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Retooling: A historian Confronts Technological Change

THE BOOK

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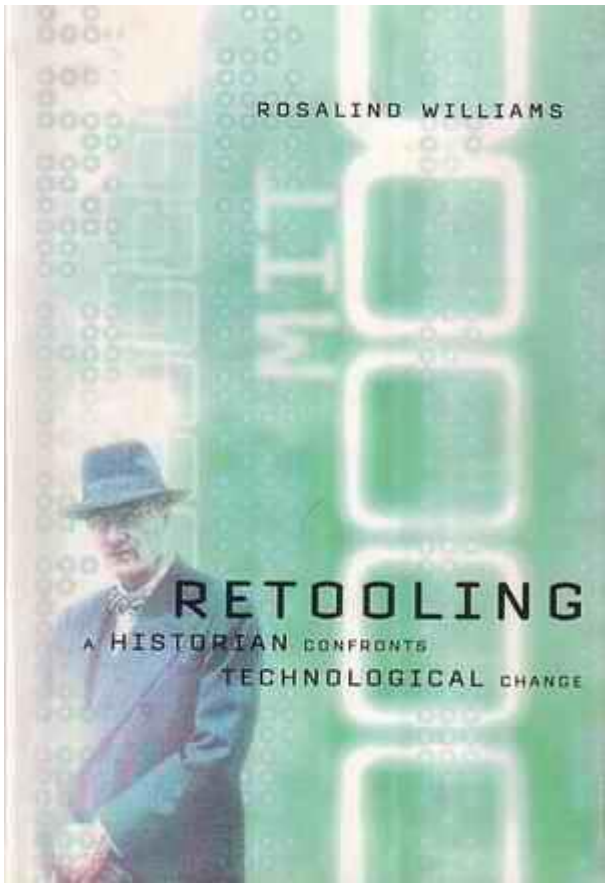
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> *...A THOUGHT-PROVOKING BOOK ...This book ... is more than a biography of a person. It is a biography of an institution. It is also the human aspect of technology. Williams discusses in some depth the irreversible intertwining of science and technology, leading to an identity crisis for engineering. Williams does not focus on the technologies themselves but prefers to study the impact of technology on society and the community...*

Retooling: A historian Confronts Technological Change *by* Rosalind Williams, soft cover, 5 3/8" x 8". The MIT Press, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142: 272 Pages: Publication Date: August 2002: ISBN-10: 0-262-23223-5. ISBN-13: 978-0-262-23223-4: Price - $44.00/£28.95 (CLOTH)

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This is a rather unusual book to emerge from MIT Press in that firstly, it is written by a sort of a historian and secondly, it is slightly biographical.

The author, Rosalind Williams was the Dean of Students and Undergraduate Education at MIT from 1995 to 2000. Her position at MIT afforded her a useful vantage point to observe a wave of changes that transformed many aspects of life ranging from how students are taught through to research. For example Williams says that in the 1970's the Department of Chemical Engineering at MIT began to shift its focus to Biotechnology and one MIT scientist remarked that the department now seems indistinguishable from a medical school or a biology department.

One does get the impression that she does not like change.but do read on!

She uses her firsthand experience at MIT to draw insights into society's love of technology.

The book starts off with an account of Warren Kendall Lewis who grew up on Spring Garden Farm in Delaware. Lewis (1882-1975) was Williams's grandfather and entered MIT in 1901. He eventually ended up as a professor at MIT and was also involved in the Manhattan Project.

Grandpapa Lewis sounds like he was an interesting man and who obviously had a profound impact on Williams's life with his engineering skills and love of history and literature. Like most granddaughters Williams must have really been in love with her granddad!

> *...The author, Cathy Cobb, was once a teacher of Chemistry at Augusta State University and is now a teacher of physics and chemistry at Aiken Preparatory School. Her teaching experience has probably helped her a lot in writing this book. She uses analogy and example rather than mathematics, which make the whole subject palatable and interesting...*

She describes his story as one of "poignancy, even tragedy, because he was an engineer who, with the best of intentions, contributed to the erosion of the way of life he cherished".

This book, however, is more than a biography of a person. It is a biography of an institution. It is also the human aspect of technology. Williams discusses in some depth the irreversible intertwining of science and technology, leading to an identity crisis for engineering. Williams does not focus on the technologies themselves but prefers to study the impact of technology on society and the community. Her failure to discuss the rights and wrongs of the technologies is one of the minor criticisms I have of this book.

> *...The first chapter is a short biography of the author's grandfather. The second chapter describes the evolution of the engineering profession, and engineering courses at MIT. The third chapter describes MIT's experience with reengineering at the social level. The fourth chapter covers the community aspect of MIT. Gender discrimination at MIT is the topic of the fifth chapter...*

The first chapter is a short biography of the author's grandfather. The second chapter describes the evolution of the engineering profession, and engineering courses at MIT. The third chapter describes MIT's experience with reengineering at the social level. The fourth chapter covers the community aspect of MIT. Gender discrimination at MIT is the topic of the fifth chapter. In the sixth chapter, the author attempts to analyze the horrific event that took place on September 11, 2001. This latter appears to be an afterthought.long after the main body of the book had been written.

The final parts of the book focuses on technology and the community and these sections in some way are the gist of this book.

I must admit that the sub-title of this book is somewhat misleading. If I had picked up this book from a bookseller's bookshelf I would probably have been disappointed in that this is not really a historical look at technological change which the sub-title seems to promise. However, it is a thought-provoking book, which most professionals in the field of technology as well as other academics should read.



-Gyan Fernando
Dr Gyan Fernando is the Home Office Forensic Pathologist for Devon & Cornwall, and an inveterate reader, traveller and commentator. He is an avid fan of history of science and technology. Dr. Gyan Fernando may be contacted via Email by clicking here.

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-Editor-in-Chief