



From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life

By Jacques Barzun

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Highly regarded here and abroad for some thirty works of cultural history and criticism, master historian Jacques Barzun has now set down in one continuous narrative the sum of his discoveries and conclusions about the whole of Western culture since 1500.

In this account, Barzun describes what Western Man wrought from the Renaissance and Reformation down to the present in the double light of its own time and our pressing concerns. He introduces characters and incidents with his unusual literary style and grace, bringing to the fore those that have "Puritans as Democrats," "The Monarch's Revolution," "The Artist Prophet and Jester" -- show the recurrent role of great themes throughout the eras.

The triumphs and defeats of five hundred years form an inspiring saga that modifies the current impression of one long tale of oppression by white European males. Women and their deeds are prominent, and freedom (even in sexual matters) is not an invention of the last decades. And when Barzun rates the present not as a culmination but a decline, he is in no way a prophet of doom. Instead, he shows decadence as the creative novelty that will burst forth -- tomorrow or the next day.

Only after a lifetime of separate studies covering a broad territory could a writer create with such ease the synthesis displayed in this magnificent volume.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In the last half-millennium, as the noted cultural critic and historian Jacques Barzun observes, great revolutions have swept the Western world. Each has brought profound change--for instance, the remaking of the commercial and social worlds wrought by the rise of Protestantism and by the decline of hereditary monarchies. And each, Barzun hints, is too little studied or appreciated today, in a time he does not hesitate to label as decadent.

To leaf through Barzun's sweeping, densely detailed but lightly written survey of the last 500 years is to ride a whirlwind of world-changing events. Barzun ponders, for instance, the tumultuous political climate of Renaissance Italy, which yielded mayhem and chaos, but also the work of Michelangelo and Leonardo--and, he adds, the scientific foundations for today's consumer culture of boom boxes and rollerblades. He considers the 16th-century varieties of religious experimentation that arose in the wake of Martin Luther's 95 theses, some of which led to the repression of individual personality, others of which might easily have come from the "Me Decade." Along the way, he offers a miniature history of the detective novel, defends Surrealism from its detractors, and derides the rise of professional sports, packing in a wealth of learned and often barbed asides.

Never shy of controversy, Barzun writes from a generally conservative position; he insists on the importance of moral values, celebrates the historical contributions of Christopher Columbus, and twits the academic practitioners of political correctness. Whether accepting of those views or not, even the most casual reader will find much that is new or little-explored in this attractive venture into cultural history. --*Gregory McNamee*

From Publishers Weekly

Now 92, Barzun, the renowned cultural critic, historian and former Columbia provost and professor, offers much more than a summation of his life's work in this profound, eloquent, often witty historical survey. A book of enormous riches, it's sprinkled with provocations. For example, Barzun contradicts Max Weber, arguing that the Protestant Reformation did not galvanize the capitalist spirit. With feminist ardor, he depicts the 16th century as molded and directed by women "as brilliant as the men, and sometimes more powerful" (e.g., Queens Elizabeth and Isabella). His eclectic synthesis is organized around a dozen or so themes--including emancipation, abstraction and individualism--that in his judgment define the modern era. Barzun keeps up the momentum with scores of snappy profiles, including of Luther, Erasmus, Cromwell, Mozart, Rousseau and Byron, as well as of numerous unsung figures such as German educator Friedrich Froebel, inventor of kindergarten, and turn-of-the-century American pioneer ecologist George Marsh. Other devices help make this tome user-friendly--the margins are chock-full of quotes, while vignettes of Venice in 1650, Weimar in 1790 and Chicago in 1895 give a taste of the zeitgeist. In Barzun's glum estimate, the late 20th century has brought decadence into full bloom--separatism in all forms, apathetic electorates, amoral art that embraces filth or mere shock value, the decline of the humanities, the mechanization of life--but he remains hopeful that humanity will find its way again. This is a book to be reckoned with. First serial to American Scholar; BOMC selection. (May)

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From Library Journal

Nearly 100, the noted thinker contemplates the last half-millennium.

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Annie Hendricks:

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