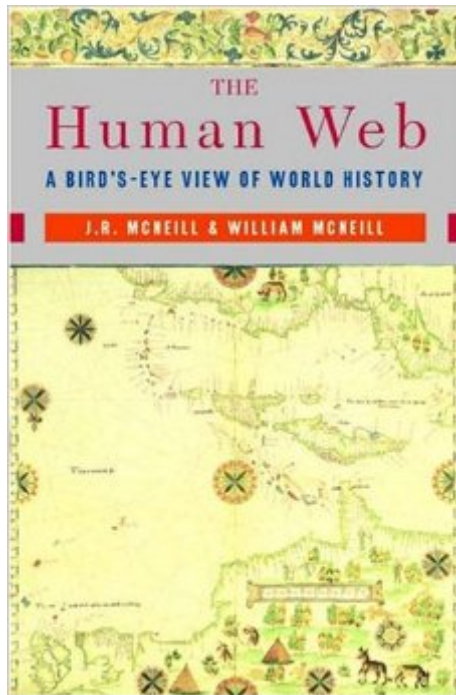


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The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View Of World History



Synopsis

Why did the first civilizations emerge when and where they did? How did Islam become a unifying force in the world of its birth? What enabled the West to project its goods and power around the world from the fifteenth century on? Why was agriculture invented seven times and the steam engine just once? 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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Cultural cheerleaders constantly shout about how lucky we are to live in an age of miracles, a utopia of technology and progress. Everything is just great (if you cram most of reality under the bed). But

the folks who rip off their blinders know better. They can perceive huge and growing crises that cannot be well addressed via the pursuit of shopping and entertainment. They can see that it's time to learn, to think, and to change. Understanding how we got into this bog of predicaments requires learning, lots of learning. For this, we need our superheroes, the historians. William McNeill, and his son John, heard the calls for help, and came to the rescue. William once tried to boil the human journey down to one book, but it was 829 pages, too big for general readers. John's vision was human history in 200 pages, and he teamed up with his father to write it. The finished product was 350 pages, and titled *The Human Web*. The book slices human history into time blocks, and provides snapshots of the world during each period. It's not a sleep-inducing recital of kings, empires, wars, and dates. It's about trends in technology, weaponry, religion, worldviews, and environmental impacts. The McNeills framed their discussion based on a model of webs, which are networks of communication and trade. Throughout the book, they take readers on an interesting promenade through the ages. Let's take a peek at a few of their topics. For most of the human journey, our hunter-gatherer phase, webs were small nomadic clans. They weren't completely isolated. For example, the freakishly powerful new technology of bows and arrows made it much easier to deplete game and enemies.

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