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Western History at a Glance: The Achievements of Western Civilization

Review Article: Jose Arcilla

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To see the book from another angle: for *Sexagesima Sunday*, there is a text from John Chrysostom on St. Paul (the liturgy alludes to Paul in the Collect and the epistle is a pauline text); a paragraph from Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (the beautiful passage towards the end of the book which begins, "When he woke up it was dawn" and which ends with the thought—from Peguy?—"... at the end there was only one thing that counted—to be a saint.") intended as a gloss on the Gospel text, "Even so, the last shall be first, and the first last"; a germane selection from Guardini's *The Living God*, on the longing for God; finally, a few lines from Cardinal Lercaro's remarkable Council address on Poverty: the great moments of renewal in the Church are moments "in which the spirit of poverty has been affirmed and lived to the most manifest degree."—For the feast of *St. Francis Xavier* there is an introductory paragraph on the saint's life, and a longish text from one of his best letters, describing his missionary efforts in India, revelatory of his missionary spirit. (For a second edition, Mr. Storey might perhaps consider adding a few lines from another letter, the passage which ends with the cry from the heart, "O my brothers, come!")

As for the question, How good a book is it? This is always difficult to answer, when one deals with books for prayer and meditation. So much in this type of reading depends on individual taste; and often enough, on the mood of the day or the moment. One does not easily prescribe this sort of fare for another. But these texts for reflective reading are the choice of widely-read and intelligent anthropologists, and one concurs with the citation from Fr. Robert Hovda (on the dust jacket) that this is a "sensitive and apt selection". If the two other volumes match the overall quality of the first one, there should be general agreement that *Days of the Lord* will prove a most useful anthology for the modern Catholic and that it should fulfill, for the moments of recollection of contemporary Christians (lay, clerical and religious) just what it set out to do.

One looks forward to volumes two and three with high expectations.

C. G. ARÉVALO, S.J.

WESTERN HISTORY AT A GLANCE

THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION: An Historical Outline. By Joan Thompson. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1964. vii, 287 pp.

Contrary to what one might perhaps expect from its title, *The Achievements of Western Civilization* is merely a manual of reference.

It correlates "parallel developments in different branches of human achievement . . . so that individuals can be put in their correct historical background . . ." (preface). It does not present a thesis, other than what the author implies in her choice of the "important" facts of twenty-five centuries of history. There is, of course, a nucleus of history traditionally accepted; but to compress in 287 pages the history of 2500 years is to invite criticism. The author is aware of this and she candidly admits some "personal discrimination" in her work.

Twelve chapters deal with twelve periods of history. But only the last five "periods" correspond to the last five centuries of history (the fifteenth to the nineteenth). A historical span of 1900 years (before 600 B.C.—1400 A.D.) is summed up in the first seven chapters (only 88 pages), while more than one half of the book is devoted to modern history (1500-1900 A.D.). Such an emphasis on modern history, in a book purporting to be a guide to western history, is open to question, at least to this reviewer.

Each chapter begins with a historical summary of the politico-economic factors of the period discussed. This is followed by sections on philosophy, art, literature, science, in which the barest essential information is presented. One may question this method of seemingly giving importance to politico-economic elements as the background of history. Is this perhaps a latent tendency to identify history with political developments?

The above remarks must not be taken as total disapproval of Miss Thompson's work. She has written a useful tool, especially for beginners in history. There is a select list of reading material at the end of the book, plus a synoptic chart for those who want their history at a glance. And, as the cover jacket of the book announces, reading the book "will do wonders" in filling in the lacunae in one's historical knowledge because of faulty reading or concentrating on limited periods of history.

JOSE ARCILLA