

WILL  
DURANT

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE AND THE MEDAL OF FREEDOM

THE  
GREATEST  
MINDS  
AND IDEAS  
OF ALL TIME

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## Introduction

In 1968, shortly after winning the Pulitzer Prize for literature, Will Durant and his wife, Ariel, consented to a television interview to be conducted in their home in Los Angeles, California. The interviewer, who fancied himself something of an intellectual, posed to Durant the following question:

*If I were to ask you to name the person who has most influenced our century (the 20th century) would it be Karl Marx?*

Durant paused for a moment and then replied:

*Well, if you use the word in its largest sense, we would have to give the greatest share of influence to the technical inventors, to men like Edison. Doubtless the development of electricity has transformed the world even more than any Marxian propaganda. Then, if you think in terms of ideas, I think the influence of Darwin is still greater than the influence of Marx, but in a different field. The basic phenomenon of our time is not Communism; it's the decline of religious belief, which has all sorts of effects on morals and even on politics because religion has been a tool of politics. But today in Europe it ceases to be a tool, it has very little influence in determining political decisions—whereas 500 years ago, the pope was superior in influence to any civil ruler on earth.*

Later, during the same interview, the interviewer turned to his subject and asked:

*Dr. Durant, of all the characters populating The Story of Civilization, whom would you have most liked to have known?*

Durant contemplated the question seriously and then, poker-faced, replied, "Madame De Pompadour."

The interviewer was dumbfounded.

"Why is that?" he asked.

A twinkle came to Durant's eyes as he answered, "Well, she was beautiful, she was charming, she was luscious—what *else* do you want?"

I cite these two anecdotes not simply to reveal Durant's views on the influence of inventors and biologists on human history, nor even his tendency to use wit to disarm journalists who took themselves or their vocations too seriously (he once noted that humor is akin to philosophy for they are both viewpoints born of a large perspective of life), but rather to show that his opinion on assessing the significance of individuals and events from human history was something that was constantly sought after—sometimes twice in the same interview.

It is entirely understandable that Durant should find himself asked to answer such questions. Any time a man spends over half a century researching and writing an eleven-volume integral history of civilization, it is natural that people are going to want to know what conclusions he has drawn from the enterprise; to know what eras, individuals, and achievements stood out in his mind as being the greatest or most significant. Who, for example, would Durant rate on his Roll of Honor of human thought as the greatest thinkers in human history? Who would he rate as the truly great poets; the ones that plucked notes upon heartstrings that continue to resonate hundreds and thousands of years after their passing? And what would be the absolute best books one should read in order to receive a meaningful—and useful—education? Over the course of Durant's career, he responded to the increasing public demand for such qualified assessments by putting pen to paper and crafting a series of essays containing his personal ranking of "The Ten Greatest Thinkers," "The Ten Great-

est Poets," "The One Hundred Best Books for an Education," "The Ten Peaks of Human Progress," and "Twelve Vital Dates in World History." Certain of these essays were published in periodicals; others were presented as lectures to standing-room-only attendees. However, unless you happened to purchase those magazines, or were fortunate enough to attend one of those lectures, it would not have been possible to learn of his conclusions in these matters. Fortunately, all of these essays have been brought together in *The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time*.

To formulate a ranking system and then apply it to such a broad array of human achievement is a difficult undertaking, to be sure, but Durant (as always) succeeds brilliantly; he not only presents compelling evidence for his selections, but also stimulates the reader to form his or her own opinions and to look beyond<sup>2</sup> immediate surroundings and present culture and into a timeless realm, which he called "The Country of the Mind," a sort of cerebral retirement home wherein the heroes of our species dwell after having served their time and purpose in their respective eras and where to be human is something to be lauded. Indeed, the title of the first chapter of this book serves to frame its very thesis: "A Shameless Worship of Heroes."

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.

*The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time* is a book containing the absolute best of our heritage passed on for the edification and benefit of future generations, replete with Durant's renowned