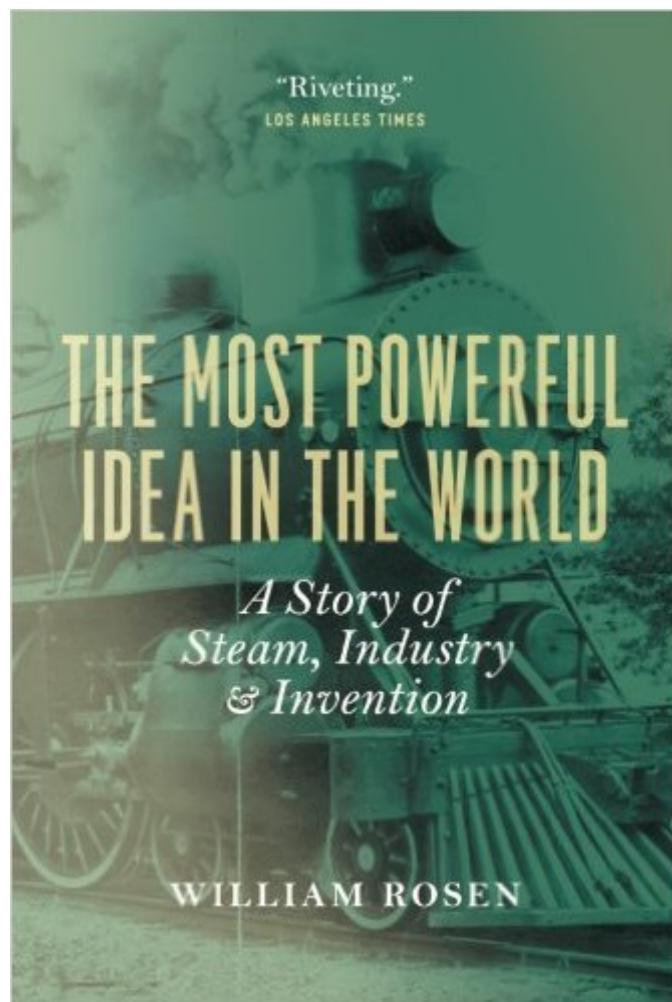


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The Most Powerful Idea In The World: A Story Of Steam, Industry, And Invention



Synopsis

Hardly a week passes without some high-profile court case that features intellectual property at its center. But how did the belief that one could own an idea come about? And how did that belief change the way humankind lives and works? William Rosen, author of *Justinian's Flea*, seeks to answer these questions and more with *The Most Powerful Idea in the World*. A lively and passionate study of the engineering and scientific breakthroughs that led to the steam engine, this book argues that the very notion of intellectual property drove not only the invention of the steam engine but also the entire Industrial Revolution: history's first sustained era of economic improvement. To do so, Rosen conjures up an eccentric cast of characters, including the legal philosophers who enabled most the inventive society in millennia, and the scientists and inventors—Thomas Newcomen, Robert Boyle, and James Watt—who helped to create and perfect the steam engine over the centuries. With wit and wide-ranging curiosity, Rosen explores the power of creativity, capital, and collaboration in the brilliant engineering of the steam engine and how this power source, which fueled factories, ships, and railroads, changed human history. Deeply informative and never dull, Rosen's account of one of the most important inventions made by humans is a rollicking ride through history, with careful scholarship and fast-paced prose in equal measure.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The amount of information contained in this book is truly astounding. Just about every aspect of

inventing that one can imagine is touched upon here, at least to some degree. These include but are not limited to: legal issues, social and political matters, psychology, even religion and philosophy. The reader is also introduced to a myriad of people who have contributed, in some way or other, to the Industrial Revolution. The most significant invention that is followed throughout is the steam engine. But many other inventions are also discussed such as: devices to address certain mining problems, making various types of iron, collecting and processing cotton and silk, various devices to improve upon prior inventions, etc. The amount of information contained in this book is truly encyclopaedic; the author's efforts in putting it all together must have been astronomical. Unfortunately, despite all of these positive features, the book was not at all what I expected. I assumed that a book recounting the history of the steam engine would be rich in technical detail - either with plenty of illustrative sketches to complement the text or written in prose so rich in detail that sketches would be unnecessary; unfortunately I misjudged. The technical details that are given in the text are, in too many cases, much too brief to allow a technical reader to get a good appreciation of how a given device worked or what the technical issues were. And the few sketches that are included (nine in the entire book) are reproductions from centuries ago and do not add much to help the reader's technical comprehension. In addition, I found that the great many individuals that are introduced throughout, along with their contributions, eventually become hard to keep track of.

Mr. Rosen has written a very interesting and well written book on the invention and improvement of the steam engine. Basically Mr. Rosen covers the period from the seventeenth century to the first part of the eighteenth century. Mr. Rosen ends his discussion with the development of the Rocket steam locomotive by George and Robert Stephenson and Richard Trevithick. Mr. Rosen demonstrates that the social and legal climate in England in this period favored new inventions. The legal system, in part due to the efforts of jurist Edward Coke, protected intellectual property by patent rights. Thus inventors were much less likely to have their ideas and products stolen by other men who had done nothing to develop the invention. Thus inventors could prosper materially as well as socially from their efforts. Moreover inventing new techniques and new products was socially acceptable. The result was that inventions occurred more and more often over the time interval. And new inventions in one product field added to the demand for and encouraged inventions in other fields. For example John Wilkinson's method of boring iron tubes greatly enhanced the production of steam engine equipment. Numerous other inventions fed the development of steam power. Mr. Rosen goes into great and interesting detail about the inventors and inventions. For example, Mr.

Rosen provides much detail on the life of James Watt, his birth near Glasgow Scotland, his work as a clockmaker and instrument maker in London, his study of the Newcomen steam engine, his new steam engine with a separate condenser and use of vacuum space, and his fertile partnership with Matthew Boulton. Mr.

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