

## **GIFTED EDUCATION NEWS-PAGE**

**VOLUME 12, NUMBER 3**

**Published by GIFTED EDUCATION PRESS; 10201 YUMA COURT;  
P.O. BOX 1586; MANASSAS, VA 20108; 703-369-5017 www.giftededpress.com**

### **BOOK NEWS AND REVIEWS**

#### ***BOOKS FOR ADVANCED DIFFERENTIATION OF THE GIFTED CURRICULUM***

##### **Heroes of History: A Brief History of Civilization from Ancient Times to the Dawn of the Modern Age (2001) by Will Durant. Simon & Schuster. New York.**

Although this book was published 20 years after the author's death in 1981, it captures the enthusiasm and humanism embodied in this great historian's work. In twenty-two chapters, it covers the high points of Eastern and Western civilization that were previously explained in great detail by Will Durant and his wife, Ariel, in the massive eleven volume work, **The Story of Civilization** (1935-75). In this posthumous work, **Heroes of History**, the author's intent was to summarize the major points of his more extensive eleven volume series. Durant's focus was on what he called "The Country of the Mind," a mental state that identifies, classifies and analyzes the greatest leaders and thinkers of history.

By presenting history from ancient times through the Age of Elizabeth I in England (including the accomplishments of Sir Francis Bacon and Shakespeare), this book will challenge gifted students to study great individuals of various historical periods such as Plato, Socrates, Aurelius, Petrarch, and da Vinci. Through his clear and interesting writing style, Durant entices the reader to learn about the high points of civilization. Additionally, his historical optimism will encourage gifted students to delve into **The Story of Civilization** (1935-75) and his single volume gem, **The Story of Philosophy** (1926). Durant's positive perspective is reflected in the following statement from Chapter One (What Is Civilization?): ". . . I will not subscribe to the depressing conclusion of Voltaire and Gibbon that history is 'the record of the crimes and follies of mankind.' Of course it is partly that, and contains a hundred million tragedies – but it is also the saving sanity of the average family, the labor and love of men and women bearing the stream of life over a thousand obstacles. It is the wisdom and courage of statesmen like Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, the latter dying exhausted but fulfilled; it is the undiscourageable effort of scientists and philosophers to understand the universe that envelops them; it is the patience and skill of artists and poets giving lasting form to transient beauty, or an illuminating clarity to subtle significance; it is the vision of prophets and saints challenging us to nobility." (pp. 19-20).

##### **The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time by Will Durant (Compiled and Edited by John Little) (2002). Simon & Schuster. New York.**

Because of Durant's worldwide reputation as an outstanding historian, he was constantly invited to lecture and give interviews concerning different aspects of Western civilization. The editor, John Little, has combined these lectures and interviews into this fascinating book. Durant discusses in beautifully crafted prose his reasons for including particular individuals, ideas or events and for excluding others. In Chapter Two, The Ten "Greatest Thinkers," he explains that his primary criterion for including individuals is the enduring nature of their thought and the impact of their ideas upon the masses. He includes, for example, Confucius, Plato, Aristotle, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Sir Francis Bacon and Charles Darwin. He excludes many artists, writers, poets, politicians and religious leaders because their primary accomplishments were not in philosophy or science. ". . . We shall seek for those men who by their thinking, rather than by their action or their passion, have most influenced mankind. We shall search for them in the quiet places of the world, far from the madding crowd; in those obscure corners where great thoughts came to them 'as on dove's feet,' and where for a moment they saw, as in a transfiguration, the countenance of truth. Who shall be first?" (p. 11).

The interest and charm of Durant's book lies not in the candidates for greatness that he identifies, but rather in the stimulating and knowledgeable arguments he makes in each chapter. Other chapters are: The Ten "Greatest" Poets, The One Hundred "Best" Books for an Education, The Ten Peaks of Human Progress, and Twelve Vital Dates in World History. It offers gifted students the opportunity to read one of the best and most enthusiastic writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although they might disagree with his choices, they will receive a lesson in advanced differentiation that can stimulate their own search for individuals and events deserving admiration and emulation. In this regard, the editor, John Little says: "The philosophy that resonates from the pages of all of Durant's books, but most particularly in *The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time*, is unabashedly 'prohuman' and serves to underscore the splendor of our intellectual and artistic heritage. In fact, Durant was known as the 'gentle philosopher' and the 'radical saint,' as he always sought to report on the positive achievements in human events and history. In a sentence, Durant chose to illuminate with his pen the mountain peaks of greatness in our species' history." (Introduction, p. 3).

## **The Renaissance: A Short History (2000) by Paul Johnson. Modern Library. New York.**

This book is part of The Modern Library Chronicles Book Series that includes many other works by historians and politicians. Johnson is a noted British historian whose thousand page tomes have been well-received for many decades by British and American readers. This short book highlights the major accomplishments of the European Renaissance from the late 13<sup>th</sup> through 16<sup>th</sup> centuries by means of discussions of individuals who played major roles in literature and scholarship, sculpture, architecture, and painting. Johnson explains the economic, technological and political changes that gave rise to the Renaissance such as the stiff, padded horse collars and the iron plows which helped to improve agricultural yields, and the invention of cast iron water mills which increased food and industrial production. Other inventions that advanced Europe were paper and the printing press. Regarding economic growth during the Middle Ages, the author says, “. . .the background to what we call the Renaissance was a cumulative growth and spread of wealth never before experienced in world history and the rise of a society in which intermediate technology was becoming the norm, producing in due course a startling revolution in the way words were published and distributed. But this does not mean the Renaissance was an economic, let alone a technological, event. Without economic and technological developments it could not have taken the form it did, and so it has been necessary to describe the material background first. But it must be grasped that the Renaissance was primarily a human event, propelled forward by a number of individuals of outstanding talent, which in some cases amounted to genius. . . .” (The Historical and Economic Background, p. 21).

Among the geniuses Johnson discusses are Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch, Chaucer, Michelangelo, Brunelleschi and da Vinci. These writers, scholars and artists initially attempted to capture the lost ideas and art of Greek civilization, but they eventually produced their own creative works that went far beyond those of ancient Greece. As Johnson also points out, Renaissance writers were interested in developing the vernacular languages of their countries into the main sources of communication rather than using Latin. There is little doubt that gifted students will learn important information for advanced differentiation by reading this and Johnson’s other books, e.g., **The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815-1830** (1991).

## **The Experience of American History from Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King, Jr.** **by Michael E. Walters      Center for the Study of the Humanities in the Schools**

“We all declare for liberty but in using the same word we do not mean the same thing. With some the word ‘liberty’ may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself and the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men and the product of other men’s labor. Here are two, not only different, but incompatible things, called the same name, liberty. And it follows that each of the things is, by the respective parties, called by two different names – liberty and tyranny.” Abraham Lincoln, address to the Sanitary Fair in Baltimore, from **The Civil War: A History** (1961) by Harry Hansen.

This essay is being written on the national observance (January 20, 2003) that commemorates Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday. It is fitting that we meditate upon American history on this day. The Civil War was a cornerstone about the problem of race in the United States. As we can see from President Lincoln’s speech, one of the essential ingredients was the definition of liberty. President Lincoln had the ability to speak in precise, simple and eloquent language. For him the word liberty meant the right of every individual to be defined as a human being, not as an object to be owned and used for the benefit of others. President Lincoln’s definition was the main concept of Dr. King’s “I Have A Dream” speech (August 28, 1963). It is the character of an individual that defines one’s humanity, not the person’s race, religion or physical genotype.

Gifted students should not just read history. They must experience it by reflection concerning what the facts mean as related to their own self-awareness. There is a wonderful paperback, **The Civil War: A History** (1961, Signet Classics), by Harry Hansen who was a unique and gifted individual. His academic training was in philosophy but his profession was journalism. During World War I, he was a war correspondent. He wrote for several newspapers as a literary editor, and he was editor of **The World Almanac** during his last years. He had the ability to be both reportorial and philosophical.

Hansen’s book describes the national debate that was pulsating throughout the United States over the issue of slavery. There is definitely a continuity between Lincoln’s words and those spoken approximately one-hundred years later by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Hansen constantly brought to the reader’s sensibility a range of facts to meditate upon. For example, in a chapter concerning the United States’ seizure of Confederate foreign commissioners, he discusses the background of the individuals involved in this situation. One of the commissioners was James M. Mason of Virginia. He was the grandson of George Mason, the Revolutionary War patriot who was an avid abolitionist and one of the main author’s of the Bill of Rights. The captain of the American ship that seized the commissioners was Charles Wilkes, a navigator and explorer of Antarctica. This book illustrates the concept of history as expressed by the Greek historian, Thucydides (– 400 BC). He described history as philosophy demonstrated by living examples. This is indeed the type of meditation on history that should occur among gifted students. Harry Hansen’s book would be an excellent literary experience for them.