

**RECALLING WILL AND ARIEL DURANT'S
THE LESSONS OF HISTORY (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968)**

by Cameron Fincher

A challenge successfully met (as by the United States in 1917, 1933, and 1941), if it does not exhaust the victor (like England in 1945), raises the temper and level of a nation, and makes it abler to meet further challenges.

Will & Ariel Durant, 1968

In the midst of historical controversies that are unconscionably titled “The History Wars” and the hostile conflict between cultures called a “War Against Terrorism”—what can we learn from a brief volume entitled “The Lessons of History”? The answer could be “a great deal” if readers will remember that Will and Ariel Durant’s *The Story of Civilization* consists of ten volumes written over a period of 32 years and based on a lifetime of learning, teaching, travel, and dedicated scholarship.¹

After completing their history of civilization, Will and Ariel Durant reread each volume—to correct errors and to make note of events that could illuminate present affairs, the nature of man, and the conduct of nations. In 1968 they published their notes and comments as an essay of 117 pages, thereby offering their readers “a survey of human experience”. *Indeed* they published a thought-provoking commentary on civilization, its history, and its relevance for those of us interested in mankind’s past—and its long journey to the present.

Critical readers need not agree with the Durants’ “lessons” to appreciate the means by which they have arrived at conclusions

and implications that should interest all of us who regard ourselves as educated. On each page, readers may find a quotable phrase or a renewable insight—or further confirmation of what was once regarded as common sense. Every chapter has at least one invitation to stop-and-think a while!

Surely, we can add the aftermath of September 11th 2001 to the national crises of World War I, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and World War II. And undoubtedly, many of us recognize the influence of geography, biology, religion, economics, and moral character in the events leading to attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

If we agree with the Durants that “civilizations begin, flourish, decline, and disappear—or linger on as stagnant pools left by once life-giving streams”, we will wonder about the current and future status of other societies or cultures—and worry about our own. In similar manner, as we listen to stock-market reports in a worrisome recession, we can not ignore the Durants’ observation that:

the concentration of wealth is natural and inevitable, and is periodically alleviated by violent or peaceable redistribution.

CIVILIZATION AND CULTURE

The Durants define civilization as a “social order promoting cultural creation” and relying on political order, economic order, and the freedom (and facilities) to originate and express “ideas, letters, manners, and arts”. They cite Toynbee in their belief that growth is stimulated by challenging changes requiring appropriate action. They also refer to Spengler’s “centrifugal forces” unifying a culture—and “centripetal forces” that decompose creed and culture.²

The Durants also tell us that severe challenges call for “creative individuals with clarity of mind and energy of will”—individuals who are “capable of effective responses to new situations”. Readers can appreciate their reference to the first phrase as “almost a definition of genius” and the second “almost a definition of intelligence”. As for “decay” most of us will find analogies with physiology and physics tempting, but we cannot embrace conceptions of civilization as *organism* and ignore the “fatality of death”. More acceptable, no doubt, is the Durants’ judgment that decaying civilizations end in “a chaos of individualism, skepticism, and artistic aberrations”.

In brief, civilization is viewed by the Durants as “an intricate and precarious web of human relationships” that must be developed with sustained effort over a lengthy period of time. Implicit in their conception of civilization and/or culture is the realistic awareness that civilizations have often been destroyed more readily than they were developed.

HISTORY AND HERITAGE: Believing that history is defined best as the creation and recording of our heritage, the Durants identify the progress of civilization as the increasing “abundance, preservation, transmission, and use of our heritage”. Our good fortune is to have a heritage that can be transmitted more fully because it is “richer than ever before”. In its richness, our heritage transcends that

of Pericles in classical Greece, Leonardo da Vinci during the Renaissance, and Voltaire in the Age of Reason. We can transmit a richer heritage, not because we have conceived and raised brighter children, but because our children are born to a heritage that continues to increase.

CHARACTER AND MORALS: Defining human nature as the “fundamental tendencies and feelings of mankind”, the Durants point out that societies and cultures are founded on the nature of mankind—and not on our ideals. Customs and traditions are explained as ready adjustments to typical and frequently repeated situations. As for morals, we should recognize that our knowledge of history, if incomplete, can lead to the conclusion that moral codes are “negligible” because they differ in time and place. Our knowledge of history, when larger or more substantive, “stresses the universality of moral codes and concludes to their necessity”.

Moral character is portrayed as positive or negative instincts—that may place too much of a burden on instincts as the means by which we meet the challenges or opportunities of life. Instincts may influence the generation of habits and feelings, but later generations disagree that human nature is the product of our instincts, habits, and feelings. Readers may readily agree that habits and feelings are more complex than instincts, but behavioral and social scientists are more inclined to discuss habits and feelings as continuums instead of polarized characteristics.

Intellect is regarded as a vital force in history—but the Durants, writing in the 1960s, are more pessimistic than cogent in pointing out that most new ideas will probably be inferior to the traditional responses they propose to replace. In similar manner, they write that resisting change may be more valuable than radical change because “roots are more vital than grafts”.

HERITAGE AND PROGRESS

The poet Virgil is identified by the Durants as the first to contend that history is a recurring phenomenon—and to believe that what has gone before will come again. They also attribute Friedrich Nietzsche's insanity to his vision of "eternal recurrence". Later generations must agree with the Durants that "History repeats itself, but only in outline and in the large"—as in the sequence of pastoral, agricultural, commercial, industrial, and financial cultures observed in western civilization. By repetition "in the large" the Durants believe that human nature changes with "leisureliness" and mankind must deal with situations involving "hunger, danger, and sex".

The Durants write that no better definition of progress can be given than "the accumulation of knowledge and art that raises the ground and support of our being". Thus, the interlinkage of history, heritage, and progress gives most of us a confidence in the future that we would not like to replace with nihilistic or pessimistic outlooks. Optimists, no doubt, remain convinced that the progress we make is related to the preservation, transmission, and use of our heritage.

GOVERNMENT AND RELIGION: In their discussion of government the Durants give various insights into the changing stages, or cycles, that have produced monarchies, aristocracies, and revolutions. The influence of economics is seen in trends to socialism within democracies—and in the intense ideological conflicts of fascism, socialism, communism, and democracy during the 1930s and the 1940s. The emergence of the United States and Soviet Russia in the post-WWII era was often billed as a "cold war" between democratic capitalism and Marxian communism. In retrospect, the "cold war" may be regarded as an inevitable competition for hemispheric control of the earth's resources.

The Durants leave no doubt about their confidence in democracy as the end result of

national struggles for international power. Observing that "great civilizations do not die entirely"—they believe later generations to be the beneficiaries of various achievements that survive. In turn, the notable achievements of government may survive despite "the vicissitudes of rising and falling states".

Religion has been found by historians in "every land and age" and its particular functions are regarded as "seemingly indispensable" As a comfort valued by millions, religion may be worth more than any natural aid. Religious beliefs confer meaning and dignity upon man's existence, and they assist in the maintenance of social order. On many occasions, religion is the sole alternative to poverty or defeat resulting from the natural inequality of man.

Despite the ancient adage that Gods have been created by the fears of our ancestors, religion is not always a sustaining force in the development of man's morals. The worship of natural or supernatural forces does not necessarily follow from catastrophes or tragedies that are beyond human control, but religion is often justified by the belief that most societies desire miracles, mystery, and myths—as well as ritual and pageantry.

The Durants believe that the differences between *religion* and *philosophy* are irreconcilable—unless philosophy recognizes religious precedents in moral judgment and religion acknowledges intellectual freedom. Neither nature nor history agrees with human conceptions of *good* and *bad*—as the natural sciences advance, man's awareness of his minuscule status "in the cosmos" strengthens religious belief. As for man's belief in God as a supreme being who is intelligent and benevolent:

If history supports any theology this would be a dualism like the Zoroastrian and Manichean: a good spirit and an evil spirit battling for control of the universe and men's souls. These faiths and

Christianity . . . assured their followers that the good spirit would win in the end; but . . . history offers no guarantee. (p. 46)

Education, once the sacred province of priests became the responsibility of learned doctors who relied on reason and persuasion to secularize colleges—that would later be captured by businessmen and scientists. To the Durants, however, one “lesson of history” is the belief that “religion has many lives”—and a habit of resurrection. The suppression of sensual pleasures and desires (under Puritanism) alternates with their free expression (under paganism). For examples, the rationalism of our “Founding Fathers” receded with the “Second Great Awakening” in our early history as a nation and the separation of church and state continues to be debated nationally.

The lesson to be remembered, perhaps, is the Durants’ contention that society does not easily maintain its moral outlook without the aid of religion—and even when nations divorce their government from all churches, they must have the help of religion in keeping social order.

DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION: The Durants give their readers an optimistic view of education as the transmission of civilization—and conclude that *unquestionable* progress has been made. Their reasoning is clear: civilization is not inherited; it has to be learned by each new generation—and the continuance of progress is in doubt whenever the transmission of civilization is interrupted for long periods of time (*See Page Five*).

Among their most emphatic statements, the Durants write that our finest contemporary achievement—as a civilization—is our unprecedented expenditure of wealth (and “toil”) in the provision of higher education for all. Even though we may not excel “selected geniuses of antiquity”, we have raised “the level and average of knowledge” far beyond that of our ancestors. They caution, nonetheless, that the “great experiment

has just begun”—and they needlessly add that our great experiment may be defeated by the “high birth rate of unwilling or indoctrinated ignorance”.

Contemporary civilizations should not consider education as the “painless accumulation of facts and data” and not merely as “the preparation of the individual *to earn his keep*” —but as:

the transmission of our mental, moral, technical, and aesthetic heritage as fully as possible to as many as possible for the enlargement of man’s understanding, control, embellishment, and enjoyment of life.

Believing that democracy has dedicated itself to the spread and lengthening of education (and to the maintenance of public health), they ask what the “full fruitage” of instruction might be—if every child remained in school until his or her twentieth year and then found full access to the universities, libraries, and museums that harbor and offer the intellectual and artistic treasures of our civilization?

Their faith in democracy and education is more or less summarized in their statement that:

If equality of educational opportunity can be established, democracy will be real and justified. For this is the vital truth beneath its catchwords . . . though men cannot be equal, their access to education and opportunity can be made more nearly equal.

LESSONS WELL LEARNED?

In their “Lessons of History” Will and Ariel Durant have given their readers a remarkable distillation of heritage and wisdom. They have taken from ten volumes of ancient, classical, medieval, and modern history what they have learned from their years of dedicated work, summarized centuries of growth, development, and maturity in civilization, and strongly endorsed

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

GEOGRAPHY is the matrix of history, its nourishing mother and disciplining home. Its rivers, lakes, oases, and oceans draw settlers to their shores for water is the life of organisms and towns and . . . inexpensive roads for transport and trade. (p.15)

BIOLOGY . . . the fundamental lesson of history. We are subject to processes and trials of evolution, to the struggle for existence and the fight of the fittest to survive . . .

RACIAL ANTIPATHIES have . . . roots in ethnic origin, but they are also generated . . . by differences of acquired culture—of language, dress, habits, morals, or religion. (p.31)

HUMAN RIGHTS . . . not a gift of God, nature, or a nation—but a privilege granted by the larger society of civilized people and which the nation must protect for individuals. (p. 79)

ECONOMICS . . . all economic history is the slow heartbeat of the social organism, a vast systole and diastole of concentrating wealth and compulsive recirculation. (p. 57)

INTELLECT . . . a vital force in history, . . . can also be a dissolvent and destructive power . . . No one man, however brilliant or well informed, can come in one lifetime to such fullness of understanding as to safely judge and dismiss the customs or institutions of his society, for these are the wisdom of generations after centuries of experiment. (p. 35)

EVOLUTION in man during recorded time has been social rather than biological; it has proceeded not by heritable variations in the species, but mostly by economic, political, intellectual, and moral innovation transmitted to individuals and generations by initiation, custom, or education. (p.34)

If **EDUCATION** is the transmission of civilization, we are unquestionably progressing. Civilization is not inherited; it has to be learned and earned by each generation anew; if the transmission should be interrupted for one century, civilizations would die, and we should be savages again. (p.101)

YOUTH . . . unchecked by custom, morals, or laws may ruin their lives before they mature sufficiently to know what life is all about.

Democracy and Education as lessons for our guidance and instruction. *Indeed*, they have learned much from their years of study—and there is much to be learned from what they have learned.

In closing, it is well to remember that the Durants' *Lessons* were published in 1968—a year that witnessed national crises with serious implications for the continued growth and development of American civilization. Readers should be grateful that the Durants were not indifferent to the “time of troubles” in which our nation was then involved. Their “Lessons of History” give numerous leads for interpreting the years between 1968—and 2001 when the relevance of geography, biology, technology, economics, religion, education, and history for civilized societies

and nations was demonstrated with horrifying results.

All of us can agree that the influences of geography do indeed diminish as technology grows. As the Durants so aptly state:

The character and contours of a terrain may offer opportunities for agriculture, mining, or trade, but only the imagination and initiative of leaders, and the hardy industry of followers, can transform the possibilities into facts. (p.17)

And when the imagination and initiative of leaders are dominated by cultural conflicts for which there are no technological fixes, we must use more wisely our economic, religious, educational, and historical resources and heritage.

END NOTES

¹*Will And Ariel Durant, The Story of Civilization*, Vols I-X. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1935-1976); *Lessons* was written in 1968 and makes no reference to Volume XI, “The Age of Napoleon”.

²Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of The West*, 2 Vols. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1927); and Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Vols. I-X, (published by Oxford University Press).

THIS ISSUE . . .

This issue of IHE PERSPECTIVES has been written concurrently with the March 2002 issue on “Egalitarianism and Individuality”—and on the assumption that each issue will make more sense when read with the other. Both issues are published with the author’s hope that readers will appreciate their relevance to the cultural conflicts of our recent past.

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