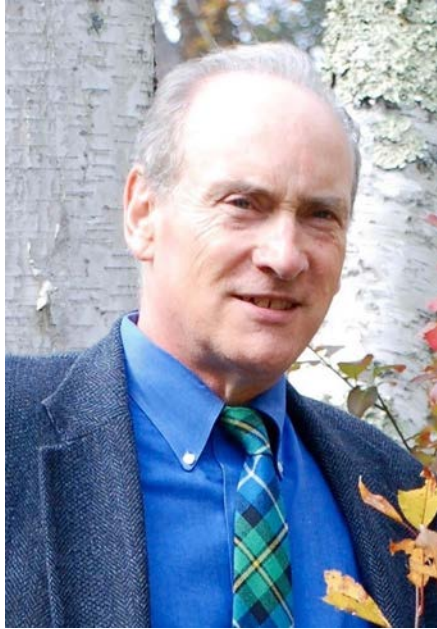


AMERICAN
HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION

2020 Annual Meeting

Presidential Address





John R. McNeill

University Professor
Georgetown University

President of the
American Historical Association, 2019

AMERICAN
HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION

Presidential Address

**New York Hilton
Trianon Ballroom
New York, New York
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5:30 PM**

John R. McNeill

By George Vrtis, Carleton College

In fall 1998, John McNeill addressed the Georgetown University community to help launch the university's new capital campaign. Sharing the stage with Georgetown's president and other dignitaries, McNeill focused his comments on the two "great things" he saw going on at Georgetown and why each merited further support. One of those focal points was teaching and the need to constantly find creative new ways to inspire, share knowledge, and build intellectual community among faculty and students. The other one centered on scholarship. Here McNeill suggested that scholars needed to move beyond the traditional confines of academic disciplines laid down in the 19th century, and engage in more innovative, imaginative, and interdisciplinary research. Our intellectual paths have been very fruitful for a long time now, McNeill observed, but diminishing returns have set in, information and methodologies have exploded, and new roads beckon. To help make his point, McNeill likened contemporary scholars to a drunk person searching for his lost keys under a lamppost, "not because he lost them there but because that is where the light is."

The drunk-swirling-around-the-lamppost metaphor was classic McNeill. Throughout his academic life, McNeill has always conveyed his ideas in clear, accessible, often memorable, and occasionally humorous language. And he has always ventured into the darkness, searchlight in hand, helping us to see and understand the world and ourselves ever more clearly with each passing year. That passion for exploration flows through his life, mingling with an unshakable commitment to hard work, innovative thinking, generosity, and community building. Taken together, these characteristics (and others) have combined to make McNeill a transformative scholar of world environmental history, an inspiring and daring teacher, a steadfast and trusted mentor for graduate students and junior faculty, an ambitious and far-sighted colleague, a global steward for advancing the historical profession, and a beloved friend to many people around the world.

Homeground

John McNeill comes from a remarkable family with a deep appreciation for history and teaching. His paternal grandfather and namesake was a church historian at the University of Toronto, the University of Chicago, and the New York Theological Seminary. His maternal grandfather taught English to school children in Greece, while harboring an ambition to become an archaeologist and participate in fieldwork in and around Athens. Both of his grandmothers nourished their children's education in customary ways.

John's father, William McNeill (1917–2016), was born in Vancouver, Canada, and became one of the most prominent historians of the last generation. Among his more than 20 books is the *Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (1963), a landmark in the development of world history

in the United States. He spent his career at the University of Chicago, winning numerous honors over his long and distinguished life, including the National Book Award, the National Humanities Medal, and being elected president of the American Historical Association. To date, William and John are the only parent and child to both serve as presidents of the AHA—34 years apart.

John's mother, Elizabeth (Darbshire) McNeill (1921–2006), was born in Kentucky but spent most of her childhood in Athens, Greece. After graduating from Swarthmore College in 1943, she joined the newly created Office of War Information (OWI) and was stationed in Algiers, Naples, and Cairo. In early 1945, she returned to Athens to serve as a librarian and translator for the OWI's Athens office. Though family memories differ as to the location, she met her future husband William, who was then serving in the US Army as a military attaché, at one of these stops during the war. After they were married and made their way to Chicago, she raised her four children, while also volunteering at local hospitals as a translator of French and Greek.

John thus grew up with parents (and grandparents) devoted to education and with a legacy of history professors stretching two generations deep on his father's side. But, drawing too straight a line from grandfather to father to son would lead us astray. Family relationships are always complicated in their own ways, not least by the unique affections and outlooks of children. Looking back on his youth, John's first dream was to play centerfield for the Chicago White Sox. His early heroes were all Chicago sports figures: the White Sox outfielders Floyd Robinson and Ed Stroud, the Cubs outfielder Billy Williams, and the Bears running backs Gale Sayers and Walter Payton. John was especially drawn to lefties like himself and chose to wear Stroud's jersey number on his high school baseball team uniform because Stroud hit left-handed.

If a professional sports career did not work out, John's backup plan was math. He had some memorable math teachers at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools he attended, and he would head off to college expecting to be a math major. Those interests were bundled with some lasting lessons from his parents. His dad taught him many things in his youth, of course, but perhaps above all he set an example of industriousness. John recalls his dad working hard. William McNeill reserved Saturday mornings for household chores with his children but spent much of the rest of the week focused on his writing and university responsibilities. The sounds of a typewriter filled the McNeill home, and most nights John and his siblings fell asleep to its rhythms. John is also certain he heard about the virtues of world history at the dinner table, and he is equally certain he was probably pondering baseball batting averages and other such things much of the time.

John's mom also shaped his affections. She encouraged reading and writing, and passed on a certain skepticism of how some intellectuals used language. If John or his siblings spoke or wrote in ways that she found too self-inflated, pretentious, or filled with jargon, she was quick to let them know. She believed in using plain and direct language, and would eventually become an unsparing critic of John's writing. In the years to come, she would read just about everything he wrote for publication and help bring it back down to

earth, if needed. John credits her with instilling in him a desire to write clearly and nourishing in him a love of all things Greek.

Trails toward World Environmental History

With these influences and leanings in hand, John McNeill left home to attend Swarthmore College in 1971. After what he has called “a doomed flirtation with mathematics,” McNeill turned to history. He took advantage of Swarthmore’s broad offerings for a small liberal arts college in the 1970s, taking classes in African, Chinese, Russian, Latin American, European, and United States history. As a sophomore, he remembers feeling inspired by Paul Beik, who taught Russian and French history, and as a senior by Lillian Li, who taught Chinese history and had recently arrived at Swarthmore. Their devotion to their work and students left a lasting impression on him.

McNeill’s wide-ranging classes at Swarthmore were a step in the direction of thinking about history on a world scale, albeit an unintentional and uncertain one, he maintains. More certain were signs of a deepening affection for research. While working on his senior thesis on British railway finance, he spent most Friday evenings in the University of Pennsylvania Library’s microfilm reading room. One night he became so absorbed in his work that he lost track of time. When he eventually looked up from the large gray microfilm reader he was using to prowl through British parliamentary records, he found himself locked in the reading room. So, he read on for a while more and then camped out on the library’s linoleum floor for the night.

After Swarthmore, his family’s love affair with Greece took hold of him, and McNeill headed off to Athens and a teaching fellowship at the preparatory school Kollegio Athinon, or Athens College. There he taught geography and economics for a year, and also traveled to Turkey, Italy, and many parts of Greece during school breaks. When the fellowship concluded, he spent the following summer in Egypt and Tanzania. Apart from what he had read, these were McNeill’s first encounters with the world beyond the United States, and the experiences proved variously puzzling, intriguing, and unsettling. He recalls feeling shaken by the poverty and sickness he saw in rural Egypt; being confused by the sight of soldiers pushing crowds of peasants into settlements in Tanzania; and like other historians in the making, hungering after a context that would help him make sense of what he was seeing. These experiences deepened his interest in history, and particularly in African history, which would help shape his intellectual outlook and commitments more than he could have ever imagined at the time.

When McNeill returned to the United States and began graduate study at Duke University in fall 1976, he chose British Empire history for his major field and studied under Richard Preston, a historian of Canada. His interests, however, ranged widely, and he took courses in African, Latin American, and modern European history. He became deeply influenced by the colonial Latin America historian John Tepaske, the British Empire historian John Cell, and the Europeanist Charles Maier. McNeill thought of Maier as a particularly ambitious scholar, and he modeled his dissertation research after the multi-national archival approach Maier used in his *Recasting Bourgeois Europe: Stabilization in*

France, Germany, and Italy in the Decade after World War I (1975). Based largely on research in Spanish, French, and British archives, McNeill compared the colonial economies and policies of the French and Spanish Bourbons in the early 18th century by focusing on two strategic imperial port cities: tropical Havana, and, lying far to the north on Cape Breton Island, chilly Louisbourg. Its comparative focus and broad Atlantic orientation were another step in the direction of world history, and its attention to the importance of physical geography and natural resources were a first small step towards environmental history.

But perhaps more than anyone or anything else at Duke, it was John Cell who launched McNeill towards world history and, inadvertently, towards environmental history, too. While McNeill was writing his dissertation in summer 1980, Cell invited him to team-teach what would soon be the first world history course ever taught at Duke. Assigning only a collection of primary sources to the students, Cell and McNeill cast an expansive net, lecturing on social relations, class formation, geography, and other processes and patterns they observed. The class went well enough that McNeill was asked to teach it again the following year on his own. As chance would have it, he was assigned to an office that had a copy of Alfred Crosby's *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (1972) on one of its shelves. McNeill picked it up one rainy afternoon, and as he recounts the encounter, "I read it in one gulp and have never been quite the same since."

Crosby's treatment of the dramatic environmental and cultural upheaval that followed in the wake of the Columbian voyages is so well known today that the very title of the book is now standard shorthand among historians for describing the complex processes he observed. But nearly 40 years ago when McNeill spent that rainy afternoon captivated by Crosby's work, its future was far less clear. The field of environmental history itself was then just emerging, and the idea of investigating the interplay of cultural and environmental factors was still novel for historians. It was an exciting, uncertain time, and Crosby sparked McNeill's imagination as nothing had quite done before. He quickly set about learning all he could about Crosby-esque themes on a global scale and reimagined his world history syllabus accordingly. Crosby's influence also began to trickle into his research. While teaching as an adjunct at Duke, McNeill began revising his dissertation, nudging his treatment of Cuban plantation agriculture and the North Atlantic cod fisheries onto a slightly more environmental footing. In a few years, those revisions would become evident in his first book, *The Atlantic Empires of France and Spain: Louisbourg and Havana, 1700–1763* (1985).

At the same time that Crosby's perspective was etching itself into McNeill's thinking, another Duke professor, the Mughal Empire historian John Richards, opened an important new door for him at the Marine Biological Laboratory's Ecosystem Center in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Ecologists at the Ecosystems Center were then working on an early version of a global carbon cycle model, and they needed historical land cover change estimates to help them determine the relative contributions of fossil fuel and biomass combustion to rising atmospheric carbon dioxide levels. Richards was

supplying them with land cover data for Southeast Asia, and at his suggestion, they hired McNeill to work on Latin America. This experience drew McNeill further towards environmental history. He learned about the great surge of deforestation in Amazonia and Central America in the second half of the 20th century, and he began comparing it with other regional experiences emerging from the Ecosystem Center's research. This research eventually seeded several publications on Brazilian land use and a lifelong interest in deforestation and climate change.

In 1983, McNeill's academic prospects brightened. He landed a tenure-track position in European history at Goucher College in Towson, Maryland, and set about teaching survey courses on German, Russian, and modern European history, as well as a course on war and fascism in Europe from World War I to World War II. The heavy lifting of teaching all new courses left little time for research, but he managed to attend the Johns Hopkins University seminar on Atlantic history and culture as often as he could. There he got to know the African historian Philip Curtin and found his work on European migration, disease, and death in the tropics inspiring in ways reminiscent of Crosby's work. Though none of McNeill's teaching at Goucher was in either world or environmental history, his interests continued to drift in that direction, and Curtin and the Johns Hopkins' Atlantic seminar helped nurture them.

After two years at Goucher, McNeill moved on to Georgetown University in 1985 and a joint appointment in the Department of History and the Walsh School of Foreign Service. Over the next several busy years, McNeill's teaching, research, and long-simmering interests in world and environmental history would all finally collide, and he would increasingly see himself as an environmental historian with broad interests. That happy convergence began with his teaching. When McNeill arrived at Georgetown, he was asked to teach a class entitled Intersocietal History, another called Empire and Independence, and a two-semester survey of African history. The first two courses were global in scope (or nearly so), and they pushed McNeill into a deeper consideration of the historiography on world history. So, too, did the two African history survey courses. The comparative nature of African history and Africa's long history of relationships with the world around it propelled McNeill's thinking outward, always looking to better understand the larger patterns and processes at work. He taught these courses for five years until Georgetown hired an African historian, allowing McNeill to teach his first ever environmental history course. He designed a course that he called the History and Politics of the Biosphere, which was among the earliest global environmental history courses taught in the United States. From that point on, McNeill would teach a course on environmental history almost every year.

While McNeill realigned his teaching interests, he also turned his research in the direction of environmental history. He set his sights on the mountainous regions of the Mediterranean world, which had drawn his interest and affection since his Athens days. In the resulting book, *The Mountains of the Mediterranean World: An Environmental History* (1992), McNeill grappled with the changes in village life and the natural world that had taken shape in the Mediterranean uplands since about 1600. The degraded landscapes and hollowed villages

he observed in the present were relatively new developments, he argued, the consequences of population pressures intertwining with the dynamics of market integration in ecologically and culturally destructive ways. The book was part of an important wave of new scholarship by pathbreaking environmental historians—including William Cronon, Richard White, Donald Worster, Donald Hughes, and Warren Dean—that looked to uncover the roots of our historical and modern environmental predicaments in the tangled web of connections binding society and the natural world.

By the time that *The Mountains of the Mediterranean World* was published in 1992, McNeill had been following various trails toward world environmental history for some 20 years. Swarthmore, Athens, Duke, the MBL's Ecosystem Center, Goucher, Georgetown—each stop opened new doors, and each stop contributed to his outlook and development in important ways. By then, he was also beginning to think about his next project, which would bring his world and environmental history interests together more fully than ever before.

Life between the Lampposts

In the early 1990s, McNeill launched into research on the book that would become one of the cornerstones of his professional life: *Something New under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (2000). The idea of the book came from Yale University historian Paul Kennedy, then serving as the general editor of Norton's new multivolume series on the history of the 20th-century world, who invited McNeill to contribute a volume on environmental history. The book was a massive undertaking, and it would take McNeill seven years to complete it. When it was done, the book opened new vistas for environmental and world historians, making important contributions to both communities and to other fields of history as well.

Those contributions began with the book's argument, which is suggested by its title. Contrary to Ecclesiastes' claim that there "is nothing new under the sun," McNeill found there is, and it is the staggering scale and intensity of anthropogenic environmental change in the 20th century. More than the world wars, the rise of mass literacy, or even the growing emancipation of women, McNeill argued that the human impact on the biosphere in the 20th century will, in time, overshadow all the others in importance. While the argument could be quibbled over, McNeill's survey of the environmental changes he observed in the Earth's spheres (the atmosphere, lithosphere, hydrosphere, and biosphere) was compelling. Equally compelling was the observation that our contemporary social, economic, and political structures are dependent on the stable and abundant environmental circumstances that are now fleeting. In revealing these deep and important connections between society and nature, McNeill made one of his greatest contribution of all: broad historical understandings, he demonstrates, are critical to understanding contemporary issues and debates. *Something New under the Sun* garnered praise from many different quarters of the academic world. It was awarded the World History Association's Book Prize (shared with Kenneth Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*), won the Forest History Society's Weyerhaeuser Book Award, and was runner-up

for the BP Natural World Book Prize. It was also named to *The Times* of London's 2008 list of ten best science books ever written and has been translated into eight languages.

As the acclaim for *Something New under the Sun* poured in, McNeill was already turning his attention to his next project. Inspired by the idea of writing a short book on the history of the world, McNeill recruited his father, and the two teamed-up to produce *The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History* (2003). The McNeills drew on the analogy of the World Wide Web and positioned the notion of the human web at the book's analytical center. A web, as they defined it, "is a set of connections that link people to one another." Those connections could take many forms, including social, political, technological, and environmental relationships. While the ideas of interaction and exchange had long been mainstays of world historians, including the McNeills, their imaginative use of webs drew attention to the numerous forces and complex networks that people have created around the world for centuries and that have recently come together to create today's interconnected global society. Among the webs that stand out in the McNeills' analysis are those linked to communication and to collecting and consuming energy. *The Human Web* challenged historians to take broader, more imaginative approaches to their work. It probably challenged the McNeill family web a bit, too. There were "uneasy compromises" and the two authors are both stubborn, John reported, but the rest of that story remains a family secret.

After *The Human Web*, McNeill returned to an idea that had been germinating since his graduate school days. Back then, McNeill had come across references to yellow fever and malaria in his study of 18th-century Cuba, and he had pondered their medical and military significance in the first two scholarly articles he ever published in 1984 and 1985. Those interests continued to bubble up to the surface occasionally, but they did not get his full attention until after *The Human Web* was published in 2003. By then, McNeill's ideas had expanded. He saw new connections, and he plunged into learning everything he could about two tiny insects and the virulent diseases they helped spread across the Greater Caribbean as European imperial powers jockeyed for control of the region from the 17th century through the early 20th century. Seven years later, that research resulted in *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620–1914* (2010).

Like McNeill's earlier works, *Mosquito Empires* is impressive in its reach and thought-provoking vision. Building on the work of some of his earliest and most profound influences, Alfred Crosby and Philip Curtin, McNeill argued that yellow fever- and malaria-carrying mosquitoes (*Aedes* and *Anopheles* species, respectively) helped shape the geopolitical order of the Greater Caribbean from the colonial period through the age of revolutions. The argument is steeped in modern ecological and epidemiological understandings, which underpin McNeill's assessment of the various factors that wove mosquitoes, yellow fever, malaria, environmental change, African slaves, and successive waves of Europeans and their descendants into a common struggle for existence. Up to about 1770, McNeill shows how these factors combined to favor Spain, Portugal, and Britain's hold on nearly all of their Caribbean colonies; after 1770,

they combined in new patterns that ultimately undermined that hold and helped lead the colonies toward independence. The book made important interventions in many fields of history, but especially in environmental, military, Latin American, and Atlantic history. One reviewer, writing for the *Journal of the History of Medicine*, even suggested that the book “should be made mandatory reading for all medical students.” *Mosquito Empires* received several prestigious awards, including the American Historical Association’s Beveridge Prize and a PROSE Award for best book on European and world history, and it was a finalist for the European Society of Environmental History’s Turku Book Award for the best book in environmental history.

As McNeill was researching and writing *Mosquito Empires*, he also began working with the idea of the Anthropocene, which was then gathering considerable attention among academics and the general public. The crux of the Anthropocene—that humankind has become a geophysical force rivaling, and in some case driving, the great forces of nature—drew on ideas and arguments that McNeill had been making since at least *Something New under the Sun*. The Anthropocene was (and is) a controversial idea on several fronts, and McNeill weighed into the debates with his former student Peter Engelke in *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945* (2014). McNeill and Engelke argued that the Anthropocene has indeed begun, that its origins date to the mid-20th century, and that the growth in fossil-fuel-driven energy consumption and human population lie at the root of what they call “the most anomalous and unrepresentative period in the 200,000-year-long history of relations between our species and the biosphere.” The argument was eye-catching, as was some of the book’s evidence, such as the increase in motor vehicles from 40 to 850 million units since 1945, or that 75 percent of all the carbon dioxide ever added to the atmosphere through human agency took place over the same time period. As McNeill and Engelke remind us, arguing about the details of the Anthropocene, its causes and consequences, is important work for historians. The world has entered uncharted territory for our species, and it needs historical perspective to better understand the issues and wrestle with the implications.

In addition to the six books that McNeill has authored or co-authored, he has helped catalyze numerous fields and subfields in environmental and world history through the 16 books he has edited or co-edited. The range of topics is impressive. There are five volumes on world environmental history, including the 28 essays that make up *A Companion to Global Environmental History* (2012). There are another six volumes on subfields in environmental history, including *Soils and Societies: Perspectives from Environmental History* (2006), *Environmental Histories of the Cold War* (2010), and *Mining North America: An Environmental History since 1522* (2017). There are three volumes on world history, including two in the Cambridge World History series (2015). And, there are two multi-volume encyclopedias that seem to nicely bookend McNeill’s scholarly interests: the *Encyclopedia of World Environmental History* (2003) and the *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History* (2005). While it is impossible to capture the significance of all of these edited books in this short biography,

the vast breadth of vision, the commitment to interdisciplinary approaches, the consistently high quality of the scholarship, and the attention to cracking open conversations on underexplored topics all stand out as signal features of these books.

These same qualities are evident in the more than 150 articles and book chapters that McNeill has authored or co-authored. Want to learn about Chinese environmental history in a global context? There's an article for that: "Chinese Environmental History in World Perspective" (1998). Ever wonder what McNeill thought about Jared Diamond's bestselling book, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1997)? There's an article for that: "The World According to Jared Diamond" (2001). Thinking about the relationship between the discipline of history and global climate change? There's an article for that as well: "Can History Help with Global Warming?" (2008). Pondering human interaction with the natural world since some of our species walked out of Africa? There's an article for that one, too: "The First Hundred Thousand Years" (2010). The range of McNeill's articles and book chapters has always been far reaching, offering challenging insights for historians at all levels.

To all of these contributions must still be added some of McNeill's most innovative and thought-provoking writing. Since 2000, McNeill has waded into the public square through op-eds and occasional pieces in the *Washington Post* and other newspapers. He has argued for gathering the stories of our remaining World War II veterans ("Save the War Stories," 2012); reflected on the meaning of Earth Day in light of the Anthropocene ("Earth Day: Are We at the Beginning of a New Geological Era?" 2016); and, most recently, invented a semi-facetious fascist meter and used it to grade our current president ("How Fascist is Donald Trump?" 2016). For someone who is a bit reserved by nature, and far more peacemaker than political insurgent, McNeill has inserted himself into public debate from time to time, always bringing historical perspective to contemporary conversations. And just how did Trump fare on McNeill's fascist meter? By the standards of historical fascism, McNeill gave him 26 out of a possible 44 "Benitos" (a measure based on one of the great fascists in modern history, Benito Mussolini). That was enough, McNeill concluded, to make Trump "more fascist than any successful American politician yet, and the most dangerous threat to pluralist democracy in this country in more than a century, but—thank our stars—an amateurish imitation of the real thing."

In addition to the individual book awards that McNeill has received, his scholarship has received support and distinctions from many organizations over the years. He has been the recipient of two Fulbright research awards, a Guggenheim fellowship, a Woodrow Wilson Center fellowship, and a MacArthur Foundation fellowship. He has been elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and has been awarded the biennial Heineken Prize for History from the Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences. And most recently, he received the 2019 President's Award for Distinguished Scholar-Teachers from his home university, Georgetown, noting him as "a ground-breaking scholar, a thoughtful colleague, an excellent mentor, and a teacher of the highest caliber."

Building Scholarly Communities

Important as all of John McNeill's vast scholarly contributions have been, they are rivaled by his commitment to people and institutions. Throughout his career, but especially in the last 20 years, McNeill has devoted an extraordinary amount of time to building scholarly communities. At Georgetown, he has served on over 40 faculty search committees, chaired searches for new deans of Georgetown College and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, been director of graduate studies in the history department, and helped build the history department into the outstanding department it is today. McNeill has always believed that finding the right colleagues is one of the most important things any department or college does, and his colleagues have long sought and trusted his judgment.

The commitment to Georgetown's intellectual life has also been reflected in the many professional associations he has served in the United States and internationally. He has been a member of numerous prize, program, and advisory committees. He has served on the governing boards of the Rachel Carson Center in Munich, the International Congress of Environmental History Organizations, the Peking University Environmental History Center, and the National History Center in Washington, DC. He has been president of the American Society for Environmental History, a delegate to the American Council of Learned Societies, and a member of the International Union of Geological Sciences' Anthropocene Working Group that is charged with making a formal recommendation about revising the official geological time scale to reflect the Anthropocene. Before he was elected president of the American Historical Association, he served the AHA as co-chair of the Program Committee and as vice president for the Research Division.

For all of the work he has devoted to building scholarly communities and institutions, McNeill may be best known among colleagues and editors for helping scholars at every level advance their research. Since 2001, he has served as the co-editor for Cambridge University Press's *Studies in Environment and History* series. The series has produced a long list of influential and award-winning books on environmental history from around the world, and all of them have benefited from McNeill's thoughtful criticism. So, too, have countless other manuscripts. McNeill has also co-edited Rowman & Littlefield's *Exploring World History* series and Cambridge University Press's *Global and International History* series, and he has served on the editorial boards of *Environmental History*, the *Journal of World History*, the *Anthropocene Review*, and several other journals. He has also reviewed manuscripts for over 30 journals and 30 presses. These numbers are extraordinary, but buried in them is a deeper meaning—a devotion to helping junior scholars. If you have ever seen McNeill at a conference, he is as likely to be talking with graduate students about their research as he is to be talking with senior scholars. He has been generous with his time and attention, always hungry to hear new ideas and to help the next generation of historians. This kind of commitment to mentoring emerging scholars has long been one of his most endearing qualities.

Perhaps no one knows this better than his own students, who remain one of McNeill's greatest sources of professional pride and fulfillment. A smile still warms his face when he reflects on the first environmental history course he ever taught to undergraduates in 1990 and that several of those students are still in touch with him all these years later. That anecdote speaks volumes about McNeill. His classrooms have always been rich and evocative spaces, places where students interrogate the past on its term while also being guided to see its relevance and importance for understanding the present. McNeill's approach to training graduate students in environmental history has been innovative. He has supervised environmental history dissertations focused entirely, or in part, on the United States, Canada, Brazil, France, Russia, China, Turkey, Lebanon, Algeria, and other fields of history by pairing his environmental history expertise with regional specialists in the Georgetown history department and with environmental scientists scattered across the university. He is a demanding, kind, and generous mentor, always eager to help students advance their work and build fulfilling careers and lives. He has built a vibrant community of environmental historians, one that he nourishes each year at the American Society for Environmental History conference where he brings his former and current students together at the annual Georgetown environmental history dinner. It has been a highlight of the conference for his graduate students and for McNeill for a long time now, and the mutual devotion and admiration is always heartwarming.

To write even a short biography of McNeill and not mention his own immediate family would be remiss. He married his wife the same year he moved to Georgetown, and they have sustained one another while weaving their lives together. Along the way, they have raised four remarkable children, constant reminders to McNeill that historical scholarship is surely as much about the present as it is about the past.

Present and Future

McNeill once likened the disciplinary culture of history to something astrophysicists call "dark matter." The term refers to some 80 percent of the known universe, which astrophysicists tell us is invisible and only observable because of the gravitational force it exerts on other objects that can be seen. For McNeill, history has always been filled with dark matter. It is part of the darkness between the lampposts that has long attracted him into its shadowy worlds. And he is still venturing into it, still casting light on new areas and ideas. He just finished a world history textbook, *The Webs of Humankind: A World History*, which will be released in 2020. It draws on the metaphor of the web, developing and formalizing it much more deeply than he and his father did in *The Human Web*. Next up is a global environmental history of the Industrial Revolution, which will feature the countless "ecological teleconnections" that McNeill sees recasting the far corners of the earth in response to centers of industrial might. And after that? The answer might just be found on the tattered and faded piece of plain white copier paper that has long been taped to the wall next to McNeill's desk. At the top of the page, hand-written and underscored is the heading, "Books I should write." Some of the items have now been scratched out, but the list is still long.

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A low-angle photograph of a Gothic Revival style stone building, likely a part of Georgetown University. The building features intricate stonework, arched windows, and a prominent tower. The sun is shining brightly from the upper right, creating a lens flare effect. The sky is blue with some white clouds.

*Georgetown University
congratulates John
McNeill for his rigorous
scholarship and his
appointment as
president of the
American Historical
Association.*

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