

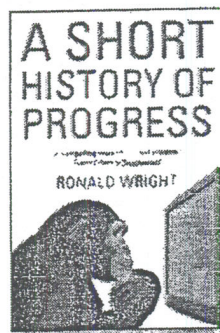
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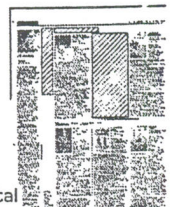
**A SHORT HISTORY
 OF PROGRESS**
 by Ronald Wright
 Canongate, £7.99
 £7.59 (free p&p)

Eschatology is an ancient art. Since the beginning of time, people such as Nostradamus have predicted the end. In books and lectures, writers such as Jared

Diamond, for example, have been pointing out for years that the ecology of the planet is near collapse. "Climate change" is now a phrase on many lips. Can we do enough quickly enough to stop, or even reverse, the damage?

This short book is a welcome contribution to the debate and a further call to action. We have heard it before, but we need to hear it again and again. "Civilisations often fall quite suddenly," Wright writes, "because as they reach full demand on their ecologies they become highly vulnerable to natural fluctuations." Wright's background as a historian and archaeologist equips him to prove his point. He ranges from Easter Island to the Incas as he shows that we need to apply the lessons of the past to the present.

He is right to point out that human progress is accelerating: three million years from the first chipped flints to the first smelted iron, but only 3,000 years from that to the atom bomb. So the theory is good. The practice? His book repackages a series of lectures that Wright gave in his native Canada. That shows on the page in the over-use of metaphor and alliteration. It also shows in the simplistic condemnation of "the conceit of laissez faire economics". China is liberalising, and so will even Cuba soon. So yes, capitalism will kill us. What won't?





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PAPERBACKS

A SHORT HISTORY OF PROGRESS



A Short History Of Progress by Ronald Wright. Canongate, £7.99

WHERE do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? The questions that form the name of Gauguin's mural also structure Ronald Wright's unsettling history of civilisation. The Victorians regarded progress in itself as good, and it has since become practically a secular religion. But it

comes at a price, and that price is self-destruction. At periodic intervals, madness has afflicted civilisations. Overpopulation and over-exploitation of resources leading to eco-catastrophes have weakened societies. Delusions that the gods will step in at the last moment to save the faithful prevented the same people from saving themselves. Consider Easter Island, where the natives deforested and thus destroyed their island in order to create statues honouring their gods. As Wright puts it: "The people who felled the last tree could see it was the last, could know with complete certainty that there would never be another. And they felled it anyway." Wright reveals an unsuccessfully hushed up Pentagon report predicting worldwide famine and anarchy within a generation or so, for reasons Easter Islanders would recognise.





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QUICK REVIEWS PAPERBACKS

A SHORT HISTORY OF PROGRESS

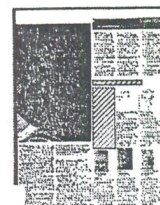


A Short History of Progress

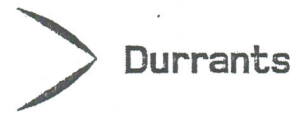
Ronald Wright

Canongate, £7.99

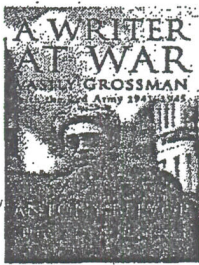
Historian Wright argues that the invention of gunpowder ensured a sumptuous spectacle at Chinese festivals but eventually blitzed a path to the atom bomb, while agriculture allowed tribes to feed themselves consistently but the resultant population explosion resulted in the rape of our planet. Written with exhilarating elan, Wright's polemic unfortunately won't be in most consumers' overloaded trolleys. It ought to be.



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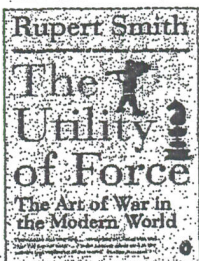
Paperbacks Non-fiction



A Writer at War: Vasily Grossman with the Red Army 1941-1945, edited and translated by Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova (Pimlico, £8.99)

The manuscript of Grossman's masterpiece *Life and Fate* was confiscated by the KGB and he died in 1964 believing it lost for ever. Fortunately a copy was smuggled out of the Soviet Union and published to worldwide acclaim. It has been called the greatest Russian novel of the 20th century. When the Wehrmacht invaded the USSR in June 1941 Grossman joined the Red Army as a war correspondent and began keeping secret notebooks, which later provided raw material for *Life and Fate*. They are devastatingly honest about the army's lack of preparation, but also passionate in their sympathy for soldiers and civilians alike. It is difficult to overpraise this skilfully assembled collection of his wartime notebooks, articles and letters. His report "The Killing of Jews in Berdichev" was censored by the Soviet authorities (he was Jewish, and his mother died there when the Germans invaded), but his harrowing article "The Hell Called Treblinka" was used in evidence at Nuremberg. Why write about such horrible things? "It is the writer's duty to tell this terrible truth, and it is the civilian duty of the reader to learn it."

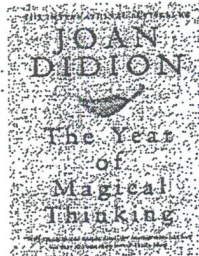
Ian Pindar



The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World, by Rupert Smith (Penguin, £9.99)

"War no longer exists," declares Sir Rupert Smith at the outset of this history of warfare. He means "industrial war", when nation states resolved their differences on secluded battlefields using military force. What we have today is "war among the people": the battlefield is everywhere, there are no obvi-

ous targets and no clear-cut strategic goals – and the media are always watching. The "rhizomatic command system" of modern guerrilla and terrorist networks is almost impossible to uproot, says Smith, so no decisive military victory is likely. The military is ill-equipped to win "hearts and minds" (Iraq being a prime example) and what we need is nothing less than "a revolution in our thinking". That's no small task, but as Smith commanded the UK Armoured Division in the Gulf war (1990-91) and UN forces in Bosnia (1995), and was GOC Northern Ireland (1996-99) before serving as Deputy Supreme Allied Commander in Nato, his thoughts on modern warfare deserve close consideration. This book reads like a long memo to the political powers that might be summed up as: stop relying on military might and start using your heads. IP



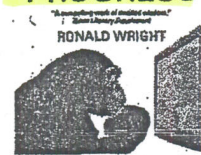
The Year of Magical Thinking, by Joan Didion (Harper Perennial, £7.99)

Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne shared the same working space – their various homes in California and New York – for all but five months of their 40-year marriage. "There was nothing I did not discuss with John," Didion states. At the end of 2003, Dunne died at their dinner table from a heart attack. *The Year of Magical Thinking* is Didion's journal of how she managed to cope with her grief in the following year. Her distress is both compounded and helped by the miserable coincidence of their newly married and only daughter, Quintana, spending long periods in intensive care. Didion's evasive mental habits flutter away from raw confrontation with John's absence into more or less secure memories, which gradually reveal the emotional depth and mutual reliance of their intellectual partnership. As a writer, Didion's inherent professionalism forces her to shrink from mawkishness and self-pity, making this austere and very moving memoir of her own

fragile recovery partly a meditation on the psychological hazards of mourning and partly a hymn of love to John Gregory Dunne.
James Urquhart

A SHORT HISTORY OF PROGRESS

A Short History of Progress, by Ronald Wright (Canongate, £7.99)



Ronald Wright's previous interest in fictional dystopias gathers urgency in this alarming treatise on mankind's record of reckless consumption leading directly to the collapse of civilisation. *A Short History of Progress* explores four examples: the Roman, Mayan, Sumerian and Easter Island civilisations, which last offers a microcosm of our contemporary rapacious exhaustion of the planet's "natural capital". This tendency is not new. Pursued by "a bad smell of extinction", Cro-Magnon man wandered the world until his hunting expertise decimated his prey. Such technological innovation overloading environmental capacity Wright calls "a progress trap". Nuclear weapons are an obvious example, but shortsighted, intensive modern farming constitutes an even bigger threat. This sharply persuasive blast is wrapped in Wright's felicitous prose and illuminating imagery, such as this Chinese saying: "A peasant may stand a long time on a hillside with his mouth open before a roast duck flies in." Escalating wealth imbalance is far likelier to cause ecological devastation and societal chaos, Wright asserts, than are the fanatics pursued in President Bush's war on terror. JU

