the exploration of the multiple ways in which Europe and Europeans were implicated in wider historical transformations defined by unequal practices of exchange and interaction (Spivak 1988; Young 1990; Chakrabarty 2007).

It is in light of these tectonic historiographical shifts that I suggest we revisit McNeill's scholarly production today. His work contributed greatly to the articulation of the conceptual framework necessary for the promotion of critical approaches to world history. In this sense, McNeill's historiographical endeavors enabled analytical innovation and prepared the terrain for the thematic and methodological explosion that allowed subsequent generations of historians to investigate the multiple historicity of the world, the globe, the planet, the Gaia, and so on and so forth.

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