GENERAL

will and ariel durant the story of civilization

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Will and Ariel Durant: The Story of Civilization

When most people think of a sweeping, encyclopedic account of human history, the names that come to mind are Will and Ariel Durant. Their monumental series, *The Story of Civilization*, transformed the way the public engages with the past. Over six decades, the Durants published a ten-volume saga that bridged scholarly rigor with accessible prose, inviting readers from all walks of life to explore the rise and fall of empires, the birth of ideas, and the forces that shape societies. This article delves deep into the lives of Will and Ariel Durant, the creation and impact of their flagship work, and the enduring legacy that continues to influence historians, educators, and casual readers alike.

Early Lives and Formative Years

Will Durant – From Small Town to Intellectual Giant

William Henry Durant was born on December 22, 1885, in the modest town of Ashland, Wisconsin. Growing up in a family that valued education, Durant was encouraged to read widely from a young age. He attended the University of Wisconsin, where he earned a bachelor's degree in 1907 and a master's in 1910. His early career as a high school teacher and later as an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison allowed him to cultivate a passion for teaching complex ideas in an engaging manner.

Durant's early academic pursuits were rooted in philosophy and history, but it was his fascination with the broader sweep of human experience that would later define his career. His marriage to the brilliant scholar and writer Ariel Kahn in 1913 marked the beginning of a partnership that would change the landscape of popular history.

Ariel Durant – A Scholar with a Pen That Could Paint

Ariel Kahn, born on June 20, 1885, in New York City, was the daughter of a prominent banker. She pursued her education at the University of Chicago, where she earned a master's degree in 1909 and a Ph.D. in 1914. Her dissertation, which examined the influence of early American religious movements on societal development, showcased her analytical depth and narrative flair.

Before marrying Will Durant, Ariel worked as a journalist and a freelance writer, crafting essays that explored the intersection of culture and politics. Her keen eye for detail and ability to distill complex ideas into clear prose would later become indispensable assets in their collaborative projects.

The Genesis of a Historical Collaboration

Meeting of Minds

The Durants met in 1913 at a literary salon in New York, where intellectuals and artists gathered to discuss contemporary issues. Their mutual admiration for each other's work blossomed into a partnership that combined Will's philosophical insights with Ariel's meticulous research skills. This dynamic would become the hallmark of their collaborative writing style.

Early Works and the Path to a Grand Narrative

Before embarking on *The Story of Civilization*, the Durants published a series of essays and books that explored topics such as the American Revolution, the rise of democracy, and the impact of technological innovation. Titles like “The Life of the American Revolution” (1925) and “The Philosophy of the American Revolution” (1929) demonstrated their commitment to making scholarly work accessible to a broader audience.

These early publications served as a testing ground for their writing process: Will would draft the overarching narrative, while Ariel would meticulously fact-check, organize sources, and refine the prose. Their collaborative model proved efficient and effective, setting the stage for their most ambitious project yet.

Birth of The Story of Civilization

Vision and Ambition

In 1934, the Durants conceived the idea of writing a comprehensive history of humanity that would span from ancient times to the modern era. Their ambition was to create a series that combined scholarly depth with engaging storytelling, thereby democratizing history for the general public.

They envisioned a ten-volume series, each focusing on a distinct epoch or theme, and planned to publish the volumes over several decades. Their goal was to produce a work that would rival the monumental histories of antiquity while remaining approachable for contemporary readers.

Publishing Journey

Initially, the Durants approached several publishing houses with their proposal. After a series of rejections, they secured a deal with the Macmillan Publishing Company in 1935. The partnership with Macmillan proved fruitful, providing the Durants with the editorial support, marketing resources, and financial stability needed to embark on this massive undertaking.

Over the next 30 years, the Durants published the first six volumes of the series, with the remaining volumes remaining incomplete at the time of Will Durant’s death in 1981. The series, however, had already cemented its place in the annals of historical literature.

Major Volumes and Their Significance

Volume 1: The Age of the Gods (1939)

Covering the earliest civilizations from the Mesopotamian flood myths to the rise of the Egyptian pharaohs, this volume delves into the origins of religion, law, and societal organization. The Durants use vivid descriptions to bring the ancient world to life, making it accessible to readers unfamiliar with the subject.

Volume 2: The Life of Greece (1944)

In this volume, the Durants examine the birth of democracy in Athens, the philosophical contributions of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and the cultural achievements of the Greek polis. Their narrative emphasizes how Greek ideas continue to influence Western thought.

Volume 3: The Life of Rome (1944)

Here, the Durants trace Rome’s transition from monarchy to republic, its expansion across the Mediterranean, and the eventual fall of the Western Empire. They also explore the influence of Roman law and engineering on subsequent societies.

Volume 4: The Life of the Middle Ages (1945)

Covering the period from the fall of Rome to the rise of the Renaissance, this volume examines feudalism, the Church's dominance, and the cultural revival that set the stage for modernity. The Durants highlight how medieval scholarship preserved and transmitted ancient knowledge.

Volume 5: The Life of the Renaissance (1946)

In this volume, the Durants celebrate the rebirth of art, science, and humanism. They discuss the contributions of figures such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Galileo, and analyze how the Renaissance reshaped European society.

Volume 6: The Life of the Great Powers (1947)

Focusing on the rise of European empires, this volume explores the political, economic, and cultural forces that propelled nations like England, France, and Spain to global prominence. The Durants also touch on the early stages of industrialization.

Writing Process and Methodology

Research and Fact-Checking

Ariel Durant's role in the series was pivotal. She maintained an extensive library of primary sources, including manuscripts, letters, and contemporaneous accounts. Her rigorous fact-checking ensured that the series remained historically accurate, while her editorial eye refined the narrative flow.

Balancing Scholarship and Narrative

Will Durant's philosophical background allowed him to contextualize historical events within broader human themes—such as the pursuit of freedom, the role of faith, and the tension between tradition and progress. Together, they crafted a narrative that was both academically sound and engaging to a general readership.

Impact and Reception

Academic Circles

While the Durants aimed primarily at a popular audience, scholars praised the series for its comprehensive scope and meticulous research. Many historians cited the series as a valuable reference for teaching introductory courses in world history.

Public Engagement

The series became a staple in libraries across the United States and the United Kingdom. Its approachable language and compelling storytelling made it a favorite among students, teachers, and history enthusiasts. The Durants' ability to weave human stories into the broader tapestry of civilization resonated with readers, fostering a deeper appreciation for the past.

Influence on Popular History

The Durants' work paved the way for subsequent popular history writers such as David McCullough, Stephen Ambrose, and Simon Schama. Their model—combining scholarly rigor with narrative flair—has become a standard in the genre.

Legacy and Continued Relevance

Posthumous Completion

After Will Durant's death, Ariel Durant continued to work on the remaining volumes. Though she was unable to complete the series fully, her notes and manuscripts were published posthumously, providing a glimpse into the unfinished vision of the Durants.

Educational Use

High schools and universities still incorporate volumes of *The Story of Civilization* into their curricula. Teachers appreciate the series for its balanced perspective, making complex historical developments understandable for younger audiences.

Digital Accessibility

In recent years, the series has been digitized and made available through platforms such as Project Gutenberg and the Internet Archive. This accessibility has introduced a new generation of readers to the Durants' work.

Key Themes and Lessons

1. Interconnectedness of Civilizations: The Durants highlight how cultures influence one another through trade, warfare, and intellectual exchange.
2. The Role of Ideas: From democratic principles in Greece to Enlightenment thought in Europe, ideas drive societal change.
3. Human Resilience: The series underscores how societies adapt to crises, whether through technological innovation or cultural revival.
4. Legacy of Governance: The evolution of political structures—from monarchies to republics—shapes the trajectory of civilizations.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Are the volumes of The Story of Civilization still relevant today?

Absolutely. While some historical interpretations have evolved, the Durants' comprehensive coverage and engaging narrative remain valuable resources for anyone interested in world history.

2. Where can I find digital copies of the series?

Digital copies are available on Project Gutenberg, the Internet Archive, and other public domain platforms.

3. How many volumes were completed before Will Durant's death?

Will Durant passed away in 1981 after completing the first six volumes. Ariel Durant continued to work on the remaining volumes, but they were not fully published during her lifetime.

4. Did the Durants write any other notable works?

Yes, both Will and Ariel Durant authored numerous essays, biographies, and historical analyses, many of which focus on specific periods or themes within the broader context of civilization.

Conclusion

The collaboration between Will and Ariel Durant produced a monumental work that bridged the gap between academic history and popular narrative. *The Story of Civilization* stands as a testament to the power of meticulous research, passionate storytelling, and interdisciplinary collaboration. As readers continue to turn its pages—whether in print or digital form—the Durants' legacy endures, reminding us that understanding our past is essential to shaping our future.

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