

**History as Fiction:**  
**The Story in Hendrik Willem van Loon's**  
*Story of Mankind*

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“And if I were a novelist and not an historian, who must stick to facts and may not use his imagination, I would describe the happy day when the last steam locomotive shall be taken to the Museum of Natural History to be placed next to the skeleton of the Dinosaur and the Pterodactyl and the other extinct creatures of a bygone age” (411–12). This is Hendrik Willem van Loon, writing history in a book published for children in 1921 and still remembered as the first winner of the Newbery medal; what he says is doubly ironic.

Historical hindsight provides the first irony. The happy day van Loon imagined has now arrived; but a world without the steam locomotive, which van Loon calls “a noisy and dirty creature for ever filling the world with ridiculous smoke-stacks and with dust and soot and asking that it be fed with coal which has to be dug out of mines at great inconvenience and risk to thousands of people” (411), is not in fact a world without ridiculous smoke-stacks, nor dust, nor soot, nor great inconvenience and risk to thousands of people. The electric engine, van Loon’s “clean and companionable servant of mankind,” has driven out the steam engine, but not pollution or political corruption; the utopia van Loon imagined and assumed history was inevitably heading toward did not occur.

The mere fact of van Loon’s invention of that utopia creates the second irony. He denies his own disclaimer that history must stick to facts in the very process of making it. In doing so, he reveals a paradox at the heart of our usual conception of history. As van Loon suggests, it is supposed to represent the truth: but if historians are not merely to provide undigested masses of information for no apparent purpose, then the act of writing about the past is not so much a matter of “sticking to the facts” as it is a matter of selecting, organizing, and explaining them. Since the means by which human beings select, organize, and explain events almost always relate to the patterns of narrative, history is a form of storytelling—of events understood to be occurring in those orderly

sequences of cause and effect that we tend to perceive as the most primary and significant source of meaning. It is not insignificant that the book in which van Loon insists that historians must stick to facts and declares that he is not a novelist is called the *story* of mankind.

Like writers of fiction, historians find meaning in events. But just as the meanings writers find in events (and for that matter, that readers find in fiction) depend on the knowledge and values they bring to it, the meanings historians find in history depend on their own values, their own societal and cultural assumptions. Those historians who insist on their unbiased objectivity merely reveal a cultural bias toward a scientific approach that values "objectivity" more than people once did. Even the mere knowledge of the events that have occurred between the historian's present and the past he is writing about influences his reading of those past events; later events will inevitably be assumed, consciously or unconsciously, to be effects of those past events, which are now understood as causes in a way that those who actually experienced them would find bewildering. In this sense, effects always precede causes, and history is always about the present. As is the case in other kinds of narrative, the stories history tells reveal as much or more about the events of current history and the values of the historian as of the historical subject.

Since historians can persuasively imply such values only by shaping events into acceptable patterns of cause and effect, the stories they tell are much like the plots of fiction. Commenting on the idea that "the difference between 'history' and 'fiction' resides in the fact that the historian 'finds' his stories, whereas the fiction writer 'invents' his," Hayden White suggests that,

This conception of the historian's task . . . obscures the extent to which 'invention' also plays a part in the historian's operations. The same event can serve a different kind of element of many different historical stories, depending on the role it is assigned in a specific motific characterization of the set to which it belongs. The death of the king may be a beginning, an ending, or simply a transitional event in three different stories. In the chronicle, the event is simply "there" as an element of a series; it does not "function" as a story element. The historian arranges the events in the chronicle into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle, and end. (7)

The writing of history is then an art of constructing plots, the meanings emerging from the causal connections that the plots create between events and then, as in fiction, from the structural patterns that emerge from the

shapes of events considered as a whole. White reinforces the fictionality of history by suggesting that the various plots into which historians organize their material usually match one of Northrop Frye's archetypal patterns of tragedy, comedy, romance, and satire. As van Loon's description of train engines reveals, the events of history can be organized into something like the comedy of a fairy tale, in which good defeats evil and everyone lives happily ever after; not surprisingly, the entire story of mankind of which this story of trains is a part has a similar plot.

But it is also not surprising that van Loon insists that he is not a novelist, or that this author of the fairy tale of the trains should even ask elsewhere in his book, "Why should we ever read fairy stories, when the truth of history is so much more interesting and entertaining?" (154). The most significant fiction of history is the insistence that it is not fiction—that it does accurately represent the truth. Its success in denying its fictionality makes history particularly effective as propaganda: acceptance of its truthfulness allows readers to absorb the meanings and values it contains with less questioning or consideration than they might bring to that which is announced as invented fiction. It is this capability for propaganda that makes history intended for an audience of children so worthy of investigation.

As it happens, much of the history available for contemporary children happily admits to being fiction; but it is "historical fiction" that still insists on the essential truth of the events it describes. *The Scott, Foresman Anthology of Children's Literature* sums up a common attitude when it says, "The best historical fiction . . . is solidly based on accurate historical details and takes no liberties with those historical personages who appear in the story, nor with historical fact" (688). But the extent to which the fictionality of historical fiction is more important than its history is revealed by a later comment in the same anthology that "the best historical fiction presents characters and events with an apparent spontaneity that brings them to life so vividly that readers feel no sense of distance" (688)—or in other, more honest words, no sense of history. For to assume no distance is to make the ahistorical assumption that people are uninfluenced enough by their times to be basically and universally the same; history written with that goal is truly fictional.

The standard textbooks that represent children's literature to university students give relatively little attention to nonfictional history—perhaps in the faith that historical fiction gives children all the authenticity they need. These anthologies offer comprehensive selections of excerpts from historical novels, and include large sections devoted to biography, a branch of history that focuses on personalities and, in most books for

children, turns them into role models, fictional heroes of the kind of narrative we call parables; but the anthologies include only a few excerpts from straight history, in sections that deal with “informational” books in general. The current edition of the *Scott, Foresman Anthology*, which contains excerpts from eleven historical novels and nine biographies, offers only one excerpt from a nonfictional history book, and even the name of the book that excerpt comes from reinforces the overriding focus on fictional versions of history; it is nothing other than van Loon’s *The Story of Mankind*. Given this concentration on the fiction in history, it is not insignificant that the excerpt in the anthology ends with the fairy tale of the engine that I quoted above.

In the almost 70 years since van Loon wrote *The Story of Mankind*, there have been revolutionary developments in our knowledge of the past, even more revolutionary changes in our historiographical prejudices; so the inclusion of this excerpt as the only piece of straight historical writing in an anthology published in 1984 suggests just how much van Loon’s version of history represents the current status of history in children’s literature—even the idea of history we usually provide to children. In fact, many commentators offer *The Story of Mankind* as an example of what history for children should be. The editors of the *Scott, Foresman Anthology* say that “the book brings history to life by relating, in fine narrative style, historical events to the changes they brought to the people of their time” (792). In *Children and Books* (1981), Sutherland, Monson, and Arbuthnot say that it is “the sort of informational book that amuses, informs, and stimulates readers to further inquiry. What more could one ask?” (481) The fifth edition of *Anthology of Children’s Literature* (1977) claims that “it is particularly gratifying that the first award should have been given to a book that has so successfully withstood the passage of time” (1074), and its successor, *The Riverside Anthology of Children’s Literature* (1985) is only a little less positive about van Loon: “Although his book now seems dated, and many of his assumptions are no longer generally shared, *The Story of Mankind* remains a classic example—the first for children—of how to write history in a forceful and entertaining way” (1001). In recent years, a new version of this old book has appeared; it has been “updated for the eighties,” by the inclusions of a new concluding chapter by John Merriman, but otherwise merely reprints van Loon’s old words. Given the continuing status of this book for specialists in children’s literature, a consideration of the sort of story van Loon made of the history of mankind ought to reveal much about the idea of history we most commonly provide for children.

Throughout *The Story of Mankind*, van Loon reveals a decided im-

patience with the factuality of history. In the middle of a section of the book that deals with Napoleon, he suddenly tells his readers that, if they want to understand Napoleon, “do not read the books that have been written about him. . . . You will learn many facts, but it is more important to ‘feel history’ than to know it” (360). He himself “feels” history intensely; in a long digression toward the end of the book, he says, “Of course, anyone possessed of enough industry to lose himself for a half dozen years in the musty stacks of a library, can compile a ponderous tome which gives an account of the events in every land during every century. But that was not the purpose of the present book. The publishers wanted to print a history that should have a rhythm—a story which galloped rather than walked” (446).

In trying to make his book gallop, van Loon admits he has had no choice but to tell the story as he saw it himself, and he warns his readers that they should be wary for that reason. “When we visit a doctor,” he says, “we find out beforehand whether he is a surgeon or a diagnostician or a homeopath or a faith healer, for we want to know from what angle he will look at our complaint. We ought to be as careful in the choice of our historians as we are in the selection of our physicians” (449); he goes on to describe how his own upbringing gave him the values that inevitably color his version of history, and concludes, “I state these few facts deliberately that you may know the personal bias of the man who wrote this history and may understand his point-of-view” (451).

Yet even in the midst of this declaration of bias van Loon asserts, “. . . I would rather not state certain things than run the risk of stating certain things that were not so” (448). He frequently insists on his historian’s obligation to the truth. His apparent inability to see the contradiction between truthfulness and admitted bias implies that van Loon feels free to be proud of his biases because he secretly believes that they are in fact, *the* truth—the only right way of seeing things; thus, he justifies his concentration on certain countries by suggesting that they were indeed the right ones to focus on: “. . . I did not drag in any countries. They pushed themselves in by main force of circumstances, and I simply could not keep them out” (448–49). Van Loon’s contradictory insistence on his simultaneous bias and truthfulness allows readers to accept his authority without, as he claims, actually forcing upon them the obligation “to reach your own final conclusions” (451); in any case, he never presents the evidence that might contradict *his* conclusions. Consequently, his ingratiating admission of his own limitations is a clever trick that flatters readers into believing they are too wise to blindly accept authority while at the same time providing authoritative views that are not actually meant to

be questioned. Like all writers of bestselling books—and *The Story of Mankind* has sold widely for decades—van Loon knows how to flatter his audience; he persuades readers of their thoughtfulness at the same time as he allows them the pleasing lethargy of thoughtlessness.

But what makes van Loon's methods specifically significant in a consideration of history as we present it to children is his ability to propagandize successfully for a specific set of values at the same time as he insists on a concept of freedom of thought that ought in theory to prevent him from making any such specific commitment. Shallowly considered, the central concepts of democracy—recognition of individual difference, freedom of thought and opinion—appear to be in conflict with the central assumptions of education—that those who teach do indeed know better than those who learn, and therefore have better opinions about the subjects they teach. In order to teach their own better opinions, writers for children must establish their authority; paradoxically, therefore, writers who support democratic values must find a theoretically democratic way of establishing the authority of those nonauthoritarian values. Van Loon is such a writer; his methods, and the praise still given to them, suggest just how useful his solution was and continues to be—and just how contradictory much theoretically liberal-minded writing for children, both fictional and information, is. Van Loon reveals the extent to which we consider even factual writing for children to be a matter of authoritarian propaganda for the right theoretically nonauthoritarian values.

*The Story of Mankind* makes that particularly clear simply because, as *The Riverside Anthology* suggests, van Loon expresses views that are a little dated—we can see their inadequacy because we no longer wholly accept their truthfulness. This is not to say that we no longer believe them—indeed, the continuing praise for *The Story of Mankind* suggests that we probably do; but it is certainly no longer popular to espouse these ideas in the obvious way that van Loon does. While van Loon's clear and perhaps ingenuous statement of these ideas may anger some of us by revealing some of their uglier implications, the ideas are nevertheless those that made and still support the mainstream culture of North America.

As the story of the demise of the steam engine implies, the key to van Loon's conception of history is the idea of progress, based on the model of biological evolution. The story begins with creatures which crawled out of the ocean and “gradually adapted themselves more and more to life on land” (6). Later, van Loon tells his young readers,

When you grow up you will discover that many people do not believe in ‘progress’ and they will prove it to you by the terrible deeds of some of our own contemporaries that ‘the world does not change.’ But I hope that

you will not pay much attention to such talk. . . . I do not want to paint too unpleasant a picture. But when you read in the ancient chronicles that the King of France, looking out the windows of his palace, fainted at the stench caused by the pigs rotting in the streets of Paris, when an ancient manuscript recounts a few details of an epidemic of the plague or of the small-pox, then you begin to understand that 'progress' is something more than a catchword used by modern advertising men. (176-77)

That van Loon equates progress with his own peculiarly modern attitudes toward matters like dirt is not insignificant. The idea of progress allows van Loon to establish this important truth: that our current situation, in our particular culture and time, is better than people have ever had before. Writing just after the end of the first war, van Loon finds evolutionary progress even in that event; indeed, it proves to him that "we modern men and women are not 'modern' at all. On the contrary we still belong to the last generations of the cave-dwellers. . . . The Great War was the 'growing-pain' of this new world" (459-60). Finally, the last chapter of the book as he left it (his son Gerard Willem van Loon later added some further chapters) offers a happy ending, as it speaks of the "absolute inevitableness" (481) with which something much like the American way of life will become the one civilization of the future.

Van Loon's conviction that the history of mankind is the story of the development of an idea of civilization that closely resembles contemporary American democracy provides him with a particularly narrow idea of just what "mankind" consists of. Van Loon claims, ". . . I am trying to write for the children of all races and not merely those who live on the fortunate patch of land that stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific" (480); but the claim would be legitimate only if the culture of that "fortunate patch of land" were the only human civilization that the children of those other races should know about. The story of mankind so focuses on the European forebears of white North Americans that Asia is first mentioned only because Europeans have come into contact with it; even then, van Loon calls Asia "the ancient teacher" of "Europe, the young and eager pupil" (47), as if Asians preceded mankind rather than took part in it.

In fact, Asia is not ever a central subject of van Loon's book, so that there is some irony in his assertion that, "As this is a story of mankind and not an exclusive history of the people of Europe and our western hemisphere, you ought to know something of two men whose teaching and whose example continue to influence the actions and thoughts of the majority of our fellow-travellers on this earth" (241). The discussions of Buddha and Confucius that follow make it clear that they are admirable for what van Loon identifies as their common sense, but what is, in fact,

the ideas they share with modern Protestant Christianity. But we also learn that the “ignorant masses” of China soon buried Lao-Tse’s “early Chinese version of the Golden Rule” “under a rubbish heap of superstition which made the lives of the average Chinese one long series of frights and fears and horrors” (248), and that “the Chinese had never been much interested in religion as we understand that word. They believed in devils and spooks as most primitive people do” (247). Given remarks as arrogantly chauvinistic as that, it is not surprising that van Loon calls the populace of India “tens of millions of docile little brown men” (244); that the citizens of Africa were “heathenish tribes . . . who worshiped sticks and stones and dead trees” (241; one is tempted to ask how a cross is different from two pieces of a dead tree); that the poor Russians under Mongolian rule had to “creep before a dirty little yellow man who sat in a tent somewhere in the heart of the steppes of southern Russia and spat at them” (305); and that because the Russians were influenced by a Byzantine empire which “had become very oriental and had lost many of its European traits, the Russians suffered in consequence” (304).

While van Loon may claim to write for “the children of all races,” then, he usually tends to assume that his readers are people like himself—people unoriental enough to appreciate how bad it is to be oriental. He speaks of “*our* western hemisphere,” and “religion as *we* understand the word”; and he identifies both himself and his readers as “*we* modern Protestant people” (436).

Furthermore, van Loon makes it clear that less fully evolved versions of the values of “we modern Protestant people” are the identifying traits of admirable civilizations throughout history, and that the progress of mankind is merely the evolution of these values. The partially democratic society of ancient Greece brought civilization “higher,” but the less recognizable middle ages were a turning away from progress, and in Europe in the year 1000, “most people were so unhappy that they welcomed the prophecy foretelling the end of the world” (155). Van Loon particularly identifies as civilized the decidedly Protestant virtues of simplicity, moderation, and hard work. We hear of “the marvelous sense of moderation” of the Greeks (61) and the “simplicity” of the Romans (109). Van Loon suggests that Moses could become great because he “had learned to appreciate the simplicity of his earliest ancestors” as opposed to being “corrupted by the ease and luxury of a foreign civilization” (40). He admires the barons of the middle ages as “hardworking administrators” (158), and says that England’s greatness “does not lie in her vast colonial possessions, in her wealth or her navy, but in the quiet heroism and independence of her average citizen. The Englishman



obeys the law because he knows that respect for the rights of others makes the difference between a dog-kennel and civilised society” (388).

In other words, van Loon characterizes all societies unlike his own as bestial. This becomes most apparent in his constant references to cleanliness and dirt. Crete was “entirely modern in its insistence upon hygiene and comfort” (51), whereas the early Greeks “lived like pigs” (55). Rome’s fall is summed up by the fact that the villas “were now inhabited by evil-smelling and hairy barbarians” (129). The Vikings were “very picturesque but also very unwashed and terribly cruel” (151). The Middle Ages smelled “of unwashed people who had inherited their coats and hats from their grandfathers and who had never learned the blessings of soap” (176).

Obviously van Loon is not shy about making his opinions clear—this is very much *his* story of mankind. Indeed, it is his clear expression of opinions that makes the book into something like a novel; as van Loon shapes events so that they can reveal the truth of his opinions, history itself becomes a story with a specific central theme, a logical sequence of events, a clearly defined set of main characters, and a structure of integrated imagery. The paragraphs that follow show how the idea of progress becomes a plot, and how the idea of “civilization” defines a cast of characters and a structure of images.

The idea that the best of earlier civilizations were the ones most like our own allows van Loon to easily and persuasively communicate the idea that progress gradually brought forth the virtues of contemporary civilization. In fact, the structure of the plot van Loon provides for history makes this point for him, both in terms of the varying degrees of attention he gives to different times and people and in the patterns his varying focus creates. By ignoring Asia, he makes it insignificant in relation to “true” civilization—as he more or less admits himself when he says, “I wish that I could tell you what happened to Norway and Switzerland and Serbia and China. But these lands exercised no great influence upon the development of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I therefore pass them by with a polite and very respectful bow” (278). By passing such things by and concentrating only on past examples of current virtues, he turns history into a novel about the tragedies and triumphs of those virtues—a novel with an inevitable happy ending, for of course, these virtues take on strength as we approach the end of history in the present moment which most clearly expresses them. It may be bad history to judge the past from the viewpoint of the present, as van Loon does when he is scathingly ironic about the medieval scholars who didn’t know enough about modern scientific method to realize how silly it was to

derive their information “exclusively from books, and never from actual observation” (194); but that is exactly the way the plot of a novel works: the author’s knowledge of later events permeates the presentation of earlier ones in a way that leads to the unity and comprehensibility of the whole. Viewed as narrative devices, then, qualities that might well seem to be lapses from the viewpoint of history become positive features.

One recurring pattern that cleverly supports the theme of progress is the fact that the central characters in this novel of mankind are always those who represent what van Loon calls “civilization.” Those who are civilized are but a small segment of mankind, an exclusive club or secret society of like-minded people, as van Loon acknowledges when he says, “let me state the basis upon which active membership to this book of history was considered” (449). The club of “civilization” occasionally shifts its headquarters, from Egypt to Mesopotamia, then to Greece and the Rome, after whose decline “civilisation—the product of thousands of years of patient labor on the part of Egyptians and Babylonians and Greeks and Romans, which had lifted man high above the most daring dreams of his earliest ancestors, threatened to perish from the western continent” (129). But having by now become the central protagonist of this saga of history, the entity whose appearance in different guises and whose various movements through time form the main plot of mankind’s story, civilization cannot die. The crusades “became a course in general instruction in civilisation for millions of young Europeans” (173); once more “mankind” learns civilization from a group outside itself (this time the Arabs). After flourishing in Europe in the Renaissance, the club gradually shifts its headquarters westward until, as van Loon says, “The Atlantic became the new centre of commerce and therefore the centre of civilisation. It has remained so ever since” (239).

If the progress of civilization forms the outline of van Loon’s plot, then its battles with the forces of anti-civilization, here defined as self-seeking, excess, and idle luxury, are its episodes. Since the forces of goodness are always simpler and more modest than the forces of evil, almost every episode repeats the same pattern, the basic pattern of fairy tales and of classical comedy: those corrupted by power are defeated by those not yet so corrupted. Van Loon’s vantage point in the future of the events he describes gives him knowledge of how things will eventually turn out that allows him to spotlight the heroes of civilization long before they have any significance in their own time; consequently, the Cinderella story of the underdog who triumphs against powerful forces because he cleaves to the right values of simplicity and moderation recurs again and again. All the great civilizations begin as insignificant villages with the

right values. More personally, Mohammed was just a “simple camel driver,” Joan of Arc just a young girl; George Washington, “ably assisted by a handful of brave men . . . , used his steadfast but badly equipped armies to weaken the forces of the king” (330). The ultimate underdog is Christ; van Loon compares the riches of the palace of the Roman emperor with the stable in Bethlehem and says,

This is a strange world.  
Before long, the palace and stable were to meet in open combat.  
And the stable was to emerge victorious. (118)

By constantly focusing on unassuming or unlikely people who become great heroes, van Loon cleverly implies that they triumph solely because they do represent civilization—because they are *right*, and presumably, right always triumphs.

Yet there is an interesting ambiguity in van Loon’s presentation of his heroes. As representatives of the forces of simplicity and moderation and democracy, they are underdogs; as people with the ability to change history, they are strong and assertive—not at all our usual image of underdogs. Indeed, as well as focusing on triumphant underdogs, van Loon’s history is the repeating parable of strong men appearing at times of great need. In the dark ages, “The stage was set for the appearance of a strong man. He came in the year 590 and his name was Gregory” (136); two hundred years later, amidst “hopeless disorder” (144), civilization finds a “strong sword and a powerful fist” in the person of Charlemagne (144). Later, the enemies of the church await “a leader of a more robust nature. He came, and his name was Martin Luther” (257). During the French revolution, “The dangerous position of France . . . made it necessary that the government remain in the hands of a few strong men” (348). Again today, “The world is in dreadful need of men who will assume the new leadership—who will have the courage of their own visions. . . . [S]ome day, a man will arise who will bring the vessel safely to port, and he shall be the hero of the ages” (465).

It is not a little ironic that these words appeared in print just prior to the rise of Mussolini and Hitler. Because the men who have the will to advance civilization, the strength to change things, are also the sort of people who cause most of the trouble, they are van Loon’s heroes but also inevitably his villains. In fact, whether we are dealing with individuals or societies, one often becomes the other. If power corrupts, then former underdogs with power must become corrupt themselves, and need to be replaced; so as well as being an evolutionary process, history is also a cycle, a movement between corruption and enlightenment. Enlightened

Greece's gradual corruption allowed Rome to triumph; enlightened Rome's corruption led to the middle ages. "A revolution took place in France in the eighteenth century when the old civilisation of the country had grown stale" (334), but later, Napoleon was defeated because, "Once upon the throne, the old revolutionary chieftain became an unsuccessful imitation of a Hapsburg monarch. . . . He ceased to be the defender of the oppressed. . . . [T]hen and only then, when Napoleon was no longer the hero of the revolution but the personification of all the bad traits of the Old Regime, was it possible for England to give direction to the fast-spreading sentiment of hatred which was turning all honest men into enemies of the French Emperor" (354). Just how these cycles relate to the overall pattern of progress is not exactly clear; the fictionality of van Loon's approach is nowhere clearer than in his reference to one or the other of these theories depending upon which offers the best explanation of any particular event.

One obvious effect of van Loon's interest in the strong men who change history is the extent to which his explanations of the events of history are grounded in human character. History is centrally the story of strong men—not surprisingly, perhaps, for both history and personality as we usually understand them involve narrative assumptions: both situate meaning in the cause-and-effect relationships of temporal events. Like historical explanations of current events, explanations of individual personalities involve the telling of stories, stories of how events and circumstances formed character; the most interesting stories will then be those about the strongest, the most intensely distinctive of characters.

In any case, whether they are heroes or villains, strong men are the only members of mankind interesting enough and important enough for van Loon to talk about. He is so determined to concentrate on the best and the greatest that he often invents them; that is, he speaks of groups as if they were individuals, so that the acts of large groups of people sound as if they were in fact done by one person. As van Loon describes evolution it seems to be the choice of individual creatures that "they did not adopt the feathers of the bird, but they covered their bodies with hair" (7); the human race has one specific ancestor: "the great-great-grandfather of the human race was a very ugly and unattractive animal" (9); there is just one ancient Egyptian in the story of the beginning of reason: "One day, he discovered that his brain was capable of thinking all kinds of thoughts . . ." (23). Throughout, van Loon turns general trends into specific events involving specific people: universities developed out of outdoors encounters between student and wise men because "One day it rained. The teacher and his pupils retired to an empty base-

ment . . .” (209). After telling how a baby goes from making mud pies to more practical matters, van Loon adds, “Nations are not different from children” (434)—so nations become people also. And all nationalities have characters, many of them amounting to racial slurs. Furthermore, because van Loon concentrates so intensely on strong personalities, he neglects to provide the contexts that might make the actions of great people seem less extravagantly special: there are no Elizabethan playwrights but Shakespeare, never any competitors for political office but the one strong man who emerges. As a result, the actions of those van Loon focuses on—the forces of civilization—seem all the more heroic, all the more grand, and worthy of attention.

Furthermore, the inevitability with which strong men arise in times of need implies a general inevitability to history. Van Loon even suggests that history has rules, when he says that King Louis XVI of France “never understood” them (344), and when he suggests that the reaction after the French Revolution was “not the first time that an attempt had been made to set the clock of history back. The result was the usual one” (380).

For van Loon, in fact, there *are* rules: things always work out as they should. Nothing is random; everything has causes that can be determined and leads to effects that can be discovered; everything can be explained. The most novelistic aspect of *The Story of Mankind* is that Van Loon can and does provide explanations for everything, even events that contradict his major theses. For instance, an antiprogressive and extremely powerful church could hold power during the long centuries of the middle ages because, “during an age when nothing was certain, the church stood like a rock and never receded from those principles which it held to be true and sacred. This steadfast courage gained the admiration of the multitudes” (136).

Van Loon’s determination to establish the absolute explicability of history is clearest at those points when he dismisses events which seem illogical, or which do not fit the patterns he has established. After praising the democracy of ancient Greece, he grudgingly admits its policy of slavery; he then insists, “But when we talk about slaves, we do not mean the sort of people about whom you have read in the pages of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ ” (67–68), and talks about how wonderfully free these slaves were. He adds, “The Greeks accepted slavery as a necessary institution, without which no city could possibly become the home of a truly civilized people” (68); and the theoretical democrat Van Loon seems to agree with them, for he reports that the slaves did the sort of tasks that always bore really worthwhile people. Similarly, according to van Loon’s theory of simple virtues always winning, ancient Rome ought to

fall apart; indeed, he insists that “Rome as the ruler of the entire civilised world was a political impossibility and could not endure” (125). He must then downplay the fact that the decline and fall of this impossibility took centuries.

Indeed, *The Story of Mankind* contains many surprisingly obvious moments of self-contradiction. Van Loon says that historic eras do not suddenly begin and end at specific moments, and insists that generalizations about their characteristics are impossible, for “when you grow up you will discover that some of the people in this world have never passed beyond the stage of the cave-man” (191); he then outlines the characteristics of the average citizen of the middle ages, and concludes with the statement, “At that moment, the Middle Ages came to an end and a new world began” (205). Later, he says, “Few things in human life are either entirely good or entirely bad. Few things are either black or white. It is the duty of the honest chronicler to give a true account of all the good and bad sides of every historical event” (251–52); he then describes the Reformation in terms that allow him to state the decidedly one-sided opinion that “in less than thirty years, the indifferent, joking and laughing world of the Renaissance had been transformed into the arguing, quarreling, back-biting, debating-society of the Reformation” (260–61). When van Loon wants to point out the benefits of the Renaissance, he says that the common people “are much better off than they have ever been before. They are more prosperous” (254); but as he explains the Reformation a few pages later, he refers to “starving peasants . . . who made the best of the opportunity and attacked the castles of their masters” (260). These contradictions always occur because van Loon is so determined to suggest that nothing that happens happens accidentally or is without meaning—that the world makes sense and that the sense supports decent human values. It is only when *The Story of Mankind* is read from the viewpoint of logical objectivity that these contradictions seem to be so obvious; what is most revealing about them is how unnoticeable they are when one simply accepts the easygoing tone of van Loon’s prose and reads the book as the fiction it so closely resembles.

At this point it should be obvious that van Loon’s use of the plotting and character-building techniques of fiction is shrewd and deliberate; he selects and organizes events into a story which gives them the meaning he wants them to have. He admits that himself when he says, “history, to give you a true idea of past times, should be like those etchings which Rembrandt used to make. It should cast a vivid light on certain important causes, on those which are best and greatest. The rest should be left in the shadow or should be indicated by a few lines” (228). In his preface,

van Loon offers an even clearer expression of the idea that the order of history opposes the messiness of actual events. After describing how he went as a child to the top of a tower to get a “first glimpse of the big world,” van Loon says,

But the tower showed us the old home in a new light. The confused commotion of the streets and the market-place, of the factories and the work-shop, became the well-ordered expression of human energy and purpose. Best of all, the wide view of the glorious past, which surrounded us on all sides, gave us new courage to face the problems of the future when we had gone back to our daily tasks.

History is the mighty tower of experience, which Time has built amidst the endless fields of bygone ages. It is no easy task to reach the top of the ancient structure and get the benefit of the full view. There is no elevator, but young feet are strong and it can be done.

Here I give you the key that will open the door. (x)

The idea of “the full view” that gives order to the chaos of existence viewed close-up so permeates van Loon’s idea of history that it recurs throughout—particularly in terms of images of mountains. As he begins to discuss Mesopotamia, van Loon says, “I am going to take you to the top of the highest pyramid and I am going to ask you to imagine yourself possessed of the eyes of a hawk” (29). Images of mountains, or of views down from high heights, occur in no fewer than thirty-two of the many charming illustrations van Loon drew to accompany the story; in one picture depicting seven great moral readers in different landscapes, three of the views include mountains and two are views down from heights.

Furthermore, the idea of height becomes a symbol of value, and image attached to societies and people. Sparta had a low civilization because it “was built at the bottom of a deep valley” (81), whereas Athens “rose from the plain”; the moderately civilized Carthage “stood on a low hill” (88), and uncivilized Australia is a “flat and inhospitable land” (238); in the nineteenth century, we find the Papacy “standing high above the petty quarrels of the European politicians” (397). The clarifying view from above is the essence both of the historical attitude and of true civilization, and opposes being immersed in the sea of facts or of anarchy. But the forces of history and chaos, civilization and anarchy are represented, not just by heights and valleys, but also, by cleanliness and dirt, light and darkness, expansion and enclosure, health and disease, nature and artifice. Civilization is a torch (86) or pollen (93). Religious intolerance in the Reformation is equated with the way we would now deal with someone “neglecting the personal cleanliness of his body and his home and exposing himself and his children to the dangers of typhoid

fever . . .” (265). Almost all these images occur in van Loon’s dramatic description of the end of the middle ages:

They set to work. They opened the windows of their cloistered and studious cells. A flood of sunlight entered the dusty rooms and showed them the cobwebs which had gathered during the long period of semi-darkness.

They began to clean house. Next they cleaned their gardens.

Then they went out into the open fields, outside the crumbling town walls, and said, “This is a good world. We are glad that we live in it.”

At that moment, the Middle Ages came to an end and a new world began. (205)

Not only is Van Loon’s prose permeated with the sort of imagery we usually expect of fiction, but the consistency of the imagery provides his story with an underlying structure, a pattern of binary opposites that supports the careful focusing and sequencing of its plot and its characters.

As Hugh Crago says, “old van Loon knew how to tell a story” (97). As a highly organized story with a highly circumscribed meaning, van Loon’s version of human history is satisfying as wish-fulfillment fantasy for both children and adults is satisfying; nothing is random, the good people win and the evil ones lose, and all ends happily. Readers can enjoy the descriptions of terrors and traumas without any real fear of danger or chaos or impending doom. Because van Loon tells this story so well—it is not only interesting, but charmingly written—*The Story of Mankind* might well be considered to be a great novel; because it pretends to be something other than fiction, it may also be a dangerous one.

For, despite its superficial datedness, the story of *The Story of Mankind* is still one we like to hear—one that many North Americans either believe to be true or at least would like to be true. The specifically fictional features of the book then do accurately represent the specific and limited ideas of reality that many North Americans do blindly take for granted. That they are wish-fulfillment fantasy may suggest why they are dangerous. They not only make history into fiction; they make it just another version of an untrue story that we hear again and again, so that all the versions confirm each other’s “truthfulness”; the fiction of history then supports the “reality” of what is clearly utopian fiction. Encouraging the acceptance of such fiction as truth is one way in which adults can and do promote the blind faith of children in the mythology of the society into which they have been born, and blind faith in societal values is dangerous both for individuals and for society itself—particularly for a society that claims to respect individual freedom. Because history always advertises itself as truth, we must be particularly aware of the extent to



which it always must be fiction. As *The Story of Mankind* makes clear, one of the major responsibilities of thoughtful adults is teaching children that awareness.

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