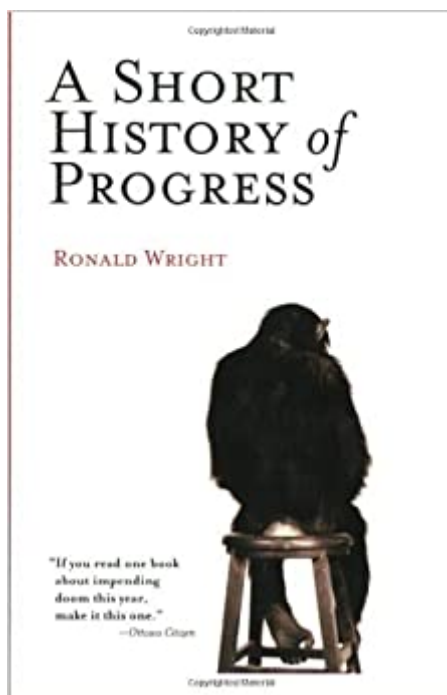


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A Short History Of Progress



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

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

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. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Wright discourses eloquently on the most urgent issues of our day (the raging market economy, causing global warming, overpopulation, food shortages, poverty, environmental destruction, and resource depletion), from the perspective of the destructive history of human civilization popularized by scholars like Jared Diamond (*Collapse*) and Joseph Tainter (*The Collapse of Complex Societies*). *ASHOP* also draws from economic, scientific, and cultural disciplines to assess the crisis of modern civilization. The book sometimes loses focus on its overall social critique and becomes too bogged down in the details of its historical narratives; and, there's little here that hasn't been said before. Nevertheless, this is a well-written short work that neatly summarizes the world's dire predicament and urgently calls for change before it's too late.

Every year, Canadians eagerly huddle around their radios to listen to the Massey Lectures, broadcast by the CBC. For the 2004 season, Ronald Wright was the honored speaker. He presented a series of five lectures, titled *A Short History of Progress*. In 2005, Wright's presentation was published as a short book, and it became a bestseller. Martin Scorsese's movie, *Surviving Progress*, was based on the book. It was an amazing success for a story contrary to our most holy cultural myths. Wright believed that the benefits of progress were highly overrated, because of their huge costs. Indeed, progress was approaching the point of becoming a serious threat to the existence of humankind. "This new century will not grow very old before we enter an age of chaos and collapse that will dwarf all the dark ages in our past." He pointed out that the world was dotted with the ruins of ancient crash sites, civilizations that self-destructed. At each of these wrecks, modern science can, in essence, retrieve the "black box," and discover why the mighty society crashed and burned. There is a clear pattern. Each one crashed because it destroyed what it depended on for its survival. Wright takes us on a quick tour of the collapse of Sumer, Easter Island, the Roman Empire, and the Mayans. He explains why the two oddballs, China and Egypt, are taking longer than average to self-destruct. The fatal defects of agriculture and civilization are old news for the folks who have been paying attention. It has become customary for these folks to believe that

"The Fall" took place when humans began to domesticate plants and animals. Wright thinks the truth is more complicated. What makes this book unique and provocative is his notion of progress traps. The benefits of innovation often encourage society to live in a new way, while burning the bridges behind them as they advance. Society can find itself trapped in an unsustainable way of living, and it's no longer possible to just turn around and painlessly return to a simpler mode. Like today, we know that the temporary bubble of cheap energy is about over, and our entire way of life is dependent on cheap energy. We're trapped. Some types of progress do not disrupt the balance of the ecosystem, like using a rock to crack nuts. But our ability to stand upright freed our hands for working with tools and weapons, which launched a million year process of experimentation and innovation that gradually snowballed over time. We tend to assume that during the long era of hunting and gathering our ancestors were as mindful as the few hunting cultures that managed to survive on the fringes into the twentieth century. But in earlier eras, when big game was abundant, wise stewardship was not mandatory. Sloppy tribes could survive -- for a while. Before they got horses, Indians of the American west would drive herds of buffalo off cliffs, killing many at a time. They took what they needed, and left the rest for legions of scavengers. One site in Colorado contained the carcasses of 152 buffalo. A trader in the northern Rockies witnessed about 250 buffalo being killed at one time. Wright mentioned two Upper Paleolithic sites I had not heard of -- 1,000 mammoth skeletons were found at Piedmont in the Czech Republic, and the remains of over 100,000 horses were found at SolutrÃ© in France. Over time, progress perfected our hunting systems. Our supply of high-quality food seemed to be infinite. It was our first experience of prosperity and leisure. Folks had time to take their paint sets into caves and do gorgeous portraits of the animals they lived with, venerated, killed, and ate. Naturally, our population grew. More babies grew up to be hunters, and the availability of game eventually decreased. The grand era of cave painting ended, and we began hunting rabbits. We depleted species after species, unconsciously gliding into our first serious progress trap. Some groups scrambled to find alternatives, foraging around beaches, estuaries, wetlands, and bogs. Some learned how to reap the tiny seeds of wild grasses. By and by, the end of the hunting way of life came into view, about 10,000 years ago. "They lived high for a while, then starved." Having destroyed the abundant game, it was impossible to return to simpler living. This was a progress trap, and it led directly into a far more dangerous progress trap, the domestication of plants and animals. Agriculture and civilization were accidents, and they threw open the gateway to 10,000 years of monotony, drudgery, misery, and ecocide. Wright says that civilization is a pyramid scheme; we live today at the expense of those who come after us. For most of human history, the rate of progress was so slow that it was usually invisible. But

the last six or seven generations have been blindsided by a typhoon of explosive change. Progress had a habit of giving birth to problems that could only be solved by more progress. Progress was the most diabolically wicked curse that you could ever imagine. Maybe we should turn it into an insulting obscenity: "progress you!" Climate scientists have created models showing weather trends over the last 250,000 years, based on ice cores. Agriculture probably didn't start earlier because climate trends were unstable. Big swings could take place over the course of decades. In the last 10,000 years, the climate has been unusually stable. A return to instability will make civilization impossible. Joseph Tainter studied how civilizations collapse, and he described three highways to disaster: the Runaway Train (out-of-control problems), the Dinosaur (indifference to dangers), and the House of Cards (irreversible disintegration). He predicted that the next collapse would be global in scale. Finally, the solution: "The reform that is needed is... simply the transition from short-term thinking to long-term." Can we do it? We are quite clever, but seldom wise, according to Wright. Ordinary animals, like our ancestors, had no need for long-term thinking, because life was always lived in the here and now. "Free Beer Tomorrow" reads the flashing neon sign on the tavern, but we never exist in tomorrow. The great news is that we now possess a mountain of black boxes. For the first time in the human journey, a growing number of people comprehend our great mistakes, and are capable of envisioning a new path that eventually abandons our embarrassing boo-boos forever. All the old barriers to wisdom and healing have been swept away (in theory). Everywhere you look these days; people are stumbling around staring at tiny screens and furiously typing -- eagerly communicating with world experts, engaging in profound discussions, watching videos rich with illuminating information, and reading the works of green visionaries. It's a magnificent sight to behold -- the best is yet to come!

Richard Adrian Reese
Author of What Is Sustainable

A good, brief, very high level overview of some human 'civilizations' and how the physical limitations of their environment lead to their demise. Of course, at the heart of this is mankind's inability to really plan long term. I think this is because of a couple factors. Maybe its by natural selection but we just don't naturally plan for very long term; we put too much emphasis on short term gains. And even those that are smart enough to be able to plan long term realize that unless everyone gets on board, its not going to happen. On top of all this is I think the 'prisoners dillema' where it may be everyone's best interest to act a certain way, but it always benefits the individual more to act in their own best interest. For example, we are all better off if we all recycle, but regardless of what everyone else does I am better off if I don't bother to spend the time separating out my garbage because I could spend that time doing other more productive things for myself.

"If you don't learn history you are doomed to repeat it." Have you ever heard this quote, I know I have hundreds of times. After reading this book I realized 2 very important things; that everyone that has ever said that is a hypocrite and that the human race is on a course for self destruction. Only recently in history is the world capable of sharing information in an instant but the human race as a whole is raging ahead like blind conductor on the freight train of life heading straight for a cliff. This is probably the best referenced and most succinct telling of the rise and fall of every civilization in recorded history leading up to the path we are on today which is so frighteningly similar to the extinct ancestors we all share. Ronald Wright sees the writing on the wall and realizes the light at the end of the tunnel is rapidly approaching but it can either be hope or oblivion. No civilization in history has been so global as the human race is today, or as destructive. A turning point is needed NOW! Progress for the sake or progress forsakes us all. Things can be done, but they aren't being done. It's not too late but the time has come. Read this book and get everyone you know to read it if enough people open their eyes we might be able to save ourselves.

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