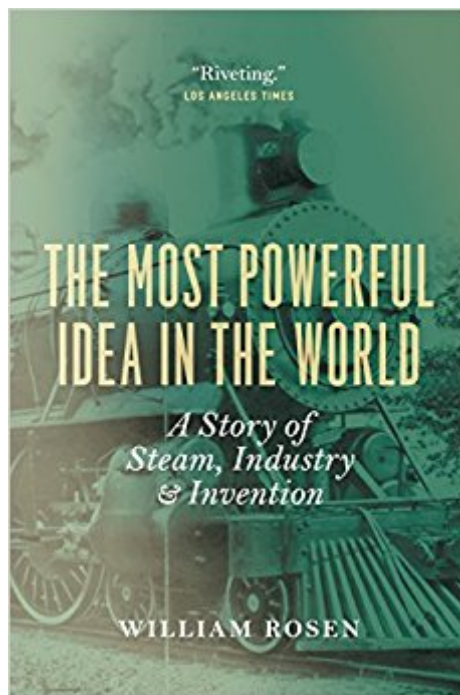




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# The Most Powerful Idea In The World: A Story Of Steam, Industry, And Invention



## 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 Industrial Revolution inspires more academic theories than absorbing narratives. Rosen, however, crafts one from subplots that connect with primitive industrialism's premier symbol: the steam engine. Ardent about historical technology, Rosen modulates his mechanical zeal with contexts underscoring that Thomas Newcomen and James Watt did not operate in a social vacuum. Fixing on patents as one prerequisite to their inventions, Rosen describes intellectual property's English legal and philosophical origins as he segues to Newcomen's and Watt's backgrounds. A degree of social mobility in eighteenth-century Britain enabled their rise, but it was the specific economic situations in mining and textiles to which they responded that ensured it. These business matters provide Rosen with storytelling opportunities that feature capital investors, scientists studying heat, and over time, innovators who improved the steam engine from a stationary to a mobile power source: Rocket, the famous railroad engine built in 1829. Readers who like enthused authors will like Rosen, and fans of his Roman history *Justinian's Flea* (2007) augment their number. --Gilbert Taylor --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

• "This book has a crackling energy to it, often as riveting as it is educational." (Los Angeles Times) • "The Most Powerful Idea in the World: A Story of Steam, Industry, and Invention is a sneaky history" ostensibly about the origins of the steam engine, though actually about much more. . . . Rosen is a natural and playful storyteller, and his digressions both inform the narrative and lend it an eccentric and engaging rhythm." (New York Times) • "A fascinating, wide-ranging narrative. . . . A staggering work of epistemological research." (Kirkus) • "Rosen has a facility for the telling anecdote and the quirky aside. Open nearly any page of the book and you'll learn tidbits like that Abraham Lincoln had a love of things mechanical and is the only American president to be awarded a patent (for air chambers that add buoyancy to steam ships and other boats). . . . The Most Powerful Idea in the World is enjoyable reading, although it does go into a lot of detail about steam engines, and you will learn more about how they work than you might expect." • (Bill Gates, Best Books of 2013)

Others have given an general overview of this book; no need to repeat that. Several have noted that if you are interested in steam engines, this book won't help you to understand them. A major flaw is the lack of explanatory drawings and diagrams to supplement the original drawings from patent applications. But this isn't a book about how steam engines work, so that lack can be forgiven. What can't are the errors in fact. I was reading happily along, marvelling at the toys of Alexandrian and enjoying the sweeping scope of the narrative, until we rolled into the Elizabethan period, an era I

happen to know something about. There the train drove right off the tracks. The capsule biography of Francis Bacon is not just wrong, it's bizarrely, stupefyingly wrong. Rosen must have copied it from one of the Rosicrucian websites he rightly makes fun of in a footnote. He cites the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography for his Bacon data, but that article is, of course, perfectly correct. OK, it's just one short biography, not central (quite) to the theme of the book, but it is so egregiously bad that the author's credibility evaporated in a flash. Francis Bacon is a major historical figure. If his bio is wrong, why should I believe the stories about George Stephenson or the more minor contributors to the development of early steam engines? From that point forward, I started skimming and taking it all with a grain of salt. The central thesis - that copyright/patent law was essential to the industrial revolution - is interesting. But I'll have to read another book to actually learn about the inventors and inventions mentioned in this one.

Howdy all, This is some excellent history with a personal approach to explaining how the "Rocket", the first successful RR locomotive came to be, by starting with Hero's crude steam turbine, NTM asking questions about how inventors invent, including the whole process and culture of invention was created in England, and answering using current research on the brain, besides the culture and development of the idea as property by Thomas Coke and John Locke among other threads of development ("each little improvement") the author seeks to answer. Other questions such as if more people gets you more inventors as some attempting to explain the industrial revolution claim, why England and not China, or even France since it had three times as many people? The author ends with a brief summary of the locomotive contest, provides a fitting conclusion by quoting from an 1858-59 lecture or speech of Abraham Lincoln's on "Discoveries and Inventions" (which he agrees with most reviewers as not one of his best) but emphasizes Lincoln's closing remark that patent laws added "the fuel of interest to the fire of genius" that has been etched in stone now at the US Patent Office, is quite an appropriate end to the author's description of that very important creation. On the negative side, the reference to the earth being 33 trillion cubic kilometers (in a somewhat facetious side note) is a bit off being much closer to 1.083 trillion cubic kilometers, and some data could not be found on the index pages mentioned, though its in the book somewhere, and a problem common with many books.

Great book, not what I expected. Rosen's history of invention in the steam age is fascinating and detailed. His greatest point is that invention and ingenuity thrive under certain conditions and he shows how legal, cultural, and other factors helped create those conditions in the UK and allowed

for the birth of the steam age. If you are interested in modern energy policy, human innovation, mechanical engineering, etc you'll love this book. I was not convinced that I'd enjoy a book about the invention and improvements to steam engines but Rosen's narrative is great and the stories are compelling.

This book is an attempt to give a reply to a complex question: why the Industrial Revolution started in England between the 18th and the 19th century and not in another place or in another time, for example in Classic Greece or ancient China. The Author analyzes the sociological, hystorical and geopolitical circumstances that caused the explosion of inventions and innovations in engineering that shaped the industrial world of today, using the development of the steam engine (from Papin to Stephenson) and its application as leit-motif. According to the author the key factor in this development was the evolution of the patent system, that is at the basis of the definition of intellectual property and the economical exploitation of human ingenuity. The narration starts slowly, and personally I find it even a bit verbose, as the Author himself practically admits. At midlength the narration gains momentum and becomes a whirlwind of intertwined inventions and inventors. It gives numerous hints for thinking and demonstrates (one more time) that development is a matter of persons who can grow up intellectually and economically only if the surrounding environments foster and nurtures them.

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