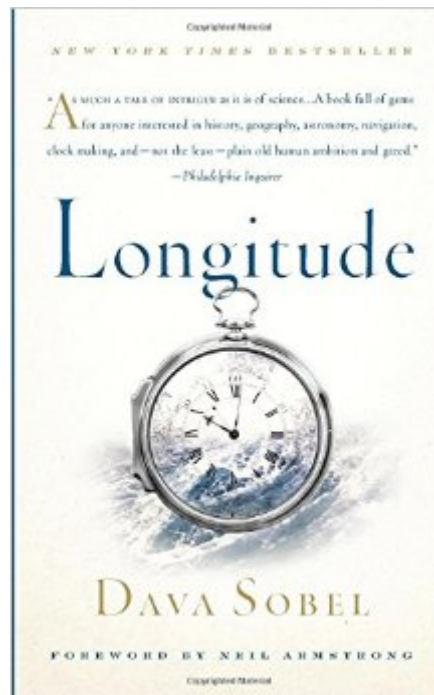


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Longitude: The True Story Of A Lone Genius Who Solved The Greatest Scientific Problem Of His Time



Synopsis

Anyone alive in the eighteenth century would have known that "the longitude problem" was the thorniest scientific dilemma of the day-and had been for centuries. Lacking the ability to measure their longitude, sailors throughout the great ages of exploration had been literally lost at sea as soon as they lost sight of land. Thousands of lives and the increasing fortunes of nations hung on a resolution. One man, John Harrison, in complete opposition to the scientific community, dared to imagine a mechanical solution-a clock that would keep precise time at sea, something no clock had ever been able to do on land. Longitude is the dramatic human story of an epic scientific quest and of Harrison's forty-year obsession with building his perfect timekeeper, known today as the chronometer. Full of heroism and chicanery, it is also a fascinating brief history of astronomy, navigation, and clockmaking, and opens a new window on our world.

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Customer Reviews

If you can't get Newton and Galileo to solve your scientific problems, who do you turn to? Well the English government turned to everyone, hoping that some budding scientist could figure out the problem of calculating Longitude at sea. They even offered a huge reward. Why was it important? Without precise longitude, there was no way to steer a ship with any precision. Thus English ships were being wrecked and precious cargo wasn't making its scheduled delivery. The scientists worked and worked on the problem. Many men including Edmund Halley thought that by mapping the stars, one could use the night sky as a map at sea. Although he knew little about science, a simple

clockmaker named John Harrison thought that well-built clock with a dual face would solve the problem. You get to guess which person was right. Longitude is both a vibrant story of the pains of solving an important problem, and a biography of the man who solved it. I don't tend to read the subject of science all that much, because I find it dry, but not so with this book. Author Dava Sobel lends an understanding of the human element in science. That Harrison has to fight snobbery first and later jealousy demonstrates how ego and self-importance can get in the way of the most important problems facing human beings. Not only will you learn how average people can solve enormous tasks, but you'll nod as the familiar self-promoters try to take the credit.

Having bought and read "Longitude", the only lightly illustrated original hardback version, I wanted to know more about how the actual clocks worked, and I wanted to see them, without making a trans-Atlantic pilgrimage to Greenwich. Hence, when I saw an illustrated version of "Longitude", I had to buy it. This book contains the original text, with no additions, except for the illustrations. The photographs are beautifully done, as is the printing. My only hesitation in not awarding the book five stars is that I was hoping for one of two things; either an illustrated version of the original, with a couple of pictures of each chronometer, at a reasonable price, or a more detailed illustrated version, with more information on how the chronometers actually work. What we ended up with is a compromise. Beautiful pictures of the chronometers, but little extra detail of Harrison's marvelous inventions. Still, an improvement on the original, which is an excellent book, one I have read several times. Highly recommended. By the way, when I purchased this book, I donated my original version to the library.

So as not to repeat myself and try the patience of those customers who have already read "Longitude", I will confine my comments to the additional material in the illustrated version. If you haven't read "Longitude", it's a great little book, and I refer you to reviews by myself and others on that book's page. "The Illustrated Longitude" contains the entire original text of Dava Sobel's book, "Longitude", along with 178 illustrations provided by William J. H. Andrewes. Mr. Andrewes hosted the Longitude Symposium that inspired Dava Sobel's book and has himself published the annotated proceedings of the Symposium in his book entitled "The Quest for Longitude". The illustrations in this book consist of portraits of people and photographs of documents and instruments which are referenced in the text. The documents include maps, journals, pages of books, and official decrees. Nearly every major player in the Longitude drama is represented with at least one portrait. Most fascinating are the photographs of the time pieces, themselves. I found the illustrations to be only

mildly interesting until I got to the discussion of John Harrison's longitude clocks. At this point, I was astonished to see how grand and beautiful H-1 was...and still is, and how small and elegant H-4 is in contrast. I found it difficult to picture Harrison's clocks while reading Dava Sobel's book, and the ability to see them in this illustrated version has left me even more impressed with Mr. Harrison's work. All of Harrison's clocks are represented with large color photographs, and many of the later copies of his works by Larcum Kendall, Thomas Mudge, John Arnold, and Thomas Earnshaw are also pictured. I wish there were more illustrations addressing the workings of Harrison's clocks, but that's probably a subject for another book. I recommend "The Illustrated Longitude" to fans of John Harrison's work and early chronometers who will not have the opportunity to see these incredible instruments in person.

If you never knew before what a major problem it was before the world knew how to measure longitude (and I certainly didn't), Dava Sobel tells of both the problem and the man who finally solved it in this easy-to-understand and interesting book. Meet John Harrison, the clockmaker/genius who fights the British scientific establishment to prove his method of measuring longitude does work. I found this book to be a quick, interesting read on a topic, and a man, most people don't know anything about, but should.

I originally read a library copy of "Longitude" back when it was published in 1995. But I hankered for a copy of my own. Recently I discovered this new illustrated version of the original and must say that it's a real find. The pictures really do help one understand better the magnitude of William Harrison's breakthrough discovery about how to use a very accurate timepiece (now called a "chronometer") to determine longitude and help ships avoid the tragedy of becoming lost with potentially tragic consequences. The text is not so technical to put off a non-expert. I'm sure one could learn more about the workings of the chronometer, but I suspect a more detailed explanation might have put it beyond the comprehension of many of us.

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