



The 12 Greatest Dates

by HENDRIK WILLEM VAN LOON

THE MOST IMPORTANT date in every man's life is, of course, the day on which he was born. He may forget all other things, but that date will remain forever fixed in his memory. But when we come to the next "twelve most important dates," we get into considerable difficulties and probably no two people will make the same choice.

As far as I am concerned, the really "most important dates" were those connected with certain events of which we have lost all recollection. I refer to those inventions which have made *homo sapiens* something different from his brethren of the animal kingdom and which, all of them, have been the work of anonymous plodders and scientists who lived and died long before we kept any written record of both major and minor events of public importance.

Who, for example, made the first wheel? And yet without that simple wooden disk should we ever have been able to get beyond the point of civilization reached by some of our anthropoid cousins? The American Indian never achieved the wheel. If he had (given the extraordinary mathematical possibilities of his savage brain) would not Europe to-day be a vast Indian colony, with a few reservations for slowly decaying groups of measles-ridden Germans and Frenchmen and Lithuanians?

Then there is the alphabet, without which our modern era would never have developed into the Paper Age that makes it different from all other bygone forms of civilization. Who was the genius who first of all thought of the possibility of such a flexible instrument of

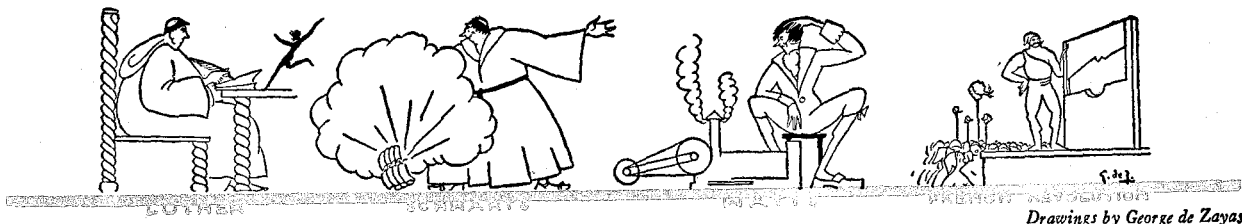
thought preservation? We do not know, although he was probably the greatest benefactor of the human race that ever drew breath.

And the same thing holds good for the countless people who did their share to make us what we are to-day; who gave us little disks of gold as a substitute for oxen and beehives; who devised the incredibly ingenious system of credit which has become an everyday part of our existence; who thought of chimneys (which turned houses from uncomfortable pigsties into pleasant dwelling places). All of them lived and died and did certain fairly definite things at very definite moments, and all of them, therefore, are fit subjects for the date-book makers. But alas, they lived and died anonymously, as far as we are concerned, and it is impossible to include them in our list.

I am therefore forced to make my choice from the very limited number of actual dates that are at our disposal, but before I do this I should like to say a few words about the entrance requirements which those dates had to pass before they could qualify for my list.

Take a very commonplace example. I did not include 1492 — and for good reason. Undoubtedly in that year Columbus did sail the ocean blue. But his act was not sufficiently "decisive" to be included among the Notable Twelve. Many other people had been in America before the Genoese decided to try his luck with a final Indian venture. He never would have been able to reach the Azores without the great economic and scientific revival of the thirteenth century, which gave him the

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Drawings by George de Zayas

Which Will YOU Select?

A PRIZE CONTEST

ON THE OPPOSITE PAGE Hendrik Willem van Loon selects the twelve greatest dates in history. Next month THE FORUM will publish the list of dates which Will Durant considers the twelve greatest, to be followed in the November issue by the chronological candidates of H. G. Wells. In these papers you will discover three important minds trying to work out a scale of values by which they can measure the importance of our developing civilization in true perspective. It was no easy task, and when the other two articles appear, you will see that they reflect a healthy difference of opinion. Durant does not agree with van Loon, and Wells does not agree with either.

If you have not altogether forgotten the history you learned in school and college, you will probably find fault with the selections of all three. Your first reaction will be to wonder why van Loon, or Durant, or Wells left out this date and that date, which you will think represents a more important event than any of those listed. And it will all depend upon your point of view, and upon what you believe are the most significant aspects of twentieth-century culture. If your interests run to science, you will naturally think that the great scientific discoveries meant much more to the world than, say, the Battles of Marathon and Zama, or the death of Alexander the Great, which were cited by Mr. van Loon. On the other hand, if ideas mean more to you than objective facts, your natural tendency will be to pick out those ideas which have done most to free the human mind, and you will say that the dates when such ideas were first advanced

are far more important than all the other dates in history.

Any attempt to evaluate the many forces and cross currents of civilization opens up so many avenues for thoughtful speculation that THE FORUM has decided to inaugurate a prize contest, taking the articles by van Loon, Durant, and Wells as a starting point. These three gentlemen have chosen what they think are the twelve greatest dates in all history. What values in current life and thought, with their roots deep in the past, have they ignored? What events, full of meaning for our own times, have they overlooked? The purpose of the contest will be to find the best answers to these questions — to pick the twelve greatest dates in history which van Loon, Durant, and Wells omitted, and to tell why each of your selections is important.

The rules of the contest are as follows:

1. Three cash prizes will be awarded: a first prize of \$250; a second prize of \$150; and a third prize of \$100. If there should be a tie for any of the three prizes, the full amount will be awarded to each contestant.
2. The prize-winning papers will be published in THE FORUM.
3. The contest is open to everyone, except employees of THE FORUM and their families.
4. Each contestant must list twelve dates which are *not* among those chosen by van Loon, Durant, and Wells, and state briefly why each date is important. The papers will be judged equally upon the dates chosen and the reasons given for their choice.
5. Papers must not be more than 1200 words