The twentieth century was a time of runaway growth in human population, consumption and technology, all of which placed tremendous demands on earth, air and water—the very elements of life. The urgent question of the twenty-first century is how, or whether, this can continue.

In A Short History of Progress, a runaway bestseller in his native Canada, Ronald Wright explains how our current predicament is as old as civilization. He brilliantly argues that only by understanding the patterns of progress and folly that humanity has repeated everywhere from ancient Rome to Easter Island can we learn to change our ways, and, with luck and wisdom, avoid a disastrous outcome.

'Ronald Wright is an historical philosopher with a profound understanding of other cultures.' Jan Morris

'I don’t care if you have never and will never read any kind of book at all, but you must read this one. If you can’t read, pay someone to read it to you...This wise, timely and brilliant book will be a bulwark against the short-sighted and the self-interested, and may also ironically save them from themselves.' Globe & Mail

'Provocative...illuminating and disturbing.' Kirkus Reviews

'Rarely have I read a book that is so gripping, so immediate and so important to our times. Jared Diamond will be jealous!' Robyn Williams, ABC
III

FOOLS' PARADISE

The greatest wonder of the ancient world is how recent it all is. No city or monument is much more than 5,000 years old. Only about seventy lifetimes, of seventy years, have been lived end to end since civilization began. Its entire run occupies a mere 0.2 per cent of the two and a half million years since our first ancestor sharpened a stone.

In the last chapter, I outlined the rise and fall of “man the hunter” in the Old Stone Age. His very progress, his perfection of weapons and techniques, led directly to the end of hunting as a way of life (except in a few places where conditions favoured the prey). Next came the discovery of farming — likely by women — during the New Stone Age, or Neolithic period, in several parts of the world. And from that grew our experiment of civilization, which began as many independent enterprises but, in the past few centuries, has coalesced (mainly by
hostile takeover) into one big system that covers and consumes the earth.

There are signs that this experiment, like hunting, is now in danger of falling victim to its own success. I've already mentioned nuclear weapons and greenhouse gases. The big bang in the atom is obviously deadlier than the small bangs in millions of engines; but if we are unlucky or unwise, both could end civilization on its present scale. Much simpler technologies have proved fatal in the past. Sometimes the trouble lies in a particular invention or idea; but it also lies in social structure, in the way people tend to behave when squeezed together in urban civilizations, where power and wealth rise upward and the many are ruled by the few.

In this chapter I want to talk about two traps sprung by progress: one on a small Pacific island, the other on the plains of Iraq.

As I mentioned earlier, the wrecks of our failed experiments lie in deserts and jungles like fallen airliners whose flight recorders can tell us what went wrong. Archaeology is perhaps the best tool we have for looking ahead, because it provides a deep reading of the direction and momentum of our course through time: what we are, where we have come from, and therefore where we are most likely to be going.

Unlike written history, which is often highly edited, archaeology can uncover the deeds we have forgotten, or have chosen to forget. A realistic understanding of the past is quite a new thing, a late fruit of the Enlightenment, although people of many times have felt the tug of what the Elizabethan antiquarian William Camden called the "back-looking curiosity." Antiquity, he wrote, "hath a certaine resemblance with eternity. [It] is a sweet food of the mind."

Not everyone's mind was so open in his day. A Spanish viceroy of Peru who had just seen the Inca capital high in the Andes, with its walls of giant stones fitted like gems, wrote back to his king: "I have examined the fortress that [the Incas] built . . . which shows clearly the work of the Devil . . . for it does not seem possible that the strength and skill of men could have made it."

Even today, some opt for the comforts of mystification, preferring to believe that the wonders of the ancient world were built by Atlanteans, gods, or space travellers, instead of by thousands toiling in the sun. Such thinking robs our forerunners of their due, and us of their experience. Because then one can believe whatever one likes about the past — without having to confront the bones, potsherds, and inscriptions which tell us that people all over the world, time and again, have made similar advances and mistakes.

About two centuries after the Spanish invasion of Peru, a Dutch fleet in the South Seas, far to the west of Chile and below the Tropic of Capricorn, came upon a sight hardly less awesome, and even more inexplicable, than the megalithic buildings of the Andes. On Easter Day, 1722, the Dutchmen sighted an unknown island so treeless and eroded that they mistook its barren hills for dunes. They
were amazed, as they drew near, to see hundreds of stone images, some as tall as an Amsterdam house. "We could not comprehend how it was possible that these people, who are devoid of heavy thick timber [or] strong ropes, nevertheless had been able to erect such images, which were fully thirty feet high." Captain Cook later confirmed the island's desolation, finding "no wood for fuel; nor any fresh water worth taking on board." He described the islanders' tiny canoes, made from scraps of driftwood stitched together like shoe leather, as the worst in the Pacific. Nature, he concluded, had "been exceedingly sparing of her favours to this spot."

The great mystery of Easter Island that struck all early visitors was not just that these colossal statues stood in such a tiny and remote corner of the world, but that the stones seemed to have been put there without tackle, as if set down from the sky. The Spaniards who had credited the Devil with the splendours of Inca architecture were merely unable to recognize another culture's achievements. But even scientific observers could not, at first, account for the megaliths of Easter Island. The figures stood there mockingly, defying common sense.

We now know the answer to the riddle, and it is a chilling one. Pace Captain Cook, Nature had not been unusually stingy with her favours. Pollen studies of the island's crater lakes have shown that it was once well watered and green, with rich volcanic soil supporting thick woods of the Chilean wine palm, a fine timber that can grow as big as an oak. No natural disaster had changed that: no eruption, drought, or disease. The catastrophe on Easter Island was man.

Rapa Nui, as Polynesians call the place, was settled during the fifth century A.D. by migrants from the Marquesas or the Gambiers who arrived in big catamarans stocked with their usual range of crops and animals: dogs, chickens, edible rats, sugar cane, bananas, sweet potatoes, and mulberry for making bark cloth. (Thor Heyerdahl's theory that the island was peopled from South America has not been supported by recent work, though sporadic contact between Peru and Oceania probably did take place.) Easter Island proved too cold for breadfruit and coconut palms, but it was rich in seafood: fish, seals, porpoises, turtles, and nesting seabirds. Within five or six centuries, the settlers had multiplied to about 10,000 people — a lot for sixty-four square miles. They built villages with good houses on stone footings and cleared all the best land for fields. Socially they split into clans and ranks — nobles, priests, commoners — and there may have been a paramount chief, or "king." Like Polynesians on some other islands, each clan began to honour its ancestry with impressive stone images. These were hewn from the yielding volcanic tuff of a crater and set up on platforms by the shore. As time went on, the statue cult became increasingly rivalrous and extravagant, reaching its apogee during Europe's high Middle Ages, while the Plantagenet kings ruled England.

Each generation of images grew bigger than the last, demanding more timber, rope, and manpower for hauling to the ahu, or altars. Trees were cut faster than they
could grow, a problem worsened by the settlers’ rats, who ate the seeds and saplings. By A.D. 1400, no more tree pollen is found in the annual layers of the crater lakes; the woods had been utterly destroyed by both the largest and the smallest mammal on the island.

We might think that in such a limited place, where, from the height of Terevaka, islanders could survey their whole world at a glance, steps would have been taken to halt the cutting, to protect the saplings, to replant. We might think that as trees became scarce, the erection of statues would have been curtailed, and timber reserved for essential purposes such as boatbuilding and roofing. But that is not what happened. The people who felled the last tree could see it was the last, could know with complete certainty that there would never be another. And they felled it anyway. All shade vanished from the land except the hard-edged shadows cast by the petrified ancestors, whom the people loved all the more because they made them feel less alone.

For a generation or so, there was enough old lumber to haul the great stones and still keep a few canoes seaworthy for deep water. But the day came when the last good boat was gone. The people then knew there would be little seafood and — worse — no way of escape. The word for wood, rakau, became the dearest in their language. Wars broke out over ancient planks and worm-eaten bits of jetsam. They ate all their dogs and nearly all the nesting birds, and the unbearable stillness of the place deepened with animal silences. There was nothing left now but the moai, the stone giants who had devoured the land. And still these promised the return of plenty, if only the people would keep faith and honour them with increase. But how will we take you to the altars? asked the carvers, and the moai answered that when the time came, they would walk there on their own. So the sound of hammering still rang from the quarries, and the crater walls came alive with hundreds of new giants, growing even bigger now they had no need of human transport. The tallest ever set on an altar is over thirty feet high and weighs eighty tons; the tallest ever carved is sixty-five feet long and more than two hundred tons, comparable to the greatest stones worked by the Incas or Egyptians. Except, of course, that it never budged an inch.

By the end there were more than a thousand moai, one for every ten islanders in their heyday. But the good days were gone — gone with the good earth, which had been carried away on the endless wind and washed by flash floods into the sea. The people had been seduced by a kind of progress that becomes a mania, an “ideological pathology,” as some anthropologists call it. When Europeans arrived in the eighteenth century, the worst was over; they found only one or two living souls per statue, a sorry remnant, “small, lean, timid and miserable,” in Cook’s words. Now without roof beams, many people were dwelling in caves; their only buildings were stone henhouses where they guarded this last non-human protein from one another day and night. The Europeans heard tales of how the warrior class had taken power, how the island had convulsed with burning villages, gory battles, and cannibal feasts. The one innovation of this
end-period was to turn the use of obsidian (a razor-keen volcanic glass) from toolmaking to weapons. Daggers and spearheads became the commonest artefacts on the island, hoarded in pits like the grenades and assault rifles kept by modern-day survivalists.

Even this was not quite the nadir. Between the Dutch visit of 1722 and Cook’s fifty years later, the people again made war on each other and, for the first time, on the ancestors as well. Cook found moai toppled from their platforms, cracked and beheaded, the ruins littered with human bone. There is no reliable account of how or why this happened. Perhaps it started as the ultimate atrocity between enemy clans, like European nations bombing cathedrals in the Second World War. Perhaps it began with the shattering of the island’s solitude by strangers in floating castles of unimaginable wealth and menace. These possessors of wood were also bringers of death and disease. Scuffles with sailors often ended with natives gunned down on the beach.

We do not know exactly what promises had been made by the demanding moai to the people, but it seems likely that the arrival of an outside world might have exposed certain illusions of the statue cult, replacing compulsive belief with equally compulsive disenchantment. Whatever its animus, the destruction on Rapa Nui raged for at least seventy years. Each foreign ship saw fewer upright statues, until not one giant was left standing on its altar. The work of demolition must have been extremely arduous for the few descendants of the builders. Its thoroughness and deliberation speak of

something deeper than clan warfare: of a people angry at their reckless fathers, of a revolt against the dead.

The lesson that Rapa Nui holds for our world has not gone unremarked. In the epilogue to their 1992 book, Easter Island, Earth Island, the archaeologists Paul Bahn and John Flenley are explicit. The islanders, they write:

carried out for us the experiment of permitting unrestricted population growth, profligate use of resources, destruction of the environment and boundless confidence in their religion to take care of the future. The result was an ecological disaster leading to a population crash. Do we have to repeat the experiment on [a] grand scale? Is the human personality always the same as that of the person who felled the last tree?

The last tree. The last mammoth. The last dodo. And soon perhaps the last fish and the last gorilla. On the basis of what police call “form,” we are serial killers beyond reason. But has this always been, and must it always be, the case? Are all human systems doomed to stagger along under the mounting weight of their internal logic until it crushes them? As I have proposed, the answers — and, I think, the remedies — lie in the fates of past societies.

Easter Island was an isolated mini-civilization in a constrained environment. How typical is it of civilization in general? In the previous chapter, I offered a technical definition: that civilizations are large, complex societies based on the domestication of plants, animals, and human beings, with towns, cities, governments, social
classes, and specialized professions. Both ancient and modern are covered by that. But Easter Island doesn’t meet all the criteria. At 10,000 people, it was small; it lacked cities, and its political structure was at best that of a chieftdom, not a state. However, it did have classes and professions (the stone carvers, for one), and its achievements were in a league with those of far bigger cultures. Its isolation also makes it uniquely important as a microcosm of more complex systems, including this big island on which we drift through space. Easter Island punched way above its weight; but it boxed alone, as if in a looking-glass, and we have been able to replay the moves by which it knocked itself out.

Some writers, seeing history in terms of weapons and winners, have over-emphasized the different rates at which cultures and continents developed. What strikes me as more surprising — and highly significant for finding out what kind of creature we humans are — is how little time it took people to do very similar things independently all around the world, even though they were working within different cultures and ecologies.

By 3,000 years ago, civilization had arisen in at least seven places: Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Mediterranean, India, China, Mexico, and Peru. Archaeology shows that only about half of these had received their crops and cultural stimuli from others. The rest had built themselves up from scratch without suspecting that anyone else in the world was doing the same. This compelling parallelism of ideas, processes, and forms tells us something important: that given certain broad conditions, human societies everywhere will move towards greater size, complexity, and environmental demand.

Easter Island’s little civilization was one of the last to develop independently. The earliest of all was Sumer, in what is now southern Iraq. The Sumerians, whose own ethnic and linguistic stock is unclear, set a pattern that Semitic cultures and others in the Old World would follow. They came to exemplify both the best and worst of the civilized life, and they told us about themselves in cuneiform script on clay tablets, one of the most enduring mediums for the human voice, a writing like the tracks of trained birds. They set down the oldest written stories in the world, a body of texts known as The Epic of Gilgamesh, compiled in “strong-walled Uruk, the city of great streets” around the time that Stonehenge and the first Egyptian pyramids were being built. Legends we know from the Hebrew Bible — the Garden of Eden, the Flood — appear in Gilgamesh in earlier forms, along with other tales deemed too racy, perhaps, for inclusion in the Pentateuch. One of these, the story of the wild-man Enkidu, who is seduced into the city by “a harlot, a child of pleasure,” recalls our transition from the hunting to the urban life:

And now the wild creatures had all fled away; Enkidu was grown weak, for wisdom was in him, and the thoughts of a man were in his heart. So he returned and sat down at the woman’s feet, and listened intently to what she said. “You are wise, Enkidu, and now you have become like a god.