

Book Reviews

Comptes rendus de livres

Duncan Steel, *Marking Time: The Epic Quest to Invent the Perfect Calendar*

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Steel, Duncan. *Marking Time: The Epic Quest to Invent the Perfect Calendar*, John Wiley & Sons: New York, 2000. ix, 422 pp., cloth, \$27.95, ISBN 0-471-29827-1.

This is a large book on a large topic. An introductory chapter sets the scene, with a discussion of the instance of the well-known inscription in George Washington's family bible relating the date of his birth. Several aspects of contemporary calendrical issues are usefully brought out by Steel, and could have been used to lead straight into Chapter 3, which defines in simple terms (more complex definitions are available in Appendices) various elements of timekeeping, such as the day, month and year. Chapter 2, however, intervenes. It indicates what each chapter through the book contains, and is verbose, patronizing and unnecessary. From Chapter 4 on, Steel then deals with his subject, in varying degrees of detail, from Stonehenge and pharaonic Egypt, through early Greek calendars into the Roman calendar, and thence on to the refinement of the Western Christian calendar. Dionysius Exiguus, the Synod of Whitby in 664 and Bede all lead inexorably on to the core of the book: the creation of the current epoch (B.C./A.D), the year system with its January 1 start-date, the Western (Gregorian) calendar system, alternatives to it, and its gradual adoption. Thereafter the book delves into a variety of less well-connected topics: the establishment of the modern time zone system, various non-Gregorian calendars from around the world, the call for further calendar reform, the date of the Christian Nativity and Crucifixion, the change in the length of the year over several millennia, and, finally, a (less than serious) call for calendar reform in recognition of the increased length of the seasonal year.

Steel enlarges his book further than this reviewer felt was necessary with his tendency to digress from the topic in hand, his prolix style, and his belief that any literary or rhetorical device needs explicit signposting for the reader who does not know that such a device is being used. To take an example of his digressiveness: in the page and a bit in which he introduces the issue of how the Romans counted the years (pp. 52–54), Steel starts from mention of the "Year of Confusion," 46 B.C., then moves through the recognition of the fact that the Romans did not use the term "before Christ" or even year numbers, to the idea of nations dating by regnal years as in Britain and Japan with such a system's attendant difficulties (for historians) of having to cope with a ruler's dying usually outside the period of the turn of one calendar year to another, to a discussion of what happens in such a system when a ruler, like James VI of Scotland and I of England, comes to rule more than one territory, to a digression on the difference between the Scottish and English legal systems. Only after all that does the reader get told, in a new section, about the Roman system of dating from the establishment of the city of Rome. It is hard to see why one has to wade through the previous pages, since they did not even illustrate such a system as the Roman one elsewhere, but rather talked of quite different systems. As for Steel's tendency to signpost his literary devices, the start of Chapter 2, "The Country Parson's Formula" (pp. 9–10) is a good example. One ends up feeling talked down to.

The outstanding characteristic of Steel's approach to his subject is the sheer amount that he knows about the calendar as such. Yet he has trouble organizing it into a coherent, concise story. One comes out of the book knowing the "what" of the calendar in its various transformations, but feeling the lack of the "why" and often the "how." It is easy

enough to see, for instance, what differences there are between the lunisolar cycles of Meton, Callippus and Hipparchus (pp. 45–49), especially in terms of the lengths of their years. But how they each discovered these data, and in the service of what aim is not at all clear. Steel creates a sense of “science for science’s sake,” which simply begs the question, “So what?”

One is also left at times with an uneasy doubt about Steel’s detailed grasp of the historical and social context of his subject — his comments on the name of Augustus (p. 51), the religious affiliation of Clavius (p. 163) and papal infallibility (p. 164) are instances of misleading oversimplification at best, and undermine one’s confidence. Early Modernists will read (Chapter 14) with (uneasy?) fascination of the notion that the English initially settled the east coast of North America for the secret

purpose of laying hold of land on the longitude on which the equinox would always be on the same day, so that they could establish the perfect Christian calendar. One wonders why Galileo was still bothering to work out a method of discovering longitude in 1616, if the English had it down to such a fine art.

Steel also seems unaware of continued interest by the Catholic Church in the definition of the length of year and its impact on the timing of Easter in the centuries immediately after the establishment of the Gregorian calendar, an interest illustrated by the setting of the meridian line in the floor of the right transept of the Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Rome in 1703 (a simple explanation is given, in Italian, at: <http://www.quipo.it/internetscuola/ipertesti/terra/guida.htm>, (5 July 2000)).

Bruce Bernard, *Century: One Hundred Years of Human Progress, Regression, Suffering and Hope*

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Bernard, Bruce. *Century: One Hundred Years of Human Progress, Regression, Suffering and Hope*. London: Phaidon Press, 1999. 1120 pp., cloth \$49.95, ISBN: 0-7148-3848-9.

In 1980, Bruce Bernard, then picture editor of the London *Sunday Times* magazine, published *Photodiscovery: Masterworks of Photography 1840–1940*. This anthology celebrated the first century of photography through the display of 213 images, drawn from photography’s various uses and applications — as reportage, as surrogates for foreign travel, as instruments of colonial ideology, as family mementos, as pornography, and as art. The sequence and often startling juxtaposition of images mirrored photography’s ubiquitous presence as both witness and consciousness of an aggressively middle-class materialistic culture. Equally, it conveyed the beauty and presence of photographs as aesthetic objects, through the decision to treat each image individually and to reproduce it in full colour. Bernard hoped to stimulate interest in the medium by delighting, seducing, astonishing, and intriguing his readers. Sadly, the book has been long out of print, but remains one of the seminal introductions to the medium of photography.

Almost twenty years later, Bernard conceived of and edited another anthology of photographic images, also spanning a century, but with quite different ambitions and purposes. *Century: One Hundred Years of Human Progress, Regression, Suffering and Hope*, runs to over 1100 pages, and contains almost as many photographs. While the earlier book was more modestly concerned with demonstrating the astonishing variety and beauty of images made during photography’s formative period, *Century* sets itself the daunting task of visually chronicling the seminal events and dominant personalities of the entire twentieth century, as these have been recorded by the camera. In its purposes, *Century* strives for comprehensiveness in its selection of its subjects, and dispassionate fairness in their presentation. It reads as a public summing-up, as the necessary attempt to bring order and clarity to the relentless rush of events and the equally bewildering occurrence of natural disasters. From the vantage point of the end of the millennium, it seeks a perspective from which to contemplate the events and to identify underlying patterns in the seemingly uncontrollable, often cyclical eruptions of violence that have marked this century.