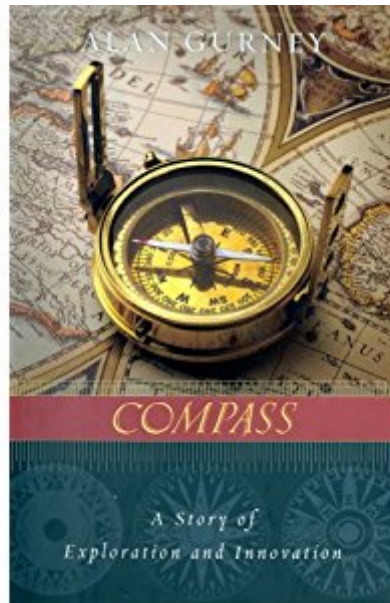


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Compass: A Story Of Exploration And Innovation



Synopsis

This book chronicles the misadventures of those who attempted to perfect the compass, an instrument so precious to 16-century seamen that, by law, any man found tampering with it had his hand pinned to the mast with a dagger. From the time man first took to the seas until only 1,000 years ago, sight and winds were the sailor's only navigational aids. It was not until the development of the compass that maps and charts could be used with any accuracy. Even so, it would be hundreds of years and thousands of shipwrecks before the marvelous instrument was perfected. And its history up to modern times is filled with the stories of disasters that befell sailors who misused it.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Compass takes us back to the day when compasses were not understood, performed poorly, broke, were inconsistent, and often pointed many, many degrees from North. Yet it was all early mariners had. Alan tells the story of the development of the compass, particularly the marine compass, from the days of a magnetized piece of steel floating in a bowl of water to today's current marvel, with multiple magnets used to avoid sorts of errors like semicircular deviation and heeling error. Unfortunately, it is not equal to Dava Sobel's great book on Finding the Longitude. The information seems scarcer, and the writing is not quite as good. It is amazing to learn that almost 1,000 years had to pass before most if not all the errors of a compass were figured out and corrected. Still highly recommended. If you navigate, you should have this book to learn the complexity of the compass in your vehicle.

The compass is a fascinating instrument. So simple, but so critical to any traveler. Gurney starts by telling us about the compass disasters. Thousands of people have died by assuming the compass was a simple device, always true and easy to read. As any Boy Scout can tell you, the compass is almost always wrong. It is predictably wrong, but one needs to know the correction formula. Given this framework, Gurney organizes his tale upon two themes. First, how does the compass design facilitate easy readings and correct interpretation. Second, did governmental organizations contribute or impede good compass design. In the best light, bureaucracies have to balance the need for 'accuracy' against 'ease of use'. In the worst light, the story is simply one of greed and aristocratic pride. Gurney makes fun of magnetic charlatans and the bureaucrats they fool, but he could have done then settle for a good laugh. The book spends a chapter or two introducing the early evolution of navigational compasses, but doesn't really get interesting until Gurney's two themes come into focus. They emerge when the British Admiralty takes on the challenge of determining 'north' from an always shifting terrestrial magnetic field. Gurney does a good job bringing his cast of characters to life. There are funny tales about the Royal Society's first 'Museum of Natural History', which required one visit to 'apply' for an entry pass, a second visit to pick up the pass, and a third day trip to actually go inside. Another tale discusses a quack doctor's solution to impotence and fertility: 2 tons of magnets under a bed, a string quartet behind a curtain and a mattress filled with stallion hair. Astronomer Halley comes off looking like Star Trek's Captain Kirk. Lord Kelvin's story is not so attractive.

It's an easy read, and at times a bit funny. I learned a lot, but not as much as I could have. I didn't learn much because the author assumed that I knew more than I did. He mentions terms once and expects that you'll remember them. It's nice to be treated like an intelligent adult, but because I knew next-to-nothing about the subject, I was constantly flipping back to see what words meant. However, if you know a little bit about sailing and navigation, this book is for you. I enjoyed it, even without a background.

No doubt the publisher's aim was to create another "Longitude", but I think "Compass" is even better. Gurney is very good at pen portraits of the many brilliant and eccentric characters who wander into his yarn. The sheer stubbornness with which extremely bright people defended their ideas, long after they were proved wrong or even dangerous, can give one pause. There's no shortage of people like that in our modern society. What gives the book its particular charm is that

the story of the compass is one of advancing technology exposing ever-newer areas of ignorance. Before the first iron-hulled ship was built, who knew that pounding and riveting iron in a dockyard would magnetize the metal? Or that a compass on a metal-hulled ship would give different readings based on the direction the ship was facing?

I learned a LOT about compasses from this book, and I have literally written instruction manuals for teaching about compass use. I am eternally grateful for Gurney's hard work in bringing me such great information mingled with engaging stories that give them vivid context. But I found the whole story to be overly British-centric. Gurney mentions some evolutions of the compass outside of Britain, and he does a good job at the end, at least mentioning how various Brits discarded valuable clues about compasses they had clearly seen over the second millennium. But I think Gurney is at least 10% as guilty as the bureaucratic villains of his book, shining his spotlight on the British advances, and giving cursory treatment to the non-British advances. I mean this in the best light possible: the subtitle ought to be "the evolution of the British marine compass." I also learned an incredible amount of history about the British empire at their acme. Gurney helps me understand both what the Brits gave to the world, and how their bureaucracy routinely shot them in the foot.

Any technology, navigation or boating nerd will appreciate the history described in this book. The development, obstacles, and even politics surrounding the development and improvements of ships' compasses are described, and it's both entertaining and informative. The author has done a wonderful job. I don't know how he found the time, between designing amazing sailboats. I suspect he time-traveled on the side.

The book is easy to read and has lots of details and stories about the history of the compass. A view of world history through the compass and well worth the read. Recommended for people interested in history of science and also naval/shipping history.

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