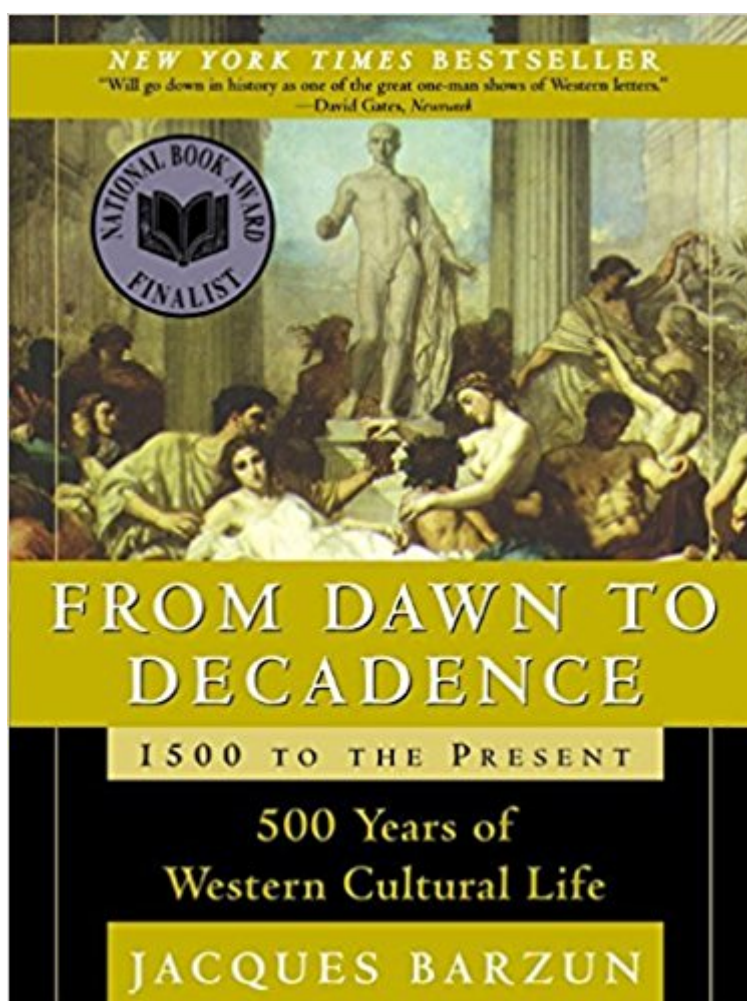


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From Dawn To Decadence: 1500 To The Present: 500 Years Of Western Cultural Life



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

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 --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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) Copyright 2000 Reed

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It is an incredible history book that reads like a novel at times, an encyclopedia at others, and a juicy gossip rag at others. At times it is a quite dense reading, and the author really thinks a lot about himself! I wish he had given the same deep dive and respect to the women in the book as the men- at times it felt like he was adding them because an editor told him he should be- and not as much care was applied to his topics about women as the men. Nonetheless, it is full of useful and interesting history topics, and i think my Jeopardy game has been upped from reading it.

OK, maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration. But certainly one of the top ten history books ever written. Barzun is a genius, and this book is his magnum opus, encapsulating in the neighborhood of 70 years of teaching and writing experience by one of the most influential intellectuals of the 20th century. How do you cram 500 years into 800 pages and make it interesting? It's not an easy or a quick read (mostly, for me, because I had to stop every couple of pages and spend half the afternoon looking stuff up on Wiki), but it's no exaggeration to say he's the most learned scholar I've ever read. Just ridiculous how smart and well-read this man was (he just passed away in Oct 2012, at 104). Some will say he spent too much time on this, or too little time on that, or that he doesn't kowtow to the establishment enough. He was his own man, and practically invented cultural history, so he's not easily or lightly dismissed. His authority speaks volumes. He was French, and was a Romantic scholar, being credited for (among very many other things) the revival of Berlioz; distrusted rigid thought, in education, science, politics, etc; and clearly thought that the West had cannibalised itself with revolution turning into nihilism. He was, however, in the end very much an optimist about people. Get yourself a hardback copy; this one is going to be on your shelf for a long time.

There have been many caustic comments about Barzun's seeming artistic and political conservatism. I don't see that and I am politically quite progressive. One thing he is doing, regarding the arts (one area discussed) is a call for standards- craft- not slovenliness and a return from the destruction of the anti-art of Dada and Du Champ. A totally remarkable book, written by an erudite, educated man conversant with science, politics, philosophy, music and art. This book covers an arc from 1500 and Martin Luther to fin-de -sicle of the 20th century. It is attempt to answer the question- why we have the art culture and politics of each age and whether we are in decline. It is a surprising page turner, and witty. Don't be afraid of the 800 pages- you will regret it's ending. Most

contemporary artists consider any criticism as reactionary and bourgeois- they reserve the right to shock, use any detritus as art and deface wall without boundaries. He explains that unfortunate trajectory with the onset of Dadaism and the destructive impulses born of World war One. Why one feel that graffiti must be "the peoples art- must they have something so cheap, so easily done with spray cans?I don't agree with everything he says- but the book is an education. I recommend it to any artist at sea regarding his work (most of us). It helps explains why beauty is in the dustbin.

This is one of the most in depth accounting of the past 500 years (1500-2000) that I have ever read. Barzun goes into detail not only about events but the people that were instrumental in changing the world to what we have now. Things like the Protestant Reformation and the events that surrounded that era, to the modern age with the discoveries in science, medicine and the arts are only some of the history that is chronicled. Very good book for reading about historical events or for reference.

This is one great read. Barzun's account of the achievements that mark the rise, and his analysis of what contributes to the decline of "the patchwork" we call western civilization (from 1500 to the end of the 20th century) is organized around themes he associates with four great revolutions each of which gave culture a new face.(These are the 16th C. religious; the 17th .C. monarchical; 18th and 19th C.s liberal; and the 20th C social and collectivist revolutions.) The pursuit of certain purposes associated with those revolutions and which lent vitality to developments and advancements were, as he said, carried out to their utmost possibility, and so are bringing about decline and demise which are shown by the deadlocks and excesses of our time. Those with a developed taste for history "writ well" will enjoy the feast Barzun lays before the reader. Those who have yet to develop that appreciation will develop it in no small degree from partaking of this lovely feast.

Very dense reading with interesting cultural and historical research. Perfect for our class, but very trying in terms of wading through a lot of minutia. It presents truly interesting historical information as well as well documented research to back author's opinions. The author, however, goes off on periodic dialogue which, may be somewhat related to the topic, but which really disturbs the flow of the book and looks like the author is dribbling on about something that really isn't necessary for the book to flow and inform. We are 1/3 of the way through the book and having read ahead a little - it seems to be written the same throughout. Worthy reading, but somewhat dense and over written.

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