

= A Short History of Progress =

A Short History of Progress is a non @-@ fiction book and lecture series by Ronald Wright about societal collapse . The lectures were delivered as a series of five speeches , each taking place in different cities across Canada as part of the 2004 Massey Lectures which were broadcast on the CBC Radio program , Ideas . The book version was published by House of Anansi Press and released at the same time as the lectures . The book spent more than a year on Canadian best @-@ seller lists , won the Canadian Book Association 's Libris Award for Non @-@ Fiction Book of the Year , and was nominated for the British Columbia 's National Award for Canadian Non @-@ Fiction . It has since been reprinted in a hardcover format with illustrations .

Wright , an author of fiction and non @-@ fiction works , uses the fallen civilisations of Easter Island , Sumer , Rome , and Maya , as well as examples from the Stone Age , to see what conditions led to the downfall of those societies . He examines the meaning of progress and its implications for civilizations ? past and present ? arguing that the twentieth century was a time of runaway growth in human population , consumption , and technology that has now placed an unsustainable burden on all natural systems .

In his analysis of the four cases of fallen civilizations , he notes that two (Easter Island and Sumer) failed due to depletion of natural resources ? " their ecologies were unable to regenerate . " The other two failed in their heartlands , " where ecological demand was highest , " but left remnant populations that survived . He asks the question : " Why , if civilizations so often destroy themselves , has the overall experiment of civilization done so well . " For the answer , he says , we must look to natural regeneration and human migration (Wright , 102) . While some ancient civilizations were depleting their ecologies and failing , others were rising . Large expanses of the planet were unsettled . The other factor , evident in both Egypt and China , was that due to abundant resources (e.g. , topsoil) , farming methods (ones that worked with , rather than against , natural cycles) , and settlement patterns , these civilizations had greater longevity (103 @-@ 104) .

Changes brought on by the exponential growth of human population (at the time of the book 's publication , over 6 billion and adding more than 200 million people every three years) and the worldwide scale of resource consumption , have altered the picture , however . Ecological markers indicate that human civilization has now surpassed (since the 1980s) nature 's capacity for regeneration . We are now using more than 125 % of nature 's yearly output . " If civilization is to survive , it must live on the interest , not the capital of nature " (129) . He concludes that " now is our chance to get the future right " ? the collapse of human civilization is imminent if we do not act now to prevent it (132) .

= = Background = =

Prior to being selected to deliver the Massey Lectures , Wright had written award @-@ winning fiction and non @-@ fiction books that deal with anthropology and civilizations . His 1992 non @-@ fiction book Stolen Continents : The " New World " Through Indian Eyes was awarded the 1993 Gordon Montador Award from the Writers ' Trust of Canada and his 1998 novel A Scientific Romance , about a museum curator who travels into the future and investigates the fate of the human race , won the David Higham Prize for Fiction for first @-@ time novelists . Wright traces the origins of the ideas behind A Short History of Progress to the material he studied while writing A Scientific Romance and his 2000 essay for The Globe and Mail titled " Civilization is a Pyramid Scheme " about the fall of the ninth @-@ century Mayan civilisation .

= = Synopsis = =

The first chapter , " Gauguin 's Questions " , poses the questions that provide a framework for the book . Referring to Paul Gauguin 's painting of the same name the questions are : Where do we come from ? What are we ? Where are we going ? Wright defines progress using the Victorian terms " the assumption that a pattern of change exists in the history of mankind ... that it consists of

irreversible changes in one direction only , and that this direction is towards improvement " . Despite the extended time span of the Stone Age , Wright places the first sign of progress as being the ability to create fire . The competition between Cro-Magnon and Neanderthals is examined with respect to the conditions that allowed one to out-compete the other .

The second chapter , " The Great Experiment " , continues the examination of Stone Age progress by looking at the advancements in hunting . Wright uses the term " progress trap " to refer to innovations that create new problems for which the society is unable or unwilling to solve , or inadvertently create conditions that are worse than what existed before the innovation . For example , innovations in hunting during the Stone Age allowed for more successful hunts and consequently more free time during which culture and art were created (e.g. cave paintings , bone carvings , etc .) , but also led to extinctions , most notably of megafauna . As smaller and smaller game were hunted to replace larger extinct animals , the hunts became less successful and culture declined . Agriculture , and subsequently civilisations , independently arising in multiple regions at about the same time , ~ 10,000 years ago , indicates to Wright that " given certain broad conditions , human societies everywhere will move towards greater size , complexity and environmental demand " . The chapter title refers to the human experience which Wright sees as a large experiment testing what conditions are required for a human civilisation to succeed .

In the third chapter , " Fools ' Paradise " , the rise and fall of two civilisations are examined : Easter Island and Sumer . Both flourished , but collapsed as a result of resource depletion ; both were able to visually see their land being eroded but were unwilling to reform . On Easter Island logging , in order to erect statues and build boats , destroyed their ecosystem and led to wars over the last planks of wood on the island . In Sumer , a large irrigation system , as well as over-grazing , land clearing , and lime-burning led to desertification and soil salination .

In the fourth chapter , " Pyramid Schemes " , the fates of the Roman and Mayan civilisations are compared ; both peaked with centralised empires but ended with power being diffused to their periphery as the center collapsed and ultra-conservative leadership refused reforms . Anthropologist Joseph Tainter 's explanation for the fall of the Roman Empire is invoked , that " complex systems inevitably succumb to diminishing returns " so that the costs of operating an empire are so high that alternatives are implemented . Two examples of civilisations that have been sustainable are described : China and Egypt . Both had an abundance of resources , particularly topsoil , and used farming methods that worked with , rather than against , natural cycles , and settlement patterns that did not exceed , or permanently damage , the carrying capacity of the local environment .

The final chapter , " The Rebellion of the Tools " , seeks to answer the final Gauguin question , ' where are we going ? ' , by applying these past examples to modern society . Technological advancements in bio-engineering , nanotechnology , cybernetics , amongst others , have the potential to be progress traps , and the global scale of modern society means that a societal collapse could impact all of mankind . Wright sees needed reforms being blocked by vested interests who reject multi-lateral organisations , and support laissez-faire economics and transfers of power to corporations as leading to the social and environmental degradations that led to the collapse of previous civilisations . Necessary reforms are , in Wright 's view , being blocked by vested interests who are hostile to change , including American market extremists . Wright concludes that " our present behaviour is typical of failed societies at the zenith of their greed and arrogance " and calls for a shift towards long-term thinking :

= = Style = =

The contents of the book were originally written and delivered as a set of five speeches for the 2004 Massey Lectures ; each speech is presented in the book as one chapter . The writing reflects Wright oration style with the use of high rhetoric . Patrick Parrinder notes that Wright sometimes uses " the rhetorical armoury of a rationalistic lay preacher . " Wright takes a broad , philosophical approach , not focusing on individual people or specific politics or religions , but rather focusing on civilisations including ' the elites and the masses ' . Wright 's tone was described as " rarely depressing ... [and

that] he remains surprisingly upbeat and even entertaining . " The use of the word progress is intended to be ironic : what is viewed as technological or social advancement have , in the historical narratives he provides , led to the fall of civilizations . Wright coins the term " progress trap " to describe the phenomenon of turning " cleverness into recklessness . "

Comparisons have been made between this book and Jared Diamond 's *Collapse : How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* which both cover similar subject matter with " a cautious problem @-@ solving approach " and come to similar conclusions . Writing in *Alternatives Journal* , philosophy professor Kent Peacock notes that " both are well @-@ written " but that Diamond includes examples of societies which had achieved sustainability for centuries , whereas Wright has " a stronger grasp of the dark side of human nature " , like impatience , aggressiveness , and obstinacy . Author and journalist Brian Brett described *Collapse* as " a slow , rich feast " while " the compact *A Short History of Progress* is an arrow loosed from a powerful bow , a lyric dart into the heart of human behaviour . "

= = Publication and reception = =

The book , published by House of Anansi Press , was released at the same time the Massey Lectures were being delivered . In early November 2004 , one lecture was given by Wright in each of the following cities : Ottawa , Edmonton , Saskatoon , Halifax and Toronto . Their recording was broadcast on CBC Radio 's *Ideas* during the week of November 22 . The book was named the Canadian Booksellers Association 's 2005 Non @-@ Fiction Book of the Year at their annual Libris Awards and short @-@ listed for the first annual British Columbia Award for Canadian Non @-@ Fiction . A hardcover edition title *An Illustrated Short History of Progress* was released with a print run of 15 @, @ 000 copies in 2006 .

In *The Globe and Mail* , Canadian author Paul William Roberts praised the book , calling it " ... the most important use of printed word and post @-@ consumer recycled fibres I have seen since Jérôme Deshusses 's *Délivrez Prométhée* , 25 years ago . " Roberts explains , " [Wright] has such a firm grasp of his goal that scarcely a word is extraneous ... You feel you 've read volumes , though , not just because of the density of Wright 's thoughts , but due to the crushing weight of the burden they carry . In prose that is balefully evocative and irreducibly precise ... " On the other hand , in the *National Post* review , Peter Foster gave a negative review , chiding Wright for " not having the slightest clue about how economies work , or how , by their fundamental nature , markets are both moral and sustainable . " Foster ended his review by insulting Wright 's intellect , " What really needs some psychological excavation is Ronald Wright 's mind , which carries a set of inflated , emotionally based moralistic assumptions derived from the structure of his primitive ignorance about markets and economics . "

Other reviews were encouraging . In *Maclean 's* magazine Brian Bethune wrote it was " an elegant and learned discussion " on the topic . The review in *The Times* said it was " an eminently readable account ... written with an incredible lightness of touch that belies the very serious issues . " In the *Montreal Gazette* , Bryan Demchinsky called Wright eloquent and the book " a brief , trenchant essay . " Diane Barlee in *Skeptic* magazine , said Wright is a " remarkably gifted wordsmith whose talent makes turgid facts not only digestible , but also generates a hunger for more " and commented " *A Short History of Progress* is an important , well @-@ crafted book , however , I can 't promise that it will change your life . "

= = Film = =

The film rights were sold to Cinémaginaire in 2008 . It was filmed as a documentary , *Surviving Progress* directed by Mathieu Roy and co @-@ directed by Harold Crooks with Daniel Louis and Denise Robert as producers for Cinémaginaire and Gerry Flahive as producer for NFB . Martin Scorsese was attached to the project as executive producer as were Mark Achbar and Betsy Carson (Big Picture Media Corporation) and Silva Basmajian (NFB) . The film premiered at the 2011 Toronto International Film Festival . It was also shown as part of Festival Atmospheres on 31 March

2012 in Paris France .

While the book focused on ancient civilizations , the majority of the film addresses environmental impacts of our current ' global civilization ' , including the impact of concentrating wealth in the hands of the ' financial class ' . It is filmed as a mixture of interviews with individuals , from Wright himself to Jane Goodall and Margaret Atwood , interspersed with striking footage from all over the world . Mathieu Roy and Harold Crooks gave an interview in early 2012 on the challenges of adapting Ronald Wright 's book into a succinct film .