



The Pursuit of Truth: A Historian's Memoir

William McNeill

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William H. McNeill's seminal book *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (1963) received the National Book Award in 1964 and was later named one of the 100 best nonfiction books of the twentieth century by the Modern Library. From his post at the University of Chicago, McNeill became one of the first contemporary North American historians to write world history, seeking a broader interpretation of human affairs than prevailed in his youth. This candid, intellectual memoir from one of the most famous and influential historians of our era, *The Pursuit of Truth* charts the development of McNeill's thinking and writing over seven decades. At the core of his worldview is the belief that historical truth does not derive exclusively from criticizing, paraphrasing, and summarizing written documents, nor is history merely a record of how human intentions and plans succeeded or failed. Instead, McNeill believes that human lives are immersed in vast overarching processes of change. Ecological circumstances frame and limit human action, while in turn humans have been able to alter their environment more and more radically as technological skill and knowledge increased. McNeill believes that the human adventure on earth is unique, and that it rests on an unmatched system of communication. The web of human communication, whether spoken, written, or digital, has fostered both voluntary and involuntary cooperation and sustained behavioral changes, permitting a single species to spread over an entire planet and to alter terrestrial flows of energy and ideas to an extraordinary degree. Over the course of his career as a historian, teacher, and mentor, McNeill expounded the range of history and integrated it into an evolutionary worldview uniting physical, biological, and intellectual processes. Accordingly, *The Pursuit of Truth* explores the personal and professional life of a man who affected the way a core academic discipline has been taught and understood in America.

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Edwin Courville:

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