

“EVERY MAN HIS OWN HISTORIAN”

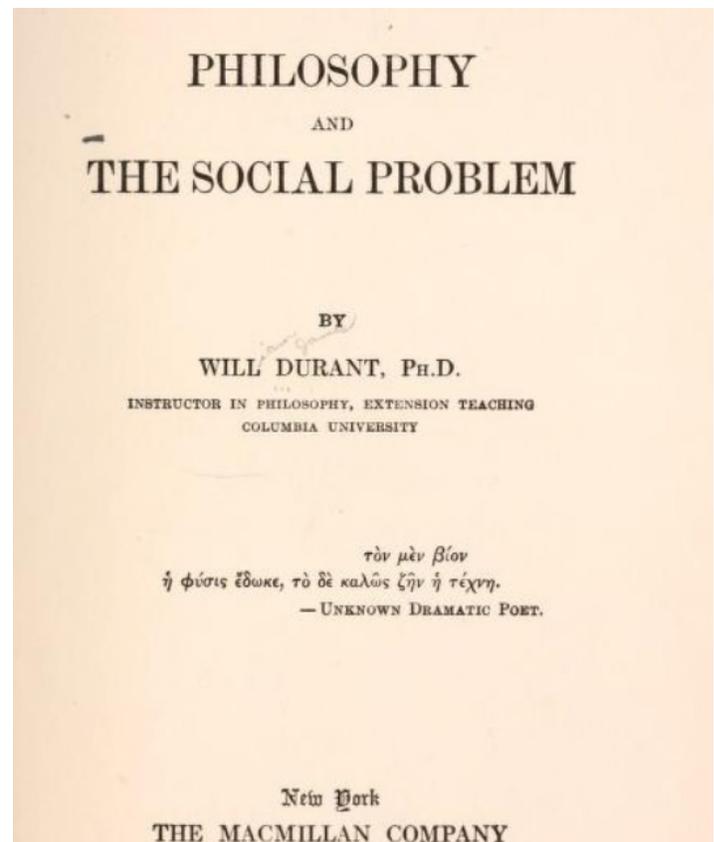
Will Durant and the Price of Popularizing History

*Abstract: In a review of Will and Ariel Durant’s 11-volume series *The Story of Civilization*, one critic remarked: “What is wrong with our educational system when more people learn “history” from one book by Will Durant than from a whole year’s output by all the professional historians in the country?” This article argues that in order to make their books accessible and interesting for ordinary people, the Durants de-emphasized important historical debates, and over-emphasized both the influence of famous individuals and the extent to which “history repeats itself.” These failings represent the “price of popularizing history.”*

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This is an essay about a philosophy teacher who wanted millions of Americans to read history and devised a story of civilization suited to that aim. Will Durant (1885-1981) found his first great success with *The Story of Philosophy*, the U.S.’s best-selling nonfiction book in 1926.¹ The book presented philosophy as a series of contributions by great thinkers, with the ideas of these thinkers placed alongside detailed biographies of their lives. In the next year, Durant and his wife, Ariel, began writing *The Story of Civilization*, the project which would consume the next forty-five years of their lives and enrapture millions of readers around the world.² The eleven-volume set totaled over ten thousand pages, sold millions of copies, and was translated into over twenty languages. It covered the whole history of Western civilization from ancient Greece to the Napoleonic Wars, with long sections on the histories of the Middle East, India, China, and Japan through World War One. The Durants won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 1968 for the set’s tenth volume, *Rousseau and Revolution*, and were awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1977. Cultural historian Joan Shelley Rubin wrote in 1992, “To mention Durant to practicing scholars today is to realize that an early encounter with his prose shaped many a distinguished career.”³

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, enormous increases in literacy vastly expanded the market for books in many academic subjects, including history. At the same time, universities also expanded rapidly, creating far more professional historians whose work became increasingly fragmented and specialized. As a result, the history books written by professional historians appeared less and less interesting to the majority of readers, who wanted to read books with a broader scope. In 1935, historian Charles Andrews lamented to the Mississippi Valley Historical Association that in the last fifty years of professional historical scholarship, “we have won no major engagement outside our ranks.”⁴ In their place, so-called “popularizers”



Title Page of *Philosophy and The Social Problem* (1917)
Source: William Durant, New York : The Macmillan company. (Archive.org)

of history filled this demand by writing broad, colorful outlines—simultaneously a reaction to uneasiness about the specialization of knowledge and an opportunity for non-elite readers to feel “cultured.” As Willem Van Loon, author of *The Story of Mankind*, put it, “The world we live in has completely changed its masters...as Will [Durant] and I considered it necessary that the new masters should know certain things which until then had been the privileged possessions of



President and Mrs. Ford with Recipients of the Presidential Medal of Freedom at the White House (William and Ariel Durant on Right) (January 10, 1977)

Source: White House photograph B2741-08, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, NARA (Wikimedia Commons)

the few.”⁵ Even Durant’s fiercest critics, historians like M.I. Finkelstein, J.H. Plumb, and James Henry Breasted, agreed that historians ought to write for a more public audience and that, for this end, a broader scope of study was needed.

Since the “outline craze” broke out in the interwar period, the chasm between history written by professional historians for other professional historians, and history written by popularizers for the general public, has widened substantially.⁶ The popular and academic reviews of *The Story of Civilization* can help us understand this chasm. Specifically, this body of criticism can show us why the general reading public might find histories written by popularizers like Durant to be more interesting than histories written by professors whose work is held to a higher standard. Although most historians of Durant’s era wanted to reach a larger audience, historians many failed to recognize the variety of tradeoffs inherent in the project. The main thrust of the reviews of *The Story of Civilization* is relatively superficial: Durant is too careless with his facts and too dramatic with his words. These critiques are correct, but misguided. It is not the facts or word choice that matter in *The Story of Civilization*—but its underlying philosophy of

history. Every historian writing a history with a large scope inevitably addresses two problems. The first is the capacity for individual political leaders, generals, writers, and thinkers to create a new future for the rest of humanity—in short, the role of the hero in history. The second is the treatment of repetition, continuity, and inevitability in history. Events in the past, particularly in the distant past, seem inevitable, for their outcomes are irrevocable. Historians disagree over the extent to which the course of history follows an inevitable path and how one might account for contingencies, real or illusory, available at any moment in the past. Inside his solutions to these problems lie the deepest secrets to Durant’s success—and the greatest flaws with his work.

There are certain tradeoffs, inherent in the popularization project, which all together make up the price of popularizing history. First, it was inevitable that the Durants would make some mistakes, rely more on secondary sources than primary sources, and make generalizations. Second, Durant’s ignorance of contemporary scholarship both perpetuated the illusion that historical truth is fixed and lent them more time to churn out volumes. Third, Durant’s beliefs in an unchanging human nature, a usable past, and a history that repeats itself together offer readers the notions that history is practically useful in dealing with the present and that it offers predictive powers when dealing with the future. Lastly, the Durants needed to humanize their history in order to make the book more comprehensible to ordinary readers, and they naturally chose the most interesting subjects: geniuses and “great men.” The three central themes of Will Durant’s philosophy of history—historical truth as timeless and fixed; determinisms linking the past with the present and future; and the extraordinary influence of great men—cannot be true, but they must be used in any history that sustains the interests of the reading public.

PROBLEMS WITH WRITING HISTORY

Durant’s critics varied in their tolerance for three of the more obvious shortcomings of his works—high quantity of factual inaccuracies, reliance on secondary sources, and failure to keep up on contemporary scholarship—all of which are inevitable problems of a study of this scope aimed a general audience. Nearly all of Durant’s reviewers acknowledge that errors can be expected of a work of this ambition and scope. Sidney Packard wrote of *The Age of Faith*: “The misleading statements which inevitably crept into the text are neither numerous nor vital.”⁷ J.W. Swain calls *Caesar and Christ* “moderately accurate,” although “a zealous mistake-finder would criticize something on every page.”⁸ Some critics are less forgiving. J.H. Plumb wrote that errors “stud *The Age of Louis XIV* like stars in the heavens on a frosty night,” and that *The Age of Napoleon* is a work of “slipshod scholarship” full of false generalizations.⁹ Both W. Leonard Grant and John Day give a long list of errors in *Caesar and Christ* and conclude that the book falls short of worthy scholarship.¹⁰ As the historical profession grew

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more specialized and fragmented throughout the middle of the century, historians grew less and less tolerant of generalization and factual errors. As a result, it was more difficult for Durant than it was for the popularizers of the previous generation, such as Arnold Toynbee and H.G. Wells.

Another target for critics was Durant’s dependence on secondary sources. Stanley Mellon complained, “They write their histories from other people’s histories.”¹¹ For Winthrop Hudson, *The Age of Faith’s* problems did not

A PAST IN SERVICE TO THE PRESENT

Durant begins *Caesar and Christ* by paraphrasing Horace: *Mutato nomine, de te fabula narratur* (“If only the names are changed, the story is about you”).¹⁵ In Durant’s view, nearly all of the elements of his recreated civilizations can be traced to life later on in Europe and in the U.S. Although at times exaggerated, the analogies are not without purpose. Michael Ginsburg, reviewing *The Life of Greece*, went so far as to write, “The only effective way to arouse the general reader’s interest in classical antiquity is to show him that the ancient world was agitated by the same problems we are facing today.”¹⁶ Popular

“Durant begins *Caesar and Christ* by paraphrasing Horace: ‘If only the names are changed, the story is about you’.”

come from relying on writers like Edward Gibbon, Henry Hart Milman, or Frederick Homes Dudden, but in the sections based on second-rate scholarly sources, where he may have been better off examining the sources for himself. Durant often responded saying that he used secondary sources for his writing on economics and politics, and primary sources for writings on the subjects more fundamental to his themes: culture, religion, philosophy, literature, and the arts. Not only did Durant take his work from secondary sources, but according to Breasted, from the wrong ones: in *Our Oriental Heritage*, “an archaeological engineer...is quoted as an authority on languages and hieroglyphics.”¹²

Many critics faulted Durant for failing to use more contemporary scholarly findings. C.A. Robinson faulted *The Life of Greece* for not keeping “abreast of recent research,” and John Day claimed that the bibliography of *Caesar and Christ* had “serious deficiencies.”¹³ Ralph Bates faulted *Caesar and Christ* for not drawing enough from Toynbee’s *A Study of History*. Durant proudly defined himself as an “amateur” historian and disagreed with the more academic, professional types throughout his career. His resentment of the “Ivory Tower” was a popular position with those outside academia, and it probably influenced his respect for contemporary scholarship. As Durant became more entrenched in his outsider position, his prejudices against the specialists and the specialist historians’ skepticism of the merit of his work fed off each other. In addition, if Durant were to use contemporary scholarship and show that the interpretations are constantly changing, the basis of his work would be weaker. Peter Novick would agree: if a work of history is to hold the interest of the reading public, knowledge of the past must appear objective and its truths must seem timeless. Durant hinted at such when he said that from teaching philosophy to working-class Americans after college, he learned that presenting complex material to working class people “demands complete clarity.”¹⁴

critic Edmund Richards agreed: “Not one of our current problems...cannot be duplicated somewhere in the history or literature of these many-sided and abounding people.”¹⁷ Many historians attacked the volumes for their “vulgarization” of the past, or their attribution of more base elements of the present to a past that many thought ought to be studied for its own sake. M.I. Finkelstein summarized this theme as “an essential sameness of institutions and problems throughout the ages,” which he is only able to prove by “twisting ancient institutions until they fit a modern frame.”¹⁸ Historian Carl Becker, in an address to the American Historical Association given in 1931, laid out an approach to history that could practically interest a normal person, whom he called “Mr. Everyman.” To infiltrate Mr. Everyman’s “little world of endeavor,” history must not be “a pure antiquarian image to be enjoyed for its own sake.”¹⁹ Instead, it must be “associated with a picture of things to be said and done in the future.”²⁰ For Mr. Everyman, the significance of any past event depends on how “well or ill it fits into his little world of interests and aspirations and emotional comforts.”²¹

If he believes that there are many links between the past and the present, then Mr. Everyman might find history informative and useful. Thus, the constant parallels and analogies are attractive for a reader who wants to understand the present. These links are strengthened by Durant’s emphasis on an unchanging human nature, continuity, and the idea that “history repeats itself” according to universal causal laws. Will Durant defined the goal of his project as the discovery of this universal, unchanging human nature, of which every individual in history is an example. On continuity, he wrote in *The Life of Greece*, “History, like nature, knows only continuity amid change: *historia non facit saltum* – history makes no leaps.”²² The Durants’ volumes are full of formulas and laws of history. In reading *The Story of Civilization*, the reader senses that if one knew enough about the past, then the future would be completely predictable. Not only can the past help us understand the present, as the two are so similar, but it can also help us predict the future.

These connections between knowing the past and knowing the future—an unchanging human nature, inescapable continuity, and repetition—lead to serious metaphysical problems. The same history that is governed so rigidly by cause and effect, as well as by Durant's formulas like "When x happens, and y happens, then z follows" is also supposed to include human beings with the freedom to make their own decisions and therefore influence the future. If Will Durant and his obedient reader can know what a society will do merely by reading enough history, then their omniscience threatens the society's freedom to do otherwise. Durant became a thoroughgoing determinist after reading Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*; determinism had a "certain majesty and courage" to him.²³ Although in his *The Mansions of Philosophy*, Durant refers the picture of a "totally predictable world" as "ridiculously incongruous with life," the aggregate of his generalizations hardly reads as a hymn to human freedom.²⁴ If history moves according to laws, patterns, and cycles, then we are trapped. The more Durant's determinisms are true, the more "man is born in chains," and the less freedom we can claim.²⁵

LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN

The scope, style, and determinisms of *The Story of Civilization* all attracted everyday readers, yet each came with its own set of problems. Through the subject matter of their history, we see once again: the brighter the sunlight, the darker the shadows. The chapters of his latest volumes, which discuss eras we know relatively more about, are flush with flattering stories about the lives of famous subjects. In Durant's work, the unit of historical study is the great man. He alone—through his power to lead armies, to penetrate others' minds with new ways of thinking, and to create written and physical art for the rest of us to worship—can genuinely influence history. If we can learn to appreciate geniuses, then we can stand on the shoulders of giants and more fully see the richness of life. We worship heroes for good reason; their gift to mankind is nothing less than civilization itself. Some of his non-academic critics shared these views. For instance, Michael Ginsburg wrote that Durant's idealization of Alexander the Great "does not do justice to the genius of the great Macedonian."²⁶ Regardless of whether he sincerely believed all this, Durant's emphasis on geniuses certainly intrigued the millions who bought his books. He was right to realize how uninterested most of us are in the lives of those without ability, brains, beauty, money, and power. Even the titles of his last four books (*The Age of Louis XIV*, *The Age of Voltaire*, *The Age of Rousseau*, and *The Age of Napoleon*) must have piqued the interests of a class of readers whose equivalent today remember world history classes as anthologies of kings and queens, cherish biographies of the presidents, and are fascinated by those on the cover of *People Magazine*.

It is a paradox: ordinary people were only interested in a history that dismissed the importance and meaning of the lives of ordinary people. In a twisted sense, thanks to the

efforts of historians like Durant, the poets, philosophers, and politicians of, say, ancient Greece, will continue to be revived and are actually made less mortal than the Mr. Everyman of their time. If Lord Acton is right, and "great men are usually bad men," we have further cause to doubt the ridiculous hero-worship that dominates the later volumes of *The Story of Civilization*. This emphasis on the efficacy of great men intensified over the course of *The Story's* publication timeline, contrary to the opposite movement in the historical profession, which, by the social turn of the 1960s, had dismissed the value and importance of such individuals (another "absolutism dethroned").

Durant wrote in his article "The Shameless Worship of Heroes":

The real history of man is not in prices and wages, nor in elections and battles, nor in the even tenor of the common man; it is in the lasting contributions made by geniuses ... The history of France is not...the history of the French people; the history of those nameless men and women who tilled the soil, cobbled the shoes, cut the cloth, and peddled the goods (for these things have been done everywhere and always) -- the history of France is the record of her exceptional men and women, her inventors, scientists, statesmen, poets, artists, musicians, philosophers and saints, and of the additions which they made to the technology and wisdom, the artistry and decency, of their people and mankind.²⁷

A critic might have countered: Always and everywhere poets have invoked a higher power, borrowed from their predecessors, written about life in their time, and have been read by literate elites and university students. Always and everywhere politicians have waged war, made alliances, and written laws. One could continue down the list, if only by using the "timeless" determinisms in his books. Here the reader might find a contradiction. What is so "great" about a class of individuals who have always, in every time and place, performed these same roles? Great men cannot create the future, if the future is predetermined by continuity with the past and an inevitable adherence to universal laws. Nor should we praise the ideas and achievements of heroes if they had no agency in their doing. Hero-worship and determinism, the two central themes of Durant's philosophy of history, are incompatible.

The conflict between these two aspects of his philosophy of history can be resolved by assuming a belief that we can find among the ancients and (perhaps) even in ourselves: that heroes are *outside of history* and therefore not subject to the same determined laws as everyone else. Durant claims in *The Life of Greece* that for centuries after the death of Alexander the Great, many people thought that he had transformed into a comet and become a god. When a comet flew over Rome in July of 44 B.C., Octavian claimed it was the god of Julius Caesar, metamorphosed. It is not much of a leap from the

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idea that the two most glorified political leaders of antiquity became comets to the idea that they were made of different stuff and lived outside of history. Durant does not entertain the possibility that talented people might, for some reason, not realize their “fate,” because such a possibility does not align with the determinist notion: that which did not happen, could not have happened. In Plato’s *Republic*, after generations of indoctrination, the people are tricked into believing that the souls of the rulers are made of gold, the souls of the warriors, of silver, and the souls of the slaves, of bronze. Not for nothing is this myth called the noble “lie”; the idea that heroes are made of different stuff than the rest of us...cannot be true. The celebrities of history may have more talent, more means, less scruples, and more effective ideas, but these are differences of degree, not of kind. If ordinary people are inside of history, then so are the “chosen ones.” And if they are inside history, then the conflict between determinism and the creativity of so-called “great men” cannot be resolved.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the three themes underlying Will Durant’s philosophy of history—historical truth as timeless and fixed, the extraordinary influence of great men, and determinisms linking the past, present, and future—cannot be true, but they must be used in any history that sustains the interests of the reading public. Historian M.I. Finkelstein ended an otherwise highly negative review of *The Life of Greece* with a rhetorical question: “What is wrong with our educational system when more people learn ‘history’ from one book by Will Durant than from a whole year’s output by all the professional historians in the country?”²⁸ Will Durant saw his project as part of an unprecedented democratization of knowledge. “Let us not be ashamed...of educating the people,” he boasted.²⁹ Of course, far fewer Americans read the books of Will and Ariel Durant today than they did fifty years ago. Yet, the challenge they posed to the study of history remains. If the reading public ought to know more history, then how might one write a history that could interest and educate the “general reader”? These aims—to pique the interest of the general reader and to educate that same reader—are often in conflict. To write a history that pleases Mr. Everyman is to make peace with certain tradeoffs, to sacrifice scholarship for popularization, to change the truth in order to share it. 🏛️



Will Durant stands with his pupils in front of the Modern School (1911-1912)

Source: *The Stelton Modern School* (Wikimedia Commons)

Endnotes

- [1] Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middle Brow Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 234.
- [2] Will Durant is listed as the sole author of the set's first six volumes. Beginning with *The Age of Reason Begins*, Ariel Durant is listed as a co-author.
- [3] Rubin, p. 244.
- [4] Novick, p. 194.
- [5] Rubin, p. 217.
- [6] Rubin, p. 214.
- [7] Frey, p. 92; Sidney R. Packard, "Striding the Centuries. Review of *The Age of Faith*", *The Saturday Review of Literature*, vol. 33, (December 9, 1950), pp. 19-20.
- [8] J.W. Swain, "Review of *Caesar and Christ*", *American Historical Review*, vol. 50, no. 3, (April 1945), p. 517 and p. 516.
- [9] J.H. Plumb, "A Ragbag of History Continued: The Age of Napoleon", *The New York Times Book Review*, (October 26, 1975), p. 2; J.H. Plumb, "Review of *The Age of Louis XIV*", *The New York Times Book Review*, (September 15, 1963), p. 3.
- [10] Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 362.
- [11] Mellon, p. 292.
- [12] Breasted, p. 3.
- [13] C.A. Robinson, "Review of *The Life of Greece*", *The Saturday Review of Literature*, vol. 21, (October 28, 1939), p. 5; John Day, "History—and Mr. Durant—March On: Review of *Caesar and Christ*", *The New York Times Book Review*, (December 10, 1944), p. 4.
- [14] G.H. Guyot, "Review of *Caesar and Christ*", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 1, (January 1946), p. 105.
- [15] Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, p. 2.
- [16] Michael Ginsburg, "Review of *The Life of Greece*", *The American Historical Review*, vol. 45, no. 4, (July 1940), pp. 945.
- [17] Edmund C. Richards, "The Glory That Was Greece: Review of *The Life of Greece*", *The New York Times Book Review*, (October 26, 1939), p. 2.
- [18] Finkelstein, 127.
- [19] Becker, pp. 3-4.
- [20] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- [21] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- [22] Will Durant, *The Life of Greece* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1935), p. 557.
- [23] Frey, 12.
- [24] Frey, 69.
- [25] Durant, *Our Oriental Heritage*, p. 29.
- [26] Michael Ginsburg, "Review of *The Life of Greece*", *The American Historical Review*, vol. 45, no. 4, (July 1940), p. 946.
- [27] Will Durant, *The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), pp. 6-7.
- [28] Finkelstein, p. 129.
- [29] Frey, p. 131.