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The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind

H. G. Wells · *1920 · English original, first American edition, The Macmillan Company, New York, November 1920, Project Gutenberg #45368 (volumes I and II in one file). Later revised editions are not used here.*

Wells's Outline is a world survey, not a plotted novel. The introduction calls it an attempt to tell, truly and clearly, in one continuous narrative, the whole story of life and mankind so far as it is known to-day. It is written plainly for the general reader, with the advice of Ernest Barker, H. H. Johnston, E. Ray Lankester, and Gilbert Murray, and it runs from the earth in space to the catastrophe of 1914 and a last look at man's coming of age.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can the whole story of life and mankind be told, truly and clearly, as one continuous narrative, without shrinking into a single nation's school history?

"This Outline of History is an attempt to tell, truly and clearly, in one continuous narrative, the whole story of life and mankind so far as it is known to-day."

Introduction

Wells begins with a sentence from Ratzel: a philosophy of the history of the human race must begin with the heavens and descend to the earth. The books that follow keep that range: the earth and the record of the rocks; the ancestry of man; the first civilizations and writing; the Hebrews, the Greeks and Persians, Alexander, Alexandria, and the rise of Buddhism; the western republics and the Caesars; the rise of Christianity, centuries in Asia, Muhammad, and the Crusades; the empire of Jengis Khan, the renascence of the West, the new republics, Napoleon, the nineteenth century, and the international catastrophe of 1914. It is a survey in movements. That limit should be named.

KEY CHARACTERS

H. G. Wells
the surveyor, writing plainly for the general reader in 1920, with advice he names on the title page

Ernest Barker, H. H. Johnston, E. Ray Lankester, and Gilbert Murray
the advisers named on the title page of the first American edition

The general reader
the student Wells wants to take beyond a too partial and narrow school history

The nations in one narrative
not England plus France plus Germany as separate tasks, but life and mankind in a single story

Grades 11–12

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01

One Continuous Narrative

THE INTRODUCTION

A plain history for the general reader, against a too narrow school treatment.

- The book's own title is The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind. The hosted text is Gutenberg's transcription of the first American edition, published November 1920, volumes I and II in one file. Later revised editions are not used here. Name that limit as well as the survey's form.
- The introduction opens with Ratzel: a philosophy of the history of the human race, worthy of its name, must begin with the heavens and descend to the earth, and must be charged with the conviction that all existence is one. Then Wells's own aim: "This Outline of History is an attempt to tell, truly and clearly, in one continuous narrative, the whole story of life and mankind so far as it is known to-day. It is written plainly for the general reader, but its aim goes beyond its use as merely interesting reading matter."
- There is a feeling abroad, he says, that the teaching of history as a part of general education is in an unsatisfactory condition, and that the ordinary treatment of this subject is too partial and narrow. If an Englishman has found the history of England quite enough for his powers of assimilation, it seems hopeless to expect his sons and daughters to master universal history if that is only England plus France plus Germany plus Russia, and so on. The Outline is his answer to that difficulty: not an encyclopedia of separate national histories, but one narrative of life and mankind.

> *"This Outline of History is an attempt to tell, truly and clearly, in one continuous narrative, the whole story of life and mankind so far as it is known to-day."*
> Introduction

02

The Earth, the Rocks, and Early Man

BOOKS I–II

From space and time to the ancestry of man.

- Book I begins where Ratzel said a worthy history must begin: the earth in space and time, the record of the rocks, natural selection and the changes of species, the invasion of the dry land by life, changes in the world's climate, the age of reptiles, and the age of mammals.
- Book II turns to the ancestry of man; the Neanderthal men, an extinct race; the later postglacial Palaeolithic men; Neolithic man in Europe; early thought; the races of mankind; and the languages of mankind.
- This opening is part of the book's claim to be a history of life and mankind, not only of states and wars. The survey will later come to cities and scriptures, but it will not start there.

03

First Civilizations and the Ancient World

BOOKS III–V

Writing, prophets, Greeks, Alexander, Buddhism, and the western republics.

- Book III treats the Aryan-speaking peoples in prehistoric times, the first civilizations, sea peoples and trading peoples, writing, gods and stars, priests and kings, and serfs, slaves, social classes, and free individuals.
- Book IV is the hinge of the ancient world as Wells orders it: the Hebrew scriptures and the prophets; the Greeks and the Persians; Greek thought and literature; the career of Alexander the Great; science and religion at Alexandria; and the rise and spread of Buddhism.
- Book V comes west again: the two western republics; from Tiberius Gracchus to the god emperor; and the Caesars between the sea and the great land beyond. Keep these as movements in a survey. A single chapter here may cover what another book on this shelf treats at full length.

04

Faiths, Empires, and the West Renewed

BOOKS VI–VII

Christianity, Asia, Muhammad, the Crusades, and Jengis Khan.

- Book VI follows the beginnings, the rise, and the divisions of Christianity; seven centuries in Asia, from about 50 B.C. to A.D. 650; Muhammad and Arab Islam; and Christendom and the Crusades.
- Book VII turns to the great empire of Jengis Khan and his successors, and to the renascence of western civilization.
- Teach these chapters with respect. Wells is writing a plain history of life and mankind, not a tract for the contempt of any people. Read what he actually says, and do not import a later quarrel into a 1920 survey.

05

The Modern Catastrophe

BOOKS VIII–IX

Republics, Napoleon, the nineteenth century, 1914, and a coming of age.

- Book VIII follows princes, parliaments, and powers; the new democratic republics of America; the career of Napoleon Bonaparte; the realities and imagination of the nineteenth century; and the international catastrophe of 1914.
- Book IX treats man's coming of age, and the probable struggle Wells saw from the year of publication. The first American edition is dated November 1920. He is writing in the immediate aftermath of the war he has just named, not from a later revision.
- The Outline remains a survey. It will not give you the inner plot of a single life, and it will not replace the special histories it tries to set in one frame. Its last movement is a claim about the age itself, made by a man who has just tried to tell the whole story so far as it was known to him then.

A World Survey · Life and Mankind · One Narrative · Education · An Age of War

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Name the limit: this is a world survey, not a plotted novel. Wells himself calls it an outline and a continuous narrative of life and mankind, written for the general reader.
2. The hosted text is the first American edition of November 1920, not a later revision. His account of 1914 and of "Man's Coming of Age" belongs to that moment.
3. The range is deliberate: rocks and reptiles before cities; Buddhism beside Alexandria; Asia beside the Caesars. Do not skip the opening books as if the real history began with Greece, and do not treat a short chapter on a people as if it were their only story.
4. Teach with respect. A 1920 survey will use the language of its time, including names and racial categories that later scholarship has revised. Read what is there, and do not turn the book into a weapon or a sneer.

Quotations are verbatim from the English original, first American edition, The Macmillan Company, New York, November 1920, Project Gutenberg #45368 (volumes I and II in one file). Later revised editions are not used here., Project Gutenberg #45368, first American edition, The Macmillan Company, New York, November 1920, volumes I and II., the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-outline-of-history/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.