

The New York Times

Book Review

July 2, 1989

Letters

'The Rise of the West'

To the Editor:

Mary Lefkowitz misses one important point in her otherwise fine review of "Arnold J. Toynbee: A Life" (May 28), and that concerns the book's author, William H. McNeill, about whom she says almost nothing.

In the review, Ms. Lefkowitz recalls one of the major complaints made about Toynbee's work, that it perceives whole civilizations as though they were single individuals. She might also have mentioned his many factual inaccuracies and his distressing habit of allowing theory to take precedence over observed reality.

But my purpose is not to flail the dead horse of Toynbee's scholarship; rather, it is to point out that Toynbee was followed by another English-language writer who also tried his hand at recounting human experience in its entirety. This latter historian restricted himself to a single volume; he did not let theory overtake reality or fall into any other of Toynbee's traps, and his work is ever more praised while Toynbee's has fallen into disrepute. This historian is none other than William H. McNeill.

Mr. McNeill's book "The Rise of the West" (1963) is the only true world history ever written and is perhaps the outstanding historical study of the past generation.

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