



# Keeping Together in Time

*William H. McNeill*

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Could something as simple and seemingly natural as falling into step have marked us for evolutionary success? In *Keeping Together in Time* one of the most widely read and respected historians in America pursues the possibility that coordinated rhythmic movement--and the shared feelings it evokes--has been a powerful force in holding human groups together. As he has done for historical phenomena as diverse as warfare, plague, and the pursuit of power, William H. McNeill brings a dazzling breadth and depth of knowledge to his study of dance and drill in human history. From the records of distant and ancient peoples to the latest findings of the life sciences, he discovers evidence that rhythmic movement has played a profound role in creating and sustaining human communities. The behavior of chimpanzees, festival village dances, the close-order drill of early modern Europe, the ecstatic dance-trances of shamans and dervishes, the goose-stepping Nazi formations, the morning exercises of factory workers in Japan--all these and many more figure in the bold picture McNeill draws. A sense of community is the key, and shared movement, whether dance or military drill, is its mainspring. McNeill focuses on the visceral and emotional sensations such movement arouses, particularly the euphoric fellow-feeling he calls "muscular bonding." These sensations, he suggests, endow groups with a capacity for cooperation, which in turn improves their chance of survival.

A tour de force of imagination and scholarship, *Keeping Together in Time* reveals the muscular, rhythmic dimension of human solidarity. Its lessons will serve us well as we contemplate the future of the human community and of our various local communities.

## Keeping Together in Time Details

Date : Published October 30th 1997 by Harvard University Press (first published 1995)

ISBN : 9780674502307

Author : William H. McNeill

Format : Paperback 216 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Psychology, Anthropology, Music

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# From Reader Review Keeping Together in Time for online ebook

## Leonardo says

...human societies since the beginning of recorded history have used synchronized movement to create harmony and cohesion within groups, sometimes in the service of preparing for hostilities with other groups. McNeills conclusion suggests that synchronized movement and chanting might be evolved mechanisms for activating the altruistic motivations created in the process of group selection. The extreme self-sacrifice characteristic of group-selected species such as ants and bees can often be found among soldiers.

The Happiness Hypothesis Pág.237

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## Geoff says

A fun, thought-provoking book that sees profound significance in Maurice of Orange's early modern military drill manual, dances, and various other practices and artifacts involving synchronized or simultaneous movement by groups of people. As in virtually all books of such a broad scope and sweeping statements, it is not difficult to find points with which to quarrel. But it nonetheless gives the reader plenty to think about.

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## Laura Hellsten says

The idea is great and the thesis is interesting but such a sad fact that at least in the religious aspect he is mostly quoting quasi science or then adding up quotes and ideas from different times and places that just can't be generalized in this manner if one wants to be a "real" academic/researcher. Further more, the fact that he starts off from evolutionary theory and never seems to move much further than that just makes the thesis even more lacking in credibility. It stays mostly speculative from the beginning to the end. As populist/popular science it's a great and overall interesting overview, yet nothing I would base further research on.

Turn out his idea wasn't even that genius or even new - seems he has borrowed the whole plot from somebody else (that is only mentioned in a couple of footnotes!)

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## Jaimella Shaikh says

I was glad to track down a copy of this fascinating academic book through the American Council of Learning Societies print on demand service. This sliver of a book somehow manages to capture the importance of dance and drill through human history. McNeill draws on chimpanzee behaviour, dance in religious ceremonies, Greek phalanxes, Nazi Germany and Japanese callisthenics to support his thesis: 'Moving our muscles rhythmically and giving voice consolidate group solidarity by altering human feelings'. He calls this 'muscular bonding'.

Although this is an academic book, it is written in lively, limpid prose, as if McNeill is drawing his

expressiveness from the activities he describes - things that are 'felt, not talked about'. He describes his own time in the army where during close order drill he experienced 'A strange sense of personal enlargement; a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life, thanks to participation in a collective ritual'.

It could be argued that this feeling of boundary loss, of 'I' becoming 'We' is the purpose of any ritual. But McNeill embeds the phenomena in the muscular and draws on studies showing the brain's physiological response to movement. He describes ancient oarsman rowing in pairs to the beat of the drum, keeping perfect time to avoid the danger that any modern rower will recognise: a 'deviation of more than a few inches, and missing by a fraction of a second, meant a tangle of oars and loss of momentum'. Keeping together in time is about more than just bonding - it's about keeping efficient and staying safe.

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## **Benjamin De Baets says**

The muscular, rhythmic dimension of human sociality is and always has been a powerful force at work among humankind, whether for good or ill. Successive levels of communication-muscular and gestural, then vocal and verbal, then written and mathematical-are what made Homo sapiens the dominant species it has become. Our future, like our past, depends on how we utilize these modes of coordinating common effort for agreed purposes. So far, the human record is one of extraordinary success in wringing more and more food and other forms of energy out of the natural environment. There is no reason to suppose that possibilities of increasing our power over natural flows of matter and energy have been exhausted, or that human inventiveness has ceased to operate. On the contrary, inventiveness can be counted on to exploit sentiments aroused by keeping together in time in the future as in the past. This primitive level of sociality has lost none of its power to create communities, and since we need communities as acutely as ever, opportunities for invention that will help to shape social solidarity in the future are unusually wide open.

Our contemporary disregard of this aspect of human sociality is unwise and probably also unsustainable over the long haul. Time will tell. In the meanwhile it is something to mull over, wonder about, and-for bolder spirits-to experiment with.

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## **Stephen Hull says**

This book is based on a fascinating premise, that when a group of people perform a set of physical actions, together and in time with each other, it builds social cohesion. Thus dance, military drill and group calisthenics have been and continue to be ways in which to forge a group consciousness and, just as important, reduce the importance of individual identity.

So far, so good. In fact, I'd reflected on the similarities between dance and drill back when I was a teenager, much to the discomfort of my air cadet NCO. The author provides an exhaustive (and exhausting) compendium of historical information to show how, arguably, this has always been the case. The key to the book's problems lie in the word "arguably" because ultimately the author is attempting to prove an unprovable thesis and to show unshowable connections. Consider this small selection of quotes from the book (believe me, there are many more):

p.95 "In general, it is safe to say that... it seems probable that... But it seems likely that..."

p.96 “one can only suspect that...”  
p.107 “I suggest that... If so, this would indeed...”  
P.115 “I am not about to address the question anew, wishing merely to ask...”  
p.116 “...presumably...”  
p.119 “...there is every reason to suppose...”  
p.121 “We may accept enough... to believe that...”  
p.152 “But in all probability...”  
p.153 “It is plausible to suppose...”

The end result is a very dreary read. While I love the idea behind the book, its execution is painful: repetitive, dry and full of wishful thinking. There is interesting information to be had here, but you'll work to acquire it. Perhaps this should be considered a book to dip into rather than read (note my start and finish dates).

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## **Dylan Groves says**

want to believe it so badly i dont care if its true

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## **Patrick Stuart says**

This was published in 1995 and is available online under an academic POD scheme.

McNeills idea is that unified muscular action on the part of human groups, whether through dance, drill, calisthenics, or via some other means, plays a vital role in forming group solidarity in human societies, and that the effects of this keeping together in time have been used at various times, sometimes as a source of emotional resilience in societies under stress, and at other times as a kind of battery or power source for successful or expansionist societies.

He says a bit more than that, his initial observations are very interesting and the more reality-based aspects to his argument are compelling, but he has a flaky mind and slips easily into totalising statements and generalities more typical of the 70's than the 90's.

The strongest part of his argument is that certain kinds of work in which the muscular effort of large numbers of people are focused upon a narrow area, like a series of blacksmiths combining to beat a piece of metal in rhythm, or sailors pulling on a rope, or where all the bodies are not focused on one object but are arranged closely in space and performing the same action at the same time, like planters in a field or infantry on a battlefield, is either only possible, or massively enhanced when people act together in time.

McNeil would claim that this capacity is unique to man. or at least, he would say that the ability to move together in time, as a group, to music, is unique to man. Animals do flock and move as one, but not to music, and I do not think they manipulate as one.

The idea of this kind of very precise uniform rhythm being a uniquely human quality is fascinating to me. It lead me to consider if perhaps movement, or the body and it actions, are not the original syntax to language

and that just as written and printed communication colonised verbal and spoke communication, absorbing its forms and then only slowly altering them, perhaps spoken language similarly absorbed the nature of muscular syntax, first simply emphasising motion like a tennis players grunt, then developing in complexity, then learning to create verbally the context and complexity that previously could be provided only by the body, and then expanding into new potentialities of description unbound by the body, but still ultimately rooted in it.

This would mean the existence of a pre-oral human culture that provided its basis.

Anyway, McNeill talks first about the importance of muscular bonding in small communities and in unified work, then goes on to religion and then finally to war and politics, essentially moving forward in time through all of these.

It's during the religion statement that we get the real motherload of surprisingly confident assertions and totalising statements. These are never frustrating, McNeil is a large hearted outgoing totalizer rather than a reductionist cutter-off, in which case his slight flakiness would be much more offensive, but he's still probably wrong about a fair amount of the specific stuff he says.

If McNeil is right in everything he says then muscular bonding is the secret engine behind almost every major shift in human culture, the rise and fall of empires and the identity of nations.

His work on religion is fascinating though, there seems to be a deep, permanent, continual and endless struggle for power between the head and the body in world religion. Powerful new forms of religious expression and feeling are continually being developed, often linked to complex emergent forms of muscular bonding that relate the transcendent directly through the movements of the body, then they become successful, then the hierarchy tries to tame or repress all the uncontrolled movement that originally went along with the first explosion of expression, then it happens all over again.

The body, it seems, is not just immediate, animal and rooted in the present, which we probably already suspected, but also timeless, outside cause and consequence, capable of directly connecting with the higher realities through movement. Dance as prayer. It is belief rooted in the people, emerging from their practice, often ignoring or escaping known structures of power and control.

The head by comparison, is highly aware of time and extremely aware of authority and hierarchy. It prefers to reach the godhead through introversion and separation from the body and it is continually frustrated that people keep. fucking. \_dancing\_ and moving around in an irregular way.

The head is rather unaware of the achievements of the body and tends to either edit them out of its histories or just ignore them. Something carried on to the present day when we compare the staggering shitload of stuff we know about words and our comparative poverty of knowledge about movement and its place in our history and development, despite it certainly being more central and vital than words.

The chapter of politics on war looks at the development, and loss of close-order-drill (the Spartans were very dancy, Athenians refused to learn drill properly as messed with their individuality), then the loss or degradation of drill as a military technique, then its recovery in the early modern period and its effects in China and Europe.

Close-Order drill being part of a feedback loop with certain aspects of civilisation makes a lot of sense. The way it interrelates with the formation of a mass military identity, and the sometimes unpredictable way that

interrelates with power structures, is interesting.

He also takes time to look at the development of callisthenics in the modern period and this is a little gem. We get to see the very different ways national cultures adopt (or refuse to adopt) the principals of civilian mass movement. The Germans are into it for masculine reasons. The Brits don't mind women and the poor doing it but the ruling class prefer team sports. Same in the U.S. The Czechs fucking love it. The French absolutely despise it, and won't do that or sport, unless a bicycle is involved.

It's a fascinating and very short book and I would recommend it for anyone with even a general interest in the subject.

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## **Scott says**

I added this to my To Read list since both Brian Eno and Stewart Brand include McNeill in their Long Now lists. It's about the role of rhythmic coordinated movement (dance, drills) in human communities.

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## **Josh says**

William Hardy McNeill argues in *Keeping Together in Time* that dance and close-ordered drill have played an integral role in human socialization throughout world history. He argues that dance/drill (or, "keeping together in time" with rhythmic movements) satisfies a subconscious, irrational, emotional need among humans and promotes subgroup affiliation, "fellow feeling," and communal bonding. McNeill's slim volume was based on a series of lectures he delivered in Europe. While his lectures focused primarily on the relationship between close-order drill and military effectiveness in world history, this volume tries to broaden the thematic analysis to early hunter-gatherer societies, ecstatic religious practice, politics, and war. McNeill does not try to provide definite answers to his hypothesized relationship between rhythmic movement and human bonding, but uses this book as a thought-piece to explore some potentialities for dance playing a prominent role in the rise of civilized humanity. I would suspect that many of his propositions have also become outdated as the evolutionary sciences upon which he bases some of his claims have surely progressed since the 1990s.

Nevertheless, I find the implications of his research intriguing for twentieth-century military history. McNeill proposes that close-order drill plays a prominent role in establishing communal bonding and a sense of comradeship among those who participate in rote exercises during basic training. McNeill remembers experiencing similar feelings of "muscular bonding" [a term McNeill uses as short-hand to describe the increased sense of fellow feeling and subsumption of individual identity into the collective that occurs during sustained rhythmic movements] during his time in the service during the 1940s. In some time periods, McNeill speculates that the social bonds established through routine drill helped solidify bonds of comradeship before men were tested in battle—thus, primary-group cohesion (a.k.a "Band of Brothers") could occur before men ever experienced combat.

This leads to a few interesting questions about the U.S. Army in Vietnam. What happens, then, when recruits are separated from their basic training classes and sent overseas as individuals to replace casualties in active units? While these men would have experienced the "boundary loss" of individual identity during close-order

drill and have likely cemented relationships with comrades through rote exercise and rhythmic movement, they surely lost these social benefits of basic training when they were spliced out from basic platoons and sent overseas. As McNeill indicates, it is difficult to quantify or precisely define how dance and drill played a particular role in socialization (especially when abstracted as a general theme in world history) when separated from the plethora of other factors at play. Nevertheless, it would seem that the "muscular bonding" that occurs during basic training certainly played some role in the relative psychological and social well-being of soldiers shipped overseas with their training cohort and those sent abroad as individual replacements.

On the whole, I probably wouldn't recommend this book to most readers, aside from some niche specialties among military historians and world historians . . . and, of course, fans of William H. McNeill.

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