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John U. Nef

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CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF  
INDUSTRIAL CIVILIZATION

THE WILES LECTURES  
GIVEN AT THE QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST 1956

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# CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF INDUSTRIAL CIVILIZATION

BY

JOHN U. NEF

*Chairman, Committee on Social Thought  
and Professor of Economic History in the  
University of Chicago*

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*To*  
JACQUES MARITAIN  
*Whose affection and admiration*  
*for my country are equalled*  
*by mine for his*

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## PREFACE

According to the generous terms of the Wiles Trust, it is possible for the lecturer to offer the public historical work in progress. That is the principal excuse for the appearance of this book. It follows at rather more than a year's distance the first set of Wiles Lectures, Professor Butterfield's *Man on His Past*.

Ever since I began my historical researches thirty-five years ago, I have been concerned with the origins of the industrialized world in which we find ourselves. Under the influence of the view which then prevailed in university circles (and which prevails perhaps even more now), that all serious historical work has to be specialized, I sought these origins, as many others have done, in the field of economic history. I sought them in what was in one way a very narrow branch of that field—the rise of the British coal industry. As time went on, I came to realize that, not only my own effort as a specialist, but the whole approach to the problem of origins in terms of economic history was a partial approach. More recently, especially in the process of writing this book, following the lectures which were delivered at The Queen's University of Belfast in May, I came to realize something which is perhaps even more important. A knowledge of general history is bound to change man's outlook on economic history, and in all probability on the other separate channels into which specialized research has divided the study of history during the past hundred years or so. Economic history, as presented not only by historian specialists, such as the elder Arnold Toynbee (who first set forth systematically the idea of an 'industrial revolution'), but by Karl Marx (who is considered to be an historical philosopher, a philosopher and even the founder of a gospel), is not only incomplete as an explanation of industrial civilization; it is unsatisfactory

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even as a partial explanation. The subject needs to be thought through anew in terms of man's experience as a whole, if it is to be presented to the public in all countries in ways that could be of greater service to a true understanding of world history.

Perhaps I should say a word about my equipment for re-considering economic history and the rise of industrialism from the vantage point of general history. At the outset of my own special researches, my interests and those of my late wife, who was a gifted writer, led me to spend as much time as possible with the great works of literature, music and the visual arts. A little later I was drawn to the study of philosophy and theology, as well as to the general histories of such masters as Herodotus, Tacitus and Gibbon. These subjects commanded an increasing part of my time. They elicited an increasing share of my enthusiasm.

I found myself wondering whether there might be some relation between the faith, the ethics, the art which have been vital to many human beings, and the special subjects of economic inquiry. These subjects would have become lifeless for me if I had looked at them only in terms of the statistics and categories which were offered as almost the whole of wisdom by some economists. Subjects of economic inquiry took on life for me only in terms of the men and women who forced their way to the surface in the documents which I read and of those I met in the process of examining and discussing documents: archivists as well as historians and other learned men who had been trained in their youth in general culture. Most of these contemporaries were specialists, but they had never quite forgotten what they had learned, in spite of the routine and mechanical nature of much of the work they were expected to do, and they also drew on the experience of the lives they led, which inevitably transcended their specialties.

I eventually came to the conclusion that the origin of the unique industrial civilization which involves us all cannot properly be made the special preserve of economic historians.

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I came to the conclusion that the only way this origin might possibly be understood is through the study of history as a whole. I was thus confronted with the task of trying to learn about all channels of history at a time when it was widely accepted as an axiom of scholarship that the only way to know anything serious about one channel was to devote to it a lifetime of research.

This placed me in a dilemma. I saw that it was necessary to go beyond the beaten paths of historical specialization, but that this involved the risk of becoming superficial in one's knowledge of the past. And then, as if that dilemma were not sufficient to complicate one poor life, I found pressing down upon me the conviction that the problem of the origin of industrial civilization is actually an aspect of the problem of its present condition and its future. I became more and more convinced that its future depends on us—on human beings with free will. That we could make industrialism into something enduring for the souls of men only as a result of a free search for truth in every line of inquiry, philosophical and theological and artistic, as well as historical. I do not mean a search for truth in the specific sense in which the natural scientist or the social scientist is committed to seek for it. The truth that seems necessary is one which aims to comprehend every facet of man's existence. That is just the truth which the modern insistence on specialization and classification virtually forbids us to seek, or at any rate fails to provide us with any established media through which to seek it.

The future of history, the future of knowledge, and the future of civilization itself, are thus interdependent. If we are to examine the nature of this interdependence, the use of methods derived from nineteenth-century natural science are most inadequate.

I can hardly hope to have made more than a beginning in my attempt to solve these two dilemmas. But they have to be stated and they have to be faced. That is what I tried to do in my lectures in Belfast. In the light of the discussions that



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followed each lecture, and in the light of the sober and difficult meditations of a European summer, I have tried again in this book. I have become increasingly certain that, in spite of the risks, the only way to handle this subject of the cultural foundations of industrial civilization is to seek for the universal in the particulars of many fields of historical inquiry, and to do this, so far as my inadequate equipment and talent allow, without losing sight of the fact that the triumph of industrialism has raised in an acute form the problem of the survival of the human spirit in the temporal world. The chapters that follow suggest that it was mainly the human spirit that created industrialism as we find it. They suggest further that in the long run the only way men might meet and surmount the threat of destruction which confronts them today and which will not disappear tomorrow is through the renewal and the perfection of that spirit to which men and women owe their greatness.

I am sure I am not entirely wrong in thinking that it was a sense of this power of the human spirit, and of the way in which history as studied and taught sometimes gets in the way of its improvement, which led Mrs Austen T. Boyd, in her wise generosity, to found the Wiles Trust. Sir Eric Ashby, the Master of Peterhouse and Professor Michael Roberts, who had charge of the arrangements of the lectures and discussions, have given the lectureship the sound basis of serious inquiry and careful scholarship on which it rests. I know of no lectureship which equals this one in the opportunities it offers an historian to transcend specialties, to set forth ideas and to discuss them at length with his professional peers. Through partially successful attempts to reconcile scholarly criticism with work of interest to the general public will depend the influence of the Wiles Trust upon the historical outlook of the generations to come—a matter of much moment to the founder.

The invitation to deliver the second series of these lectures and to publish them was one which I could not refuse in view of the development of my own interests. But I accepted with

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much hesitation, and I publish this historical essay with trepidation, because of the vastness of the undertaking and my continual sense of my own inadequate preparation. In the past fifteen years I have made several efforts to meet the mission to which, for want of a more adequate candidate, I seem to have been summoned. This effort in connexion with the Wiles Trust has interested me at least as much as any of the others. But, knowing a little how far short it falls of what it should be and could be, I can only hope that it will not be my last effort, and that readers and critics will be indulgent because of its provisional nature.

As it happened, the invitation to deliver the Wiles Lectures came shortly after I had received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation for research in connexion with a long work on the same subject. This financial support has been indispensable in preparing the present book, which is to be regarded as an attempt to break the ground for what I hope will be a more comprehensive history, going more deeply into the origins of industrial civilization, taking account of the influence upon it of the Near and Far East, and bringing the story of its rise and triumph down to the present.

To the members of the Wiles Trust, to Sir Eric and Lady Ashby and to Mr and Mrs Boyd in particular, I owe an immense debt of gratitude for their hospitality and kindness in Belfast and afterwards. And I am under great obligations to Professor Roberts and to the group of scholars who gave the time and made the effort to come to Belfast and to participate in the discussion, some of them old friends of mine: Professor Butterfield (who is now so closely linked to The Queen's University through the Wiles Trust), Professor Cobban, Professor Briggs, Dr Hugh Trevor-Roper, Dr H. G. Koenigsberger, Dr A. R. Hall, Dr T. Halliman and Mr E. Kerridge. These discussions, which are a special feature of this lectureship, are of the greatest value to the lecturer. Their value is increased by the participation of members of the Department of History, as well as of some members from the Depart-

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ments of Philosophy, Spanish, French, German, English and Economics, in The Queen's University of Belfast.

Outside Belfast, two friends—one old and one new—have come to my assistance this summer in reading the manuscript of this book with a generosity and a serious purpose which have helped me greatly and for which I am profoundly grateful. Mr André Siegfried, of the French Academy, has lent his moral support and his critical faculties to the undertaking as a whole. Mrs Russell Davenport has saved me from several serious errors in judgement. She has helped me in putting the subject of economic history in its proper perspective in relation to the more important matters treated in the book.

I am also grateful to Miss Nellie Kerling and to Mademoiselle Robinet for their invaluable help with material available in the English and French archives, and to Mademoiselle Georgette Houdebine for putting the final touches on the typescript here in Paris. My major obligation both for research and typing is to my secretary, Mrs R. Armour. Her accuracy, speed and initiative are beyond praise. I could never have got the book ready to meet the deadline which the end of summer represented without her continuous help during the past two years in Chicago.

The provisional character of this small book seems to forbid an attempt to supply elaborate references in the footnotes. Among the references given there is, I realize, disproportionately frequent mention of my own books and articles. My reasons for including so many of these citations are two. First, these lectures have grown largely out of material that has appeared in essays that I have published during the past twenty-five years. Consequently there seems no point in repeating here sources that are available already in footnotes printed as part of those essays. Secondly, it has occurred to me that an occasional reader of this present book might possibly wish to examine parts of the text of earlier scholarly efforts of mine, and that unless I cite chapter and verse he will have

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great difficulty in finding these, as my essays have appeared in widely scattered places and under varied auspices, some in England, some in the United States, some in France and in French, and one only in Italian, which alas *I* neither speak nor readily understand!

JOHN NEF

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NEF: *Cultural Foundations*, p. 1

## ERRATUM

I related the anecdote about Georges Bernanos on page 1 from memory, without having checked it with M. Maritain. He has read an advance copy of my book and he points out to me two things: first, as far as he knows, Bernanos never visited the headquarters of General Franco; second, the remark of a Spanish officer, ‘The greatest proof of fidelity to Christ is not to die for Him, but to kill for Him’, was often mentioned in France at the time but not as having been said directly to Bernanos.

J. U. N.