Having examined many aspects of the seventeenth-century intellectual movement internally, however, it may be useful for us if we enlarge our perspective, standing some distance away from the story that we have been studying, and try to find the bearings of these events on the whole history of Western civilisation.

Until a comparatively recent date—that is to say, until the sixteenth or the seventeenth century—such civilisation as existed in our whole portion of the globe had been centred for thousands of years in the Mediterranean, and during the Christian era had been composed largely out of Graeco-Roman and ancient Hebrew ingredients....

In these circumstances it requires to be explained why the West should have come to hold the leadership in this part of the world; and, considering the Graeco-Roman character of European culture in general, it is necessary to account for the division of the continent and to show why there should ever have arisen anything which we could call the civilisation of the West....

An important factor in the decline of the East and the rise of Western leadership, however, was one which has been unduly overlooked in our historical teaching, for it has played a decisive part in the shaping of the map of Europe, as well as in the story of European civilisation itself. From the fourth to the twentieth century one of the most remarkable aspects of the story—the most impressive conflict that spans fifteen hundred years—is the conflict between Europe and Asia, a conflict in which down to the time of Newton's Principia it was the Asiatics who were on the aggressive. From the fourth to the seventeenth century—when they still expected to reach the Rhine—the greatest menace to any culture at all in Europe were the hordes of successive invaders from the heart of Asia.... These hordes—generally Turkish or Mongol in character—sometimes succeeded one another so quickly that one group was thrust forward into Europe by the pressure of others in the rear.

A primary aspect of the Renaissance, however, as we have seen, is the fact that it completes and brings to its climax the long process by which the thought of antiquity was being recovered and assimilated in the middle ages.... The course of the seventeenth century...represents one of the great episodes in human experience, which ought to be placed...amongst the epic adventures that have helped to make the human race what it is. It represents one of those periods when new things are brought into the world and into history out of men's own creative activity, and their own wrestlings with truth. There does not seem to be any sign that the ancient world, ..., was moving towards anything like the scientific revolution, or that the Byzantine Empire, in spite of the continuity of its classical tradition, would ever have taken hold of ancient thought and so remoulded it by a great transforming power. The scientific revolution we must regard, therefore, as a creative product of the West—depending on a complicated set of conditions which existed only in western Europe.... And not only was a new factor introduced into history at this time ... but it proved to be so capable of growth, and so many-sided in its operations, that it consciously
assumed a directing role from the very first, and, so to speak, began to take control of the other factors—just as Christianity in the middle ages had come to preside over everything else, percolating into every corner of life and thought.

Now I think it would be true to say that, for the historian...there are not in any absolute sense civilisations that rise and fall—there is just the unbroken web of history... But we cannot hold our history in our minds without any landmarks, or as an ocean without fixed points.... Similarly, though everything comes by antecedents and mediations—and these can be traced farther and farther back without the mind ever coming to rest—still, we can speak of certain epochs of crucial transition, when the subterranean movements come above ground, and new things are palpably born, and the very face of the earth can be seen to be changing. On this view we may say that in regard not merely to the history of science but to civilisation and society as a whole the transformation becomes obvious, and the changes become congested, in the latter part of the seventeenth century. We may take the line that here, for practical purposes, our modern civilisation is coming out in a perceptible manner into the daylight.

We know now that what was emerging toward the end of the seventeenth century was a civilisation exhilaratingly new perhaps, but strange as Nineveh and Babylon. That is why, since the rise of Christianity, there is no landmark in history that is worth to be compared with this.