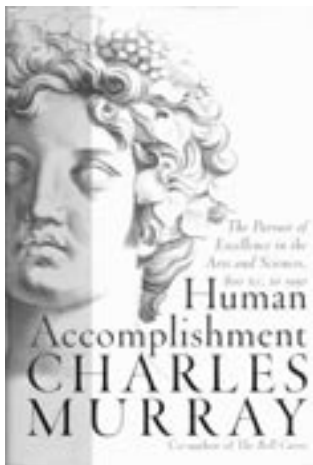


In Pursuit of Truth and Beauty



Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 B.C. to 1950

By Charles Murray

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Reviewed by Wolfgang Kasper

This is a heroic book by an author well known for his imaginative use of concepts and data (for example in *Losing Ground* and *The Bell Curve*).

In his latest book, Charles Murray attempts to present quantitative guestimates of where people 'discovered new truths, created beauty and apprehended the good', and why. To use his own metaphor, he tries to compile what high achievements mankind ought to include in its collective résumé. He is unapologetic about concluding that Europeans (in particular from the 'European core', the North Italy-Rhine-England axis) and white males have been dominant in achieving the truly excellent advances in the arts and sciences.

Measuring achievement

Murray surveys the past 10,000 years, from the beginning of the Neolithic age, when Palaeolithic

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exploitation of nature gave way to wealth creation through agriculture and animal husbandry.¹ More specifically, he looks at the most outstanding individual accomplishments in the sciences and arts around 800 BC and which high achievements have driven civilisations forward and upward since. To get a quantitative sense for this, he has drawn on numerous histories, encyclopaedias, anthologies and biographic dictionaries to identify the number of 'significant figures' and the quality of their works. The survey covers philosophy, literature, the arts, music, and scientific discoveries, including some technology. In each case, the incidence of 'great figures' is related to the estimated population of the region in which they lived. The text offers a rich conspectus of the evolution of astronomy, mathematics, biology, chemistry, earth sciences, and physics, as well as philosophy, the visual arts and literature. This is the sort of survey educated young people should read if they aspire to a systematic knowledge of global civilisation above and beyond the clutter of mere information.

Murray focuses on the discovery of new ideas, not on invention (discrete solutions that make new ideas feasible), let alone innovation (applying knowledge

to human benefit and profit). This may explain why essential inputs in the innovation process, and hence economic growth, such as economics, organisation and governance, are hardly touched upon, except when rated as contributions to philosophy. As Murray wants to highlight individual achievement, he is correct in focusing on discovery. Invention and innovation are normally group exploits and may often even spring from evolutionary interaction without any particular person's design.² The economist in me of course would also have been interested in the material side of human accomplishment and stands in awe of such material witnesses to human greatness as the Forum Romanum, the Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque, the Taj Mahal, or the Sydney Opera House. Nor would I be dismissive of such high group achievements as Roman law, the creation of democratic government, or the internet. However, I readily acknowledge that widening the task to all human accomplishments would have shifted Murray's task from the monumental to the unmanageable. So, I respect his choices.

The 'significant personalities' in the arts and science include greats from Europe, the Islamic world, India, China, Japan, and more recently America. Murray's selection of materials, using predominantly English-language sources, has no doubt favoured a Eurocentric, even somewhat Anglocentric, view. Had he included, for example, the (French) *Larousse* and the (German) *Brockhaus* encyclopaedias, let alone Chinese compendia, the relative ratings would have come out somewhat differently. The *Larousse* would no doubt have made him attribute a greater weight to the great French naturalist René Réaumur, and the *Brockhaus* would have made him include such a figure as Martin Behaim, who invented the globe and made people see the world differently. And does Byron deserve to be rated so much higher (42/100) than Cervantes (32/100)? (And, by the way, 'Johann Schiller from Switzerland' (p. 571) would surely have been revealed as Friedrich Schiller, one of Germany's outstanding 'Princes of Poetry' and great libertarian thinkers, and Rainer Rilke would hardly have been listed as a Czech, p. 571). But these are quibbles.

Having said this, one of the delights of reading this book is to compare one's own prejudices with Murray's compilation and to find most of one's

sceptical preconceptions addressed convincingly. After much probing of Murray's inventories and methods, I came away with confidence in his results.

Of time, place, and motivation

I particularly liked Murray's attempt to explain excellence from the separate angles of time and place. We learn that wars and civil disturbance hardly disrupted the flow of great ideas, and that human accomplishment flourishes in cities and when people are free. Slavery and dictatorship are not conducive to progress, and Murray's data amply bear out D.H. Lawrence's assertion that 'culture is founded on the deep dung of cash'. Murray states that high human accomplishments are 'facilitated by growing national wealth, both through the additional money that can support the arts and sciences and through indirect spill-over effects of economic vitality on cultural vitality' (p. 336).

In the final part of the book, Murray speculates about 'a parsimonious set of elements', under which the always-present propensity to excel is unshackled. Beginning with Aristotle's principle that it is human nature to apply one's best faculties to demanding tasks, he comes to the plausible conclusion that creative people have to believe that they, as individuals, have a purpose in life. They need the social climate that allows them to realise their aspirations autonomously—rather than being bound by social consensus, as so often in East Asia, or collective constraints, such as the demand for submission under post-11th century Islam. This is where the Greco-European tradition—and the Jewish Diaspora—have been the outstanding exceptions. What is decisive then is the richness and age of the framework for conducting arts and sciences, and how new results are evaluated, based on shared visions of what is good, coherent, true and beautiful.

Are we in decline?

In Chapter 21, Murray observes and discusses a decline in the rate of high accomplishment, relative to the population. I found this section rather implausible. The putative decline seems to me a result of the chosen methodology. First, centres of excellence have always attracted immigrants from the hinterland, thus boosting a centre's population numbers by more than its human capital. The growing mobility of recent times allows the density

of significant figures to get diluted faster than in earlier epochs (think of post-war California).

Second, the very nature of creativity has changed; and lags between scientific discovery and practical innovation have shortened. Where once individuals, who figure in encyclopaedias, created high accomplishments single-handedly, much research in science and technology is nowadays done by teams. Even Nobel Prizes are now often shared, and scientific breakthroughs are communicated quickly through better communication even before they have been fully developed. In the present world, significant figures are therefore less likely to stand out enough to be counted by the compilers of 'great-man inventories'.

Third, much human creative energy has switched from mere scientific discovery to innovation. This is part of the trend-breaking take-off into sustained economic growth, which has occurred in the 20th century in one country after the other. Last not least, writers of encyclopaedias and the like often need considerable distance to evaluate the importance of a 'significant figure'; we all suffer from recognition lags. Thus, the two great Austrian economist-philosophers Friedrich A. Hayek and Joseph A. Schumpeter are cited considerably more often now than they were in their lifetime, and some of their impact is only now being uncovered.

These quibbles are not to detract from Murray's achievement in writing this remarkable book, nor from his method of getting a handle on the broad sweep of global human history. This is a truly wonderful book. It is organised and presented in a most accessible way, and the style of writing is simple and clear. Laymen and young people will find the material easily accessible. Murray also does readers a valuable service by offering easily grasped explications of the statistical analysis he uses (including Appendix 1, splendidly entitled 'Statistics for People Who Are Sure They Can't Learn Statistics').

Reading the 458 pages of text and charts is only part of the enjoyment of owning this book. The various appendices, which document sources, methods and details on the high achievers and their places of activity, as well as a carefully edited index, will entice the reader to go back time and again and interact with this rich tome. F.J.E. Woodbridge once defined a great book as one that is 'read, pondered, and enjoyed in the realm of our own thinking, to be

worked and played with, not for understanding of the author but for a clarification of our own ideas'. *Human Accomplishment* meets this criterion.

Some comparisons

Human Accomplishment is a step forward in cultural studies; but it is worthwhile to compare it with a few other recent books that have explored related grand themes of cultural and economic evolution. Thus, the 1998 tome by the British geographer Peter Hall *Cities in Civilization* would make a good companion to *Human Accomplishment* on your bookshelf.³ Like Murray, Hall focuses on cities, i.e. concentrations of human capital, wealth and liberty, as the hotbeds of innovation. What Hall also tells us, is that outbursts of high creativity often last only for short periods, when the supply of talent and the demand for innovative art or scientific-technical ideas coincide, and when suppliers and buyers are free from traditional and hierarchical constraints. It is also interesting to note how often openness and the arrival of hungry immigrants in cities have been decisive in triggering the creative social chemistry. Murray would hardly disagree with Hall's accounts of ancient Athens, Renaissance Florence, Shakespeare's London, or Weimar Berlin. A recent compendium, edited by Åke Andersson and David Andersson addressed similar big themes, but took the theme of cities a step further: The world is seen as a network of first-order central places, or hubs (New York, London, Tokyo), where relevant networks of transport, communication, media, finance, arts, publishing and the like are centred. Then, there are second-order hubs or 'gateways' (e.g. Sydney, Miami, Shanghai or Singapore), where many, but not all, relevant networks have a hub. That is where the future happens; the rest of the world is hinterland. This material extends the Murray analysis from mere discovery to innovation and economic growth. It seems to me to validate and complement Murray's findings.

Murray's temporal dimension of accomplishment can be related to an exciting body of knowledge about economic progress, which long-term economic historians have explored in recent years. They have highlighted the role of key institutions, such as secure property rights, the rule of law, and openness, for the unfolding of enterprise and innovation. The mobility of capital, knowledge and

enterprise, and openness to international trade are identified as outstanding forces of material progress in important books by Eric Jones (his much-cited *European Miracle*), the compendium by Bernholz et al., and indeed by Joseph Schumpeter's classic on long waves of enterprise and economic growth. Last not least, a host of recent writings—such as Virginia Postrel's *The Future and Its Enemies* and Tyler Cowen's *Creative Destruction*—could serve to put more attitudinal flesh on the skeleton of analysis and information that Murray has presented. I could imagine an exciting new university course on cultural and economic evolution, which is built around Murray's seminal book. But, such a course would hardly fit into any of the set-piece syllabuses of our hidebound state-run universities.

Lessons for Australians?

Murray discusses a 'big idea', which seems to me highly relevant to the style of community conduct and policy that shape Australia's future.

Australia and Australians hardly figure in this account of global history. After all, we have long been on the periphery. However, the Australian condition has changed and now favours a rise in high accomplishment. First, the primary centre of global industry and commerce has shifted from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Second, the Australia of our day offers openness to migration, capital flow, ideas and trade as never before. And we are attractive thanks to the comparatively high degree of social, political and economic freedom that have typically been a precondition for individual excellence. The reforms that have promoted these changes have also promoted a third important component in a climate favourable to human accomplishment: the growth of wealth. Doesn't Sydney now look and feel increasingly like one of those historic hotbeds of artistic and scientific creativity which Peter Hall and Charles Murray celebrate? To my mind, we are gaining critical mass and have good chances for savouring the satisfactions of high achievement, if only we persevere on the path taken since about 1980. What is so special about Australian culture at the start of the 21st century is the combination of time-tested Western values with the stimuli from nearby Asian civilisations. After languishing on the periphery for so long, we are now favoured by geography and cultural mix. These

opportunities would be squandered if we failed to heed one important lesson from Hall's historic analysis, namely that the right artistic and scientific chemistry can all too easily turn out to be transient. Pusillanimous protectionism, Luddite instincts and anti-innovative cultural cringes always lurk and can quickly terminate phases of cultural flowering, such as Renaissance Florence's, or Weimar Berlin's.

Readers, who feel like I do and who wish to celebrate the pursuit of artistic and scientific excellence in the spirit of Murray, will not simply read this book and then cast it aside. It has the potential of becoming a reference companion for our intellectual journey and for gaining a perspective on what is happening in this country in our time.

Buy one copy for yourself—and another for your favourite young friend.

Endnotes

¹ Murray asserts (p. 6) that the neolithic revolution occurred only once, in the Fertile Crescent. I thought it was by now well established that agricultural crops and animal husbandry were invented in many areas, once people respected each others' property rights: eastern Thailand (rice), China (millet, soy beans), the PNG highlands (yams, taro), the Maya lands (maize, beans), and probably northern Chile (llamas). See, for example, J. Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel* (London: Vintage Books, 1998), 119-128.

² Let us remind ourselves of F.A. Hayek's statement that 'culture is neither natural nor artificial, neither genetically transmitted nor rationally designed' ('Epilogue' to *The Political Order of a Free People, Law, Legislation and Liberty III*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 155).

³ The books mentioned in this section are:
A.E. Andersson-D.E. Andersson (eds.), *Gateways to the Global Economy* (Cheltenham, UK-Northampton, MA, 2002).

P. Bernholz, M. E. Streit, R. Vaubel (eds.), *Political Competition, Innovation and Growth* (Berlin-New York: Springer, 1998).

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J.A. Schumpeter, *Business Cycles*, 2 vols (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939).