



A Short History of Progress

By Ronald Wright

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Each time history repeats itself, the cost goes up. The twentieth century—a time of unprecedented progress—has produced a tremendous strain on the very elements that comprise life itself: This raises the key question of the twenty-first century: How much longer can this go on? With wit and erudition, Ronald Wright lays out a convincing case that history has always provided an answer, whether we care to notice or not. From Neanderthal man to the Sumerians to the Roman Empire, *A Short History of Progress* dissects the cyclical nature of humanity's development and demise, the 10,000-year old experiment that we've unleashed but have yet to control. It is Wright's contention that only by understanding and ultimately breaking from the patterns of progress and disaster that humanity has repeated around the world since the Stone Age can we avoid the onset of a new Dark Age. Wright illustrates how various cultures throughout history have literally manufactured their own end by producing an overabundance of innovation and stripping bare the very elements that allowed them to initially advance. Wright's book is brilliant; a fascinating rumination on the hubris at the heart of human development and the pitfalls we still may have time to avoid.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

No hope, just an awareness of what's being done now and what's been done in the past, is what Ronald Wright will permit in *A Short History of Progress*, his grim, ammoniacal Massey Lectures, the 43rd in the series. In five lucid, meticulously documented essays, Wright traces the rise and plummet of four regional civilizations--those of Sumer, Rome, Easter Island, and the Maya--and judges that most, perhaps all, of humanity is making and will continue to make mistakes equally disastrous as theirs. He gives general reasons first for not reckoning we'll pull back from the brink. Important among them is an anthropological observation. As individuals, we live long lives. We evolve more slowly than we should, given our lack of vision and our aggressive, selfish nature. We seem to lack the collective wisdom and the insight into cause and effect to realize the limits to what Wright calls the "experiment" of civilization. What Wright calls natural "subsidies" underwrite civilizations' successes. The squandering of those gifts presages inevitable failure, but with careful, canny stewardship, a civilization can manage to muddle through eons. Wright cites Egypt's submission to the limits set by the Nile's annual floods and China's windblown "lump-sum deposit" of topsoil, used for hillside paddies instead of being put to the plough. Wright observes with unrelenting eloquence that our planetary civilization lives precariously, far beyond its means. "Hope drives us to invent new fixes for old messes," he acknowledges, neither claiming nor wanting to be a prophet. We certainly have the tools for change and remediation; we also know what our ancestors did wrong and what happened to them. We're faced, our author observes, with two choices: either do nothing--what he calls "one of the biggest mistakes"--or try to effect "the transition from short-term to long-term thinking." His evidence suggests we're taking the first alternative, which will include a swift, final ride into the dark future on the runaway train of progress. Wright's account tempts one to bet on the rats and roaches. --*Ted Whittaker*

From Publishers Weekly

Progress can do us in, or so argues British historian Wright as he embarks on a lively if meandering journey through the development and demise of ancient civilizations to determine whether our current one is doomed. By reading the "black boxes" left by departed societies (like those of the Easter Islanders, the Sumerians and the Mayans), we can learn to avoid the mistakes that led to their downfall, he suggests. Many of those errors revolve around the plundering of natural resources and the development of social hierarchies that allow elite groups to indulge in over-consumption at the expense of the masses. Other errors involve "progress traps," technologies or advances that, like weapons, are initially useful but become dangerous to civilization once fully developed, especially if moral and technical progress diverge. The analogy of civilization as a kind a "pyramid scheme," which, like the sales scheme, thrives only if it grows, is one of several imaginative mnemonic devices Wright uses to round out his argument. Today's culprit, he declares, is "market extremism," which has "cross-bred with evangelical messianism to fight intelligent policy on metaphysical grounds." This laissez-faire capitalism, he reasons, will spell the end of the planet, and our civilization, if it is not controlled. Wright crafts an entertaining tale of eras gone by, incorporating relevant facts on subjects as diverse as the lifestyles of early hominids and recent patterns of climate change, and demonstrating the holistic importance of natural resources to a society. And if he never specifies exactly what the proper choices for modern civilization are, or how they will bring deliverance from the coming storm, his book will nonetheless convince readers that we are at a crossroads where the right choices can still be made.

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Diane Reid:

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