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The Book of Victorian Heroes

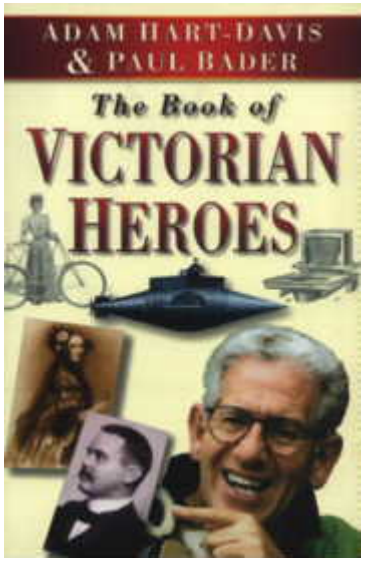
THE BOOK

Publisher	Davis & Paul Bader Sutton Publishing
Pages	152
ISBN-10	0-7509-2820-4
Price	£6.99

Editor's recommendation — this book carries the editor's "must buy" recommendation.

AN ODE TO THE INGENUITY OF VICTORIAN INVENTORS

The Book of Victorian Heroes, 2001 by Adam Hart-Davis & Paul Bader
Sutton Publishing Limited, Phoenix Mill, Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire, GL5 2BU. : 152 Pages: ISBN 0-7509-2820-4: Price UK £6.99, US $11.95



Victorian Era is usually considered as the period between 1837, when Queen Victoria ascended the throne, and 1901, the year when she died. She reigned Great Britain all of these 64 years. This period arguably saw the greatest surge in British Science. It was during this period that the telephone was invented, the Pneumatic tyre was born, and great strides were made in health and hygiene by people such as Florence Nightingale and Henry Moule. And it was not a matter of

chance. In fact when Queen Victoria ascended the throne, things were so difficult for scientists and inventors that during the whole year, only 259 patent applications were received by the British Patent Office. The reason was that to get a patent, every inventor had to visit seven - yes seven - different offices, and get two signatures from the monarch. All this changed after she came to the throne, though it took time even for her to introduce reforms. The patent system was reformed fifteen years after she ascended in throne - in 1852. Towards the end of her reign there was an unprecedented rush of patent applications. In 1897, well over 30,000 applications were received by the British patent office! The book under review celebrates the ingenuity, creativity and adventurism of these dedicated people some of whom came up with really amazing innovations.

Ada Lovelace, the first "computer programmer". She wrote programmes for Charles Babbage's "Analytical Engine". This picture appears on page 28 of this book



In all, this little book describes 36 inventors with their discoveries and inventions, some of whom are really astounding. In this book, you would read about the perpetual mousetrap of Colin Pullinger, Alexander Bain and his fax machine, the first powered flight by John Stringfellow, Kirkpatrick MacMillan and his first pedal powered bicycle, Ada Lovelace's computer program and John 'Earthquake' Milne's seismograph. Each story describes the life of the inventor from his birth and how exactly the idea came to his mind.

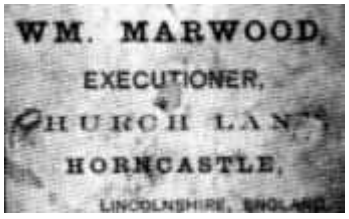
> *...the book is well-illustrated with several black and white photographs. Any one who admires the adventurism, ingenuity and the unfailing spirit of man is going to love this book...*

We are told for example that George Boole, who gave the world Boolean Algebra, got his idea on one cold day in January 1833, when he was walking along Town Fields, a great expanse of common land directly across the Great North Road. Later, he compared his experience with that of Saul on the road to Damascus. Joseph Paxton, merely a gardener, could design the great Crystal Palace for the 1851 London Exhibition, because he was inspired by the architectural design of the huge lily! In

fact he asked his daughter Annie to float sitting on a lily leaf, and it worked. So he designed a rigid structure made of radiating ribs connected by flexible cross-ribs. The whole structure could be assembled and disassembled at will. Frank Hornby got his idea of Meccano because he had to design new toys for his sons almost every other day. Not only that - for every new toy, he had to start from a scratch. So he thought of interchangeable parts, and hence Meccano was born.

William Marwood, the executioner (top) and his visiting card (below). These pictures appear on pages 94 and 95





One would imagine that this is just one of the usual run-of-the-mill type "invention books", but no - this would give you much more than that. Take for example the story of William Marwood, who designed the long drop for hanging. Yes, we are talking of innovations in executions here! Before Marwood's time, i.e. before 1875 condemned criminals were simply suspended by a rope wound round the neck. This actually strangulated them, and caused them to face a rather long, inhuman and agonizing death. It was Marwood who thought of a system whereby the condemned person could be made to drop from a height with a rope round his neck, breaking his neck and causing death almost instantaneously. The State could kill condemned criminals in a more humane manner after that.

An Edmondson-style railway ticket, numbered by special machines. This picture appears on page 9 of this book



You may not believe it, but as simple a thing as the railway ticket was invented in 1839, almost ten years after the trains regularly began transporting passengers. We take railway tickets for granted today, but to think up such an innovation was not easy in those times. In fact when Thomas Edmondson, the inventor of the railway ticket put forth his idea to the Newcastle & Carlisle Railway Company, the company he was working for, his idea was quickly dropped. Before the ticket was

invented, every passenger's name was written down in a big book in the booking office. This was not only laborious business, but made journeys unnecessarily complex. The fact that there were more than fifty railway companies operating simultaneously did not help matters either. But Edmondson continued trying. Ultimately another company, the brand new Manchester & Leeds Railway accepted his idea, and the Railway ticket was born.

There are more and more of these interesting little stories. You would surely like to read all of them, and in full detail. This nice little book provides them all. You are surely going to enjoy it, especially if you have any interest in the ingenuity and the unfailing spirit of man. Fully recommended for everyone!

-Editor-in-Chief