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Realizing The Dream! – Give us a student, we give back a Bureaucrat
Twelve Vital Dates in World History

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THE IDEA OF CREATING a list of twelve vital dates in history came to me at Manila as I was preparing to set sail across the Pacific to America. It came at an appropriate moment, for it found me struggling with the problem of dates in working on the first volume of *The Story of Civilization*.

It was already quite clear to me that the inclusion of dates in the text would make the story as accurate and dull as a good encyclopedia; that the transformation of dead data into living narrative would require some other disposition of dates than one that would infest with them every page of the tale. The arrangement arrived at, after much pseudopodial trial and error, was to confine all dates to the margin and the notes. Perhaps some such plan would alleviate the pain inflicted by some of the textbooks of history used in our colleges and schools.

I had occasion, some years back, to examine the texts employed in certain institutions of lower learning in my neighborhood. The geography, which might have been made one of the most fascinating studies of all, was especially abominable; a mere massing of dead information, much of it made false or worthless by the war, much of it restricted to the superficial features of a nation's life, much of it made ridiculous by provincial prejudice against the Orient. But the textbook of history—Bear and Bagley's *History of the American People*—was intelligently and intelligibly written, recording the progress of civilization, as well as the logic-chopping vicissitudes of politics, and presenting its sound scholarship with pleasing artistry. It is a splendid volume.

In many high schools I have found, as the standard historical text of world history, Breasted's *Ancient Times*, which I regard as the finest schoolbook in America, and along with it, only slightly inferior to it, the books of Robinson and Beard on modern European history. In these volumes there is no excessive use of dates, and if we are to agree that dates have been overdone, we shall have to acknowledge, also, that some of our texts have avoided this fault, and many of them represent a great improvement on the class books of our younger days.

I should hardly be content to have my pupils know only twelve dates, and I presume that the choice of this baker's number would not suggest an optimum, but rather a minimum—dates, let us say, that every baker should know. How many dates a man should carry with him will depend, of course, on his functions and purposes. A farmer might do his job very well, and bring up a fine family, with no other date in his head than that of the next state fair, but a man condemned to the intellectual life, precluded from the deepening contacts of experiment and action, ought to have sufficient knowledge of man's chronology to give him, as some poor substitute for wide personal experience, that historical perspective which is one road to philosophy and understanding.

Such a man should be able to name the century (though not necessarily the precise dates) of world-transforming inventions and discoveries like gunpowder, printing, the steam engine, electricity, and the discovery of America. He should know the centuries of the world's greatest statesmen—say Hammurabi, Moses, Darius I, Solon, Pericles, Alexander, Caesar, Charles V, Louis XIV, Peter the Great, Frederick the Great, Henry VIII, Elizabeth, Disraeli, Gladstone, Bismarck, Cavour, Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, and Lincoln; of the world's greatest scientists and philosophers—say Confucius, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Copernicus, Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, Spinoza, Voltaire, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Darwin; of the world's greatest



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saints—say Iknaton, Lao-tzu, Isaiah, Buddha, Christ, Marcus Aurelius, Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Loyola, Luther, and Gandhi.

This man of intellectual interests should also know the centuries of the world's greatest poets—say Homer, the Psalmist, Euripides, Virgil, Horace, Lipo, Dan unite, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Pushkin, Keats, Byron, Shelley, Hugo, Poe, Whitman, and Tagore; of the world's greatest makers of music—say Palestrina, Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Paganini, Brahms, Tschaikowsky, Verdi, Wagner, Paderewski, and Stravinsky; and of the world's greatest artists or works of art—say Karnak and Luxor and the Pyramids, Pheidias and Praxiteles, Wu Tao-tzu and Sesshiu and Hiroshige, Chartres and the Taj Mahal, Giotto and Dürer, Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo, Titian and Correggio, El Greco and Velázquez, Rubens, Rembrandt, and Van Dyck, Reynolds and Gainsborough, Turner and Whistler, Millet and Cezanne.

I have left out the great prose writers, lest this chapter should read like a telephone directory, or a list of radical export-tees, or a register of "dirty foreigners." The reader help me by making here his own pantheon. Let him then examine his friends and himself on the centuries and work of these men (perhaps we should also add a list of great women, from Queen Hatshepsut to Madame Curie), and so rate them and himself with a new Binet-Simon test.

If, however, one is condemned to live on a mental desert island, and can take only twelve dates with him, these dates should presumably be such as to carry in their implications the essential history of mankind. About them should cluster such associations that on their docket the greater achievements of the human mind would string themselves in a concatenation of development, in an order and perspective that would clarify old knowledge and facilitate the new. Since history is varied, and all aspects of human activity in any age are bound up with the rest, many such chains of pivotal events might be composed. What follows, then, are not the twelve world dates; they are merely twelve.

1. 4241 B.C.—THE INTRODUCTION OF THE EGYPTIAN CALENDAR This date alone, the earliest definite date in history, is sufficient to cause some disturbance to fiercely orthodox souls who believe, as did Bishop Ussher, that the world was created in 4004 B.C. To accept the testimony of Egyptologists that a calendar existed on the Lower Nile 237 years before the creation of the world might serve as a fertilizing shock to any virgin mind.

The implications of that calendar are endless. Consider the development of astronomy and mathematics that must have preceded its formulation. Consider how long even then a civilization must have endured to set aside from the economic life men with leisure enough to chart the stars and capture the course of the sun. It was a very sensible calendar compared with ours: it divided the year into twelve months of thirty days each, with five intercalary days at the end for roistering. And it stands in the memory for all Egypt, for three thousand years of recorded civilization, with orderly government, security of life and property, comforts for the body, delights for the senses, and instruction for the mind. It stands for Cheops, who built the greatest of the pyramids; and Thutmose III, who built Karnak; and Iknaton, who literally sold his kingdom for a song (arousing revolution by writing a monotheistic hymn); and Cleopatra, who led Antony to ruin by the nose—if one may speak so metonymically.

2. 543 B.C.—THE DEATH OF BUDDHA No other soul, I suppose, has ever been so influential. It is not so much that several hundred million men and women profess the Buddhist

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religion today; in truth, Buddhism does not follow Buddha, but is a mass of legends and superstitions that have no more right to use his name than the ferocious Christianity of Calvin or Torquemada or Tennessee has to use the name of Christ. But Buddha means India, for the spirit of India lies in religion rather than in science, in contemplation rather than in action, in a fraternal gentleness rather than in the application of mathematics to artillery, or of chemistry to bombs.

Life, said Buddha, is full of suffering; it can be made bearable only by doing no injury to any living thing, and speaking no evil of any man—or woman either. Let us hope that that simple religion is what lies behind the infinite superstitions of the Hindu mind today, and let us take the date of Buddha as the beginning of a civilization that has known every vicissitude, every injustice, every slavery, and yet in the midst of it has produced geniuses and saints from Buddha and Asoka to Gandhi and Tagore.

3. 478 B.C.—THE DEATH OF CONFUCIUS We must have some symbol to represent China for us—China, so gigantic in size that it calls itself “All Under Heaven,” and so old that it records the doings of its kings for the last four thousand years.

I envy those Chinese schoolboys who were made to memorize every word of Confucius. I have found every line profound and applicable, and sometimes I think that if these maxims had sunk into my memory for twenty years, I might have in me a little of the poise of soul, the simple dignity, the quiet understanding, the depth of character, the infinite courtesy that I have found in the educated Chinese everywhere. Never has one man so written his name upon the face and spirit of a people as Confucius has done in China. Let us take him again as a symbol and a suggestion: behind him are the delicate lyrics of the Tang Dynasty’s poets, the mystic landscapes of the Chinese painters, the perfect vases of the Chinese potters, the secular and terrestrial wisdom of the Chinese philosophers; perhaps the greatest of all historic civilizations is summed up in his name.

4. 399 B.C.—THE DEATH OF SOCRATES When this man passed, drunk with hemlock, also passed the most astonishing picture in ancient history—the Age of Pericles. But this time I am not thinking of philosophy. Behind Socrates I see his friend and lover, Alcibiades, and the destructive tragedy of the Peloponnesian War. I see Aspasia, the learned courtesan, at whose feet the old Gadfly sat with Pericles. I see Pericles gathering rich men around him and persuading them to finance the Athenian drama. I see Euripides contending with Sophocles for the dramatic prize in the Theater of Dionysius. I see Ictinus in slow thought molding the columns of the Parthenon, and Pheidias carving the gods and heroes of its frieze. I see young Plato winning the prize at the Panathenaean games. I want some stopping-point in history that shall bring to my memory a few of the thousand facets of this brave and varied age, when for the first time a whole civilization liberated itself from superstition, and created science, drama, democracy, and liberty, and passed on to Rome and Europe half of our intellectual and aesthetic heritage.

5. 44 B.C.—THE DEATH OF CAESAR A few years before the death of Georg Brandes, the Danish critic who helped the French Taine to make the British understand English literature, an American student visited him and found him in a very somber mood. “Why are you sad?” the visitor asked. “Don’t you know,” answered Brandes, “that this is the anniversary of the greatest blunder in history—the assassination of Caesar?”

The old critic might have found blunders nearer home, like the defeat of Napoleon at

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Waterloo, and perhaps he exaggerated a little the importance of Brutus' sottise. For in a sense it is not Caesar whom we wish to remember; it is the succession of developments that followed upon his death: the reconstruction of Roman law and order by the statesmanlike Augustus on the basis and lines of Caesar's preliminary work, the flourishing of arts and letters under the extension of the Pax Romana to Rome, the poetry of Virgil and Horace, the prose of Pliny and Tacitus, the philosophy of Epictetus and Aurelius, the beneficent rule of Hadrian and Antoninus, the beautification of the Forum and the capital with architecture and statuary, the building of those roads, and the revision and codification of those laws, which were to be Rome's essential legacy to the modern world. As the death of Socrates may be used to sum up the Periclean Age of Athens, so the death of Caesar stands as the door to the Golden Age of Rome.

6. B.C.—THE BIRTH OF CHRIST This date the reader may place ad lib., since no man knows it. For us it is the most important date of all, because it divides all history in the West, gives us our greatest hero and model, provides us with that body of myth and legend which is now passing from the theological to the literary stage, and marks the beginning of that Christian age which seems today to be approaching its close. After us the deluge; God knows what a mess of occult faiths will in the present century replace the tender and cruel theologies that praised and dishonored Christ.

7. A.D. 632—THE DEATH OF MOHAMMED It was in this year, so designated by us infidels but known to the Mohammedans as A.H. 10 (the tenth year after the Hegira), that Mohammed left this earth, after founding the faith that was to overrun and dominate for centuries all northern Africa from Cairo to Morocco, southern Europe in Turkey and Spain, and half of Asia from Jerusalem and Bagdad to Teheran and Delhi. Even Christianity cannot boast of so many wars waged in its name, or so many heathen killed.

With this trifling exception, it was a noble religion, sternly monotheistic, rejecting images and priests and the polytheism of saints, building strong characters with the doctrine of fatalism and the discipline of war, raising great universities and cultures at Cordova, Granada, Cairo, Bagdad, and Delhi, giving the world one of its greatest rulers—Akbar of India—and ennobling Spain, Egypt, Constantinople, Palestine, and India with gracious architecture from the Alhambra to the Taj Mahal. Today, despite their political dismemberment, they are still growing in numbers and strength; in India and China they are making converts every hour of every day. There is no surety that the future is not theirs.

8. 1294—THE DEATH OF ROGER BACON This date is almost as good as any other to mark the first use of gunpowder, for the rebellious English monk who died in this year may be held partly responsible for its invention. It was Roger Bacon who first definitely described the explosive that would revolutionize the world and offer to all pious statesmen a substitute for birth control. "One may cause to burst forth from bronze," he wrote, "thunderbolts more formidable than those produced by nature. A small quantity of prepared matter occasions a terrible explosion accompanied by brilliant light. One may multiply the phenomena so far as to destroy an army or a city."

Very likely. It was gunpowder that gave to the rising bourgeoisie of late medieval Europe the means of overthrowing the feudal baron by bombarding from a distance his once impregnable castle. It was gunpowder that made the infantry as important as the cavalry, and gave the common man a new prestige in war and a new power in revolutions. It was

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gunpowder that turned war from a gentleman's game, occasionally fatal, to a form of standardized mass destruction, a mode of removing from the earth, with a few minutes' bombardment, the work of a hundred thousand artists' hands laboring for three centuries. Perhaps this is the most important date in the story of the fall of man; though some cynic might argue that a still more tragic event was the invention of thinking, the liberation of intellect from instinct, the consequent separation of sex from reproduction, and the abandonment of the perpetuation of the race to the selected morons of every land.

9. 1454—THE PRESS OF JOHANNES GUTENBERG (AT MAINZ ON THE RHINE) ISSUES THE FIRST PRINTED DOCUMENTS BEARING A PRINTED DATE The Germans had used printing from movable types for some fourteen years before; the Chinese had done such printing as far back as A.D. 1041; and in 1900 a block-printed book was discovered in China which had been published in 868. Nothing is new in China, democracy least of all. They invented gunpowder and used it chiefly for fireworks. They invented printing and never used it for tabloid newspapers, crime club fiction, or Freudian biographies.

In Western civilization, printing helped money and muskets to liberate the middle class and put an end to the rule of the knights and the priests. It enabled the people to read the Bible, and so engendered the Reformation. It immensely widened the circle to which a writer might address his ideas. And by transferring the making of books from monks to printers' devils, and the patronage of books from the aristocracy and the church to the commonalty and the laity, it made possible the propaganda and development of democracy and free thought.

Napoleon remarked that the Bourbons might have preserved themselves, and prevented the French Revolution, by maintaining a governmental monopoly of ink. Our empowered middle class has profited by the example and has made literacy an impediment to the acquisition of truth. One hardly knows, today, whether printing does more harm than good, or whether the growth of knowledge and learning has not weakened character as much as it has stocked the mind—but let us try it a little further!

10. 1492—COLUMBUS DISCOVERS AMERICA When Columbus discovered us, he put an end to the Italian Renaissance by changing trade routes from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, and bringing wealth and power first to Spain, making possible Velázquez and Cervantes, Murillo and Calderon; then to England, financing Shakespeare, Milton, Bacon, and Hobbes; then to the Netherlands, producing Rembrandt and Spinoza, Rubens and Van Dyck, Hobbema and Vermeer; and then to France, generating Rabelais and Montaigne, Poussin and Claude Lorraine. When, in 1564, Michelangelo died and Shakespeare was born, it was a sign that the Renaissance had died in Italy and been reborn in England. The discovery of America cooperated with the Reformation, and the diminution of Peter's pence, in ending for a time the role of Italy in history.

Later the development of the New World opened up a vast market for European goods and a vast area for Europe's surplus population. This is the secret of Europe's rapid growth in wealth and power, and its conquest of Africa and Asia and Australia. And all the history of America, with its experiments in popular sovereignty and popular education (would that the order had been reversed), lay potential in that magnificent adventure of 1492.

11. 1769—JAMES Watt BRINGS THE STEAM ENGINE TO PRACTICAL UTILITY This event inaugurated the Industrial Revolution. Hero of Alexandria made a steam engine in 130 B.C.; Della Porta, Savery, and Newcomen had made better ones in 1601, 1698, and 1705;

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but it was Watt's stone that capped the arch and changed the world.

Essentially there are only two fundamental and pivotal events in human history: the Agricultural Revolution, in which men passed from hunting to tillage and settled down to build homes, schools, and civilization; and the Industrial Revolution, which threw millions and millions of men, first in England, then in America and Germany, then in Italy and France, then in far away Japan, now in China, the Soviet Union, and India, out of their homes and their farms into cities and factories. It transformed society and government by empowering the owners of machinery and the controllers of commerce beyond the owners of titles and land. It transformed religion by generating science and its persuasive miracles and inducing many men to think in terms of cause and effect and machines. It transformed the mind by substituting novel and varied stimuli, necessitating thought, for the old ancestral and domestic situations to which instinct had been adapted and sufficient. It transformed woman by taking her work from the home and forcing her into the factories to recapture it. It transformed morals by complicating economic life, postponing marriage, multiplying contacts and opportunities, liberating woman, reducing the family, and weakening religious and parental authority and control. And it transformed art by subordinating beauty to use, and subjecting the artist, not to a favored few with inherited standards of judgment and trained tastes, but to a multitude who judged all things in terms of power and cost and size. All this, incredible as it may seem, is in that single invention of James Watt. All this and more—Capitalism, Socialism, the Imperialism that must come when industrialized nations need foreign markets and foreign food, the wars that must come for these markets, and the revolutions that must come from these wars. Even the Great War, and the vast experiment in Russia, were corollaries of the Industrial Revolution. Seventeen-sixty-nine stands for the whole modern age.

12. 1789—THE FRENCH REVOLUTION The French Revolution must be taken not as a single self-contained event, but as the political signature to economic and psychological facts that had accumulated for centuries. Perhaps it began in 1543, when Copernicus published his book *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Orbs*; for then began the twilight of the gods and the liberation of man. Cast here upon this petty earth, no longer the center of things but an incident, forced to realize that humanity is an interlude in biology, biology an interlude in geology (as any earthquake will remind us), and geology an interlude in astronomy, man was left to shift and think for himself. Thought became free and boundless and fought its way out of superstition and ecclesiasticism to the time when a whole age would be named after a writer, and Voltaire might say, "I have no scepter, but I have a pen."