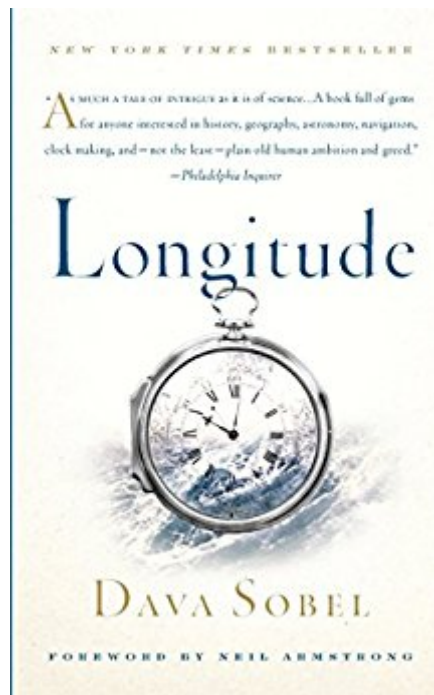




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# **Longitude: The True Story Of A Lone Genius Who Solved The Greatest Scientific Problem Of His Time**



## 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. The scientific establishment of Europe-from Galileo to Sir Isaac Newton-had mapped the heavens in both hemispheres in its certain pursuit of a celestial answer. In stark contrast, one man, John Harrison, 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.

## Book Information

File Size: 824 KB

Print Length: 191 pages

Publisher: Bloomsbury USA; 1 edition (July 5, 2010)

Publication Date: July 5, 2010

Language: English

ASIN: B003WUYE66

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #5,125 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #1 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Science > Earth Sciences > Geography #6 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Science > History & Philosophy #7 in Kindle Store > Science & Math > Earth Sciences > Geography

## Customer Reviews

I first read the Danson book, thinking this was the book Mark Knopfler based his "Sailing to Philadelphia" on. Afterwards I learned it was the Pynchon book that birthed the song. Longitude offers descriptive history of clocks and astronomy as two methods for finding longitude, which was

so sought after for British shipping and sailing. Having traveled to London, I spent one day visiting the Royal Observatory in Greenwich after reading these books. Returning home after that experience, I was urgently wanted to re-read both books again. Sorbel writes enthusiastically and holds attention without including extraneous detail which might bog down the reading, and after reading *Longitude* the second time- now I want to go back to the observatory and also to the clock museum in Guildhall, which I did not see. The science of positioning on the Earth is fascinating and anyone who finds global positioning and astronomy intriguing should read this book

Although I stumbled across this book after I had seen the television production based on it back in the mid nineties, starring Michael Gambon and Jeremy Irons, I didn't actually buy it and read it until I had watched the show again on recently. It's disappointing that there are no illustrations or photographs of Harrison's marine clocks, save the illustration of H-4 on the cover of the electronic edition of the book. But despite that the book was a pure joy to read and I appreciated the author's use of humor in her writing, which to me makes any book just that much better to read, even though it is indeed a rather serious subject. My hat goes off to Dava Sobel for making the subject of longitude extremely interesting to read about.

Suppose you wanted to figure out where you were on earth. You could make a fair guess at your north-south location between the North Pole and South Pole -- that is, you could determine your latitude -- by waiting for the sun to reach its highest point, then determining the angle from the horizon to the sun, then doing a bunch of math. But where you are on an east-west line -- that is, to determine longitude? This is much harder. This book tells the story of longitude and how the problem of determining longitude was solved. It begins with a particularly disastrous British naval accident in 1707, after which Parliament established an X-Prize of sorts for methods to accurately determine longitude, to be administered by a Board of Longitude. The story then follows the two methods contending for the prize: those based upon examination of the positions of astronomical bodies, and those based upon accurately tracking the time at one's home port. (Knowing the time in, say, Greenwich would provide the time offset to a known longitude. From there simple division into twenty-four hours would reveal longitude of precision determined by the timekeeping method.) The story particularly follows John Harrison, the eccentric autodidact who built the first truly accurate seaborne clocks, and his efforts to win the prize; but it also tracks the efforts of the leading scientific minds toward an astronomical method. Behind all this lie the politics of the Board of Longitude, in particular its excess of faith in astronomical methods, and disdain for chronometric methods, as the

latter took the clear lead. This book is a popular account of the problem of longitude: if you're looking for an academic account of the story, look elsewhere. (And perhaps be wary of too easily accepting its assertions as fact: Wikipedia claims that the book unhesitatingly repeats a couple myths concerning the 1707 naval disaster, suggesting that perhaps not all facts this book relates are certainly so.) For that it remains entertaining throughout, giving a nice survey of story and its developments. It's definitely worth a read to get an idea of how ship-based navigation worked in a time before GPS and modern communication aids, and accurate clocks on every wrist (or phone, these days) -- which is to say, not always well. A few complaints about the Kindle edition specifically. That foreword by Neil Armstrong touted on the cover? No, not yours -- it's not here. And some of the end bits mention illustrations of various clocks encountered in the book -- illustrations not in this edition. (In fact there are no images here beyond the cover image. I can't tell if that's a limitation of the Kindle edition, or of the original book [particularly as some reviews here discuss an illustrated version], so I can't hold it against the Kindle edition specifically. Either way it's a minor gripe you should be aware of.) In closing I'll say one thing: I'll never see the card with the sextant on it in the *7 Wonders Game* board game quite the same way again.

I loved the detail and love that the author put into this book. We don't often think how absolutely critical accurate time-keeping is. For example, our global GPS satellite system is "just" scores of super accurate clocks orbiting the Earth sending out time signals that allow us to calculate accurate Latitude/Longitude/Altitude. All of our computers world-wide depend on accurate time for many aspects of their operation. The stock market, medical devices, banking, etc. etc. rely on accurate timing. This book gives an amazing and engaging account of the early work done over decades to invent an accurate timepiece.

Mostly a bio about the man who invented the best chronometers (clocks) in the pre industrial revolution world... and made good navigation possible... if you are wondering what clocks have to do with navigation, then you need to read this... easy to do, short, concise and full of good info... not an 'adventure novel'... however, a good historical revelation...

If you think you've been screwed by "The Man of the Sea" -- boy you should hear the story of John Harrison! The British Empire was built on its sailing vessels, and those ships used John Harrison's sea clocks which measure longitude. Longitude was ridiculously hard to compute back in the day, the British

government (and others) offered a sizable reward to the person who solved it. Due to bureaucratic b.s., greed, and scientific jealousy John Harrison was never paid his full reward, had his intellectual property stolen, and was not given credit.

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