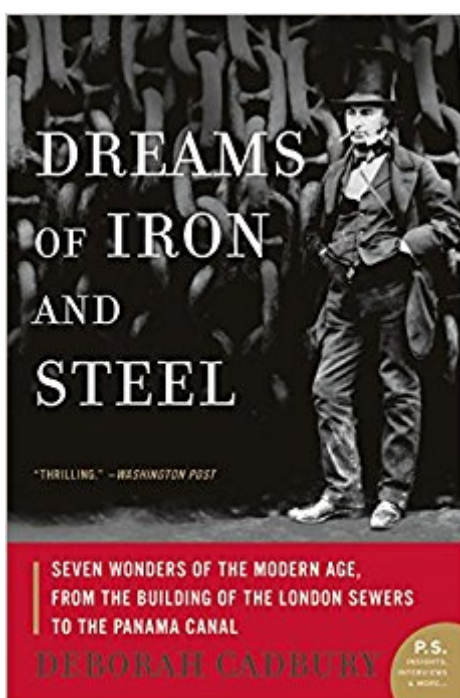


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# Dreams Of Iron And Steel: Seven Wonders Of The Modern Age, From The Building Of The London Sewers To The Panama Canal



## Synopsis

A world that had changed little from the Middle Ages was altered beyond recognition by the pioneering genius of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In *Dreams of Iron and Steel*, acclaimed historian Deborah Cadbury tells the heroic tale of the visionaries and ordinary workers who brought to life seven great wonders of the world that still have the power to awe and inspire us today. Fueled by Deborah Cadbury's characteristic scholarship and insight, this extraordinary chronicle re-creates the human odyssey of how our modern world was forged not only with rivets, grease, and steam but also with blood, sweat, and extreme imagination. This P.S. edition features an extra 16 pages of insights into the book, including author interviews, recommended reading, and more.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“A fascinating look at the technological triumphs of the nineteenth century.” (Booklist)  
“Cadbury has a knack for providing interesting asides—an engaging and informative read.” (San Francisco Chronicle)  
“Engrossing...DREAMS OF IRON AND STEEL celebrates the triumphs not just of engineering but of the questing human spirit.” (Stephen Fox, author of *Transatlantic*)  
“An engaging and informative read.” (San Francisco Chronicle)

Deborah Cadbury is the highly acclaimed author of several books, including *Dreams of Iron and Steel*, *The Lost King of France*, and *Terrible Lizard*. She has also won numerous international

awards as a television producer for the BBC. She lives in London.

As a person who worked as designer/engineer for 17 years in heavy steel fabricated equipment this book was very enjoyable to read. I bought it for information to produce a report for my MBA in project management but ended up reading all of the historical accounts in it after receiving my degree.

Ms Cadbury is a wonderful writer. Her prose is clean and clear. I had read the McCullough books on the Panama Canal and the Brooklyn Bridge, and this gave me a basis to appreciate what a fine job she did on condensing these two topics. So many history books are about politics or war, which I find boring, but the history of people actually doing something to make life better makes a great read. I bought her *Terrible Lizards*, and I am looking forward to it.

Since I retired four years ago I have had the time to read a LOT of books, at least a lot for me. One of my favorite books this summer was something a little out of my usual realm - the history of technology. Deborah Cadbury, in *Dreams of Iron and Steel*, provides a brief, readable and captivating synopsis of the construction of what she terms the "seven wonders of the modern age." Having seen, during my lifetime, the first space flight, the first moon walk, the development of a jet that can cross the Atlantic in four hours and the invention of the wonders of the internet, I can sometimes get jaded when viewing the technical accomplishments of the nineteenth century. However, this book stimulates the awe that is appropriate when considering engineering projects such as the Brooklyn Bridge, the Panama Canal, the Transcontinental (US) railroad, or the London sewer system. Take, for example, the construction of the Bell Rock Lighthouse. Located eleven miles offshore of Scotland, Bell Rock is a reef that is exposed for only 2 hours at each low tide (twice a day for you landlubbers). In 1807, Robert Stevenson won the commission to build a 100-foot-tall lighthouse that could withstand the 60' waves that regularly lashed the outcrop and sent 70 ships to the bottom of the sea in a single storm in 1799. Many of the ships went down because their captains refused to head into a safe port because of the dangers presented by Bell Rock. In four years, Stevenson completed the construction of the granite lighthouse without the benefit of power tools, dynamite or steam powered ships. Working during the summer season only at low tides, crews rowed to the island from a mother ship, put in their shift, and rowed away as the rising tide covered the reef. Hundreds of tons of intricately-shaped granite blocks were unloaded and hauled by mule across the outcrop and anchored into place. Against all odds, Stevenson discovered

that his unfinished structure had withstood each winter's storms as he returned to the rock for the following season's construction. Ms. Cadbury does an excellent job of building the personal drama of each of the construction projects. Her chapters are very personality-based and each of the seven chapters has a remarkable engineer or entrepreneur that brought a grand vision to life. She honed her storytelling skills as a BBC producer of documentaries, including a seven-part series on the industrial wonders of the world that led to this book. But, Ms. Cadbury's ability to inject drama into each of these stories also belies the only weakness of the book. I found myself wanting considerably more technical information than was provided in these treatments. When an author covers both the French and American Panama Canal projects in 36 pages, we are obviously not going to get an in-depth treatment. On balance, this book is an excellent introduction for someone like me who really had little previous knowledge or interest in topics such as the Hoover Dam or the Great Eastern steamship. It was an engaging read that I couldn't put down and the lack of in-depth information did not leave me too disappointed - I just moved on to the next exciting chapter! And, like any good non-fiction book, it whet my appetite for further research.

If you haven't discovered Deborah Cadbury yet then she is one of the best and sharpest writers around. Her text is spare, her research impeccable, and her ability to draw out threads without resorting to tabloid sensationalism makes for satisfying reading. In this, her third book, Cadbury covers the seven wonders of the industrial world, putting the feats, their makers, and the events into context of the time and what they have meant in history. This is the GREAT industrial revolution. The 7 wonders are The Great Eastern (the largest boat of its time a double hulled steel boat by Brunel), The Bell Rock Lighthouse, the Brooklyn Bridge, The London Sewers, The Transcontinental Railroad, The Panama Canal and the Hoover Dam. What I love about Cadbury is that she has not only picked 7 extremely diverse items, (dams, lighthouses, sewers, railroads, bridges, canals, and boats) but she manages to put them into the context of the history of that particular engineering feat, but also in context to the events of their own time. Her research takes her right into the building as well - for instance with the building of the Great Eastern she talks about the need for large numbers of young boys who were employed inside the boat, working in appalling hot and cramped conditions and juggling white hot rivets. There were dreadful accidents but a steady supply of labour meant that new workers were never a problem. The sheer volume of workers however never even made it into the day book though, they were never considered important enough. She relates this sheer volume of workers back to all these structures. They were all built through the enormous supply of labour available. This does not denigrate the sheer feats of engineering which these men needed to

create these structures. No one thought the Great Eastern would be able to sail. The London Sewers were built in competition with the Underground in London, The Transcontinental Railroad needed to have all the items shipped around by sea via the Cape to get to the WEstern Side of America. As an aside I would really recommend reading Laura INGalls Wilder's book on the Banks of Silver Lake, if you are interested in the Transcontinental as Wilder's father worked for a time on the Railroad and she describes the working day in excellent detail including how they 'flattened' out the prairies by hand. I cannot emphasise enough how great the detail is in the book - for instance, the work on the Brooklyn Bridge laying the foundations lays bare the horrendous circumstances in which men worked, in 80 degree heat at the bottom of the river. Explosions at the edge of the caissons often resulted in blow outs of compressed air which would send a 'fury of debris and water" in a column as much as 500 feet in the air. I saw the television series on this book but was very disappointed. It was reenactments and it just didn't bring the depth of detail which is in this book. This is one of the best reads this year. I would strongly recommend it to anyone. Deborah Cadbury's books are excellent and she is on my must buy list.

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