

Preface

The difference between Europeans and Americans, some wag has suggested, is that Europeans think a hundred miles is a long distance, and Americans think a hundred years is a long time. I had a cogent reminder of that witticism in the summer of 2003 when my wife and I climbed a rocky hill in the Welsh town of Caernarfon. Spread out below us in an unexpected glory of sunlight was the whole recorded history of that little corner of the world.

The ground beneath us still rippled with earthworks from the Celtic hill fort that guarded the Menai Strait more than two and a half millennia ago. The Roman fort that replaced it was now the dim brown mark of an old archeological site on low hills off to the left. Edward I's great gray castle rose up in the middle foreground, and the high contrails of RAF jets on a training exercise out over the Irish Sea showed that the town's current overlords still maintained the old watch. Houses and shops from more than half a dozen centuries spread eastward as they rose through the waters of time, from the cramped medieval buildings of the old castle town straight ahead to the gaudy sign and sprawling parking lot of the supermarket back behind us.

It's been popular in recent centuries to take such sights as snapshots of some panorama of human progress, but as Caernarfon unfolded its past to me that afternoon, the view I saw was a different one. The green traces of the hill fort showed the highwater mark of a wave of Celtic expansion that flooded most of Europe in its day. The Roman fort marked the crest of another wave whose long ebbing — we call it the Dark Ages today — still offers up a potent reminder that history doesn't always lead to better things. The castle rose as medieval England's Plantagenet empire neared its own peak, only to break on the battlefields of Scotland and France and fall back into the long ordeal of the Wars of the Roses. The comfortable brick houses of the Victorian era marked the zenith

of another vanished empire, and it didn't take too much effort just then to see, in the brash American architecture of the supermarket, the imprint of a fifth empire headed for the same fate as the others.

Views like this are hard to find in North America. The suburban houses and schools where I spent my childhood were all built after the Second World War, on land that had been unbroken old growth forest three quarters of a century before that. In that setting, it was easy to believe the narrative of linear progress served up by the schools, the media, and the popular culture of the time. Even in the handful of Atlantic coast cities old enough to have a history worth mentioning in Old World terms, the marks of the past are buried deep enough beneath the detritus of the present that the same narrative seems to make sense. The energy crises of the 1970s shook this easy faith in progress, but the following decade saw that moment of uncertainty dismissed as an aberration, or rather a nightmare of sorts from which we had all thankfully awakened.

Readers who hope to see those same reassuring sentiments repeated here will be disappointed. The energy crises of the 1970s, as this book will show, were anything but an aberration. Rather, they marked industrial civilization's first brush with an unwelcome reality that will dominate the decades and centuries ahead of us. We have lived so long in a dream of perpetual economic and technological expansion that most people nowadays take progress for granted as the inevitable shape of the future. Our collective awakening from that fantasy may prove bitter — after sweet dreams, the cold light of morning is rarely a welcome sight — but at this turn of history's wheel, few things are more necessary.

No heresy raises hackles in the contemporary world quite so effectively as the suggestion that the soaring towers and equally lofty pretensions of the industrial world could become the crumbling ruins and dim memories of some future age. At the core of the modern world's identity is the conviction that our civilization is exempt from the slow trajectories of rise and fall that defined all of human history before the industrial revolution. It's an article of

contemporary faith, as deeply and sincerely held as any religious creed, that we have been singled out for some larger destiny — perhaps a science fiction future among the stars, perhaps a grand catastrophe bigger and brighter than any other civilization has managed for itself, but certainly not the slow ebb of a tide of expansion that has been flowing since our ancestors figured out how to tap into the Earth's reserves of fossil fuels. This conviction colors nearly all modern attempts to make sense of the future.

The word “decline” has been absent from our historical sense for so long that most people nowadays find the possibility of economic, cultural, and technological decline impossible to grasp. Still, that unacknowledged possibility defines the most probable future for the modern industrial world. We have to face the fact that our civilization may not be exempt from the common fate, and could very well follow the great civilizations of the past down the long slope into history's dumpster.

In the view from that Caernarfon hilltop, the similarities that united the empires of past and present stood out clearly enough to bring that awareness within reach. In the pages that follow, I hope to provide a similar view from a more abstract height. The topography in question was originally surveyed by an American petroleum geologist in the middle years of the 20th century. Its name is Hubbert's peak, and the road that leads down from it traces out the most likely future we face today — a future I've named the Long Descent.

Making sense of that future will require a reassessment of many aspects of the recent past and careful attention to the cultural narratives we use to impose structure on the inkblot patterns of human history. Those tasks will be taken up in the first two chapters of this book, “The End of the Industrial Age” and “The Stories We Tell Ourselves.” The chapter that follows, “Briefing for the Descent,” outlines the likely shape of our approaching decline into a deindustrial future. The next two chapters, “Facing the Deindustrial Age” and “Tools for the Transition,” map out the strategies and technologies that will be needed in an age of decline.

A final chapter, “The Spiritual Dimension,” is an attempt to make sense of the Long Descent in the context of that realm of ultimate meanings we awkwardly call “spiritual” or, perhaps, “religious.” An appendix, more technical in nature, outlines the theory of societal collapse that underlies the argument of this book.

No book is the product of a single mind, and this one in particular has benefited from the help I have received from many other people. Dr. Richard Duncan and the members of the Third Place Society introduced me to the world of peak oil and encouraged the first rough outlines of the ideas presented here. Richard Heinberg offered valuable feedback at several stages of the process; he and Wijnand de Vries also arranged for online publication of my initial essay “How Societies Fall: A Theory of Catabolic Collapse” when other options fell through. Many people provided valuable feedback on that essay and on subsequent posts on my blog, “The Archdruid Report,” where many of the ideas discussed in this book were first aired. All the staff of New Society Publishers, especially publisher Chris Plant and editor Linda Glass, were unfailingly enthusiastic and helpful.

Another series of intellectual debts begins with Corby Ingold, who introduced me to the modern Druid tradition. Philip Carr-Gomm, Chosen Chief of the Order of Bards Ovates and Druids (OBOD), helped me make sense of Druidry and posed cogent questions about the interface between Druid spirituality and the fate of the industrial world. The visit to Caernarfon described at the beginning of this introduction was made possible by OBOD’s Mount Haemus award for Druid scholarship, for which I also must thank the Order’s Patroness Dwina Murphy-Gibb. Dr. John Gilbert welcomed me into the Ancient Order of Druids in America (AODA), the Druid order I now head. He and many other members of AODA have played crucial roles in shaping my ideas on this and many other subjects. My wife Sara, finally, has had a central part in helping to shape this book, and in the rest of my life. My thanks go to all.