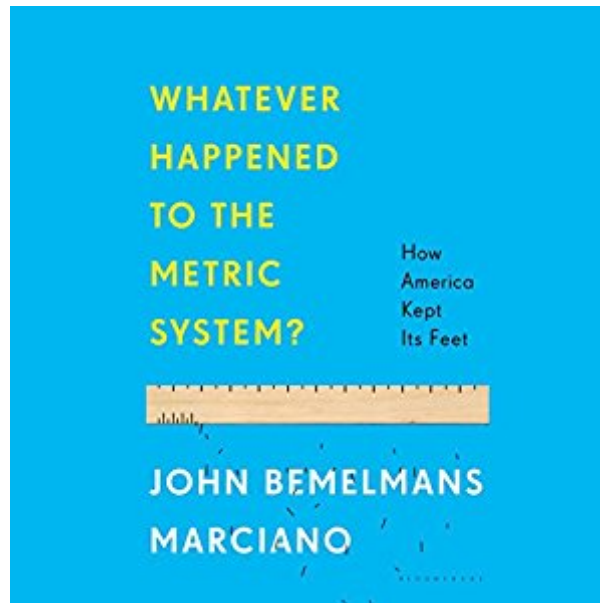


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Whatever Happened To The Metric System?: How America Kept Its Feet



Synopsis

The American standard system of measurement is a unique and odd thing to behold, with its esoteric, inconsistent standards: 12 inches in a foot, three feet in a yard, 16 ounces in a pound, 100 pennies to the dollar. For something as elemental as counting and estimating the world around us, it seems like a confusing tool to use. So how did we end up with it? Most of the rest of the world is on the metric system, and for a time in the 1970s America appeared ready to make the switch. Yet it never happened, and the reasons for that get to the root of who we think we are, just as the measurements are woven into the ways we think. John Marciano chronicles the origins of measurement systems, the kaleidoscopic array of standards throughout Europe and the 13 American colonies, the combination of intellect and circumstance that resulted in the metric system's creation in France in the wake of the French Revolution, and America's stubborn adherence to the hybrid United States Customary System ever since. As much as it is a tale of quarters and tenths, it is a human drama, replete with great inventors, visionary presidents, obsessive activists, and science-loving technocrats. Anyone who listens to this inquisitive, engaging story will never read Robert Frost's line "miles to go before I sleep" or eat a foot-long sub again without wondering, "Whatever happened to the metric system?"

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

An interesting revelation of the development of metric measure as a parochial (French) system to widespread adoption except in the US. Metric measure has long been legal for commerce in the US but only slowly adopted here. Wine, spirits and even beer (Coors) are now dispensed in liters or

milliliters; we (some of us) trot along 5K runs; even measuring cups sold at Walmart are marked in milliliters. Of course we won't be truly metric until your favorite team kicks off at the 50 meter line and the car manufacturers provide a magic button to switch your (now electronic) dashboard display from miles/hr and miles to km/hr and km. Then Arizona won't have to switch their I19 road signs back from Kilometers to Miles. The story of US decimalized currency (the dollar) is authoritatively developed. The failed attempts to promote decimal time or dividing (earth) great circles into 100 per quadrant (instead of the commonly used 90 per quadrant) are well covered. Marciano also mixes in the politics (good gossip) of decimalization: Ben Franklin interacting with leaders in France, Washington interacting with congress. For someone like me (interested in technology, commerce and their history) this is a compelling story, an easy read, a page turner.

The book contains lots of good detail, reasons, and history of measurement. Original measurement units were based on the human body; feet, inches, span, or fathoms (based on the length of rope pulled in by a seaman). The book recounts this "natural" basis of measurements, and proposals for standard units with a metric system (units based on multiples of 10). The adoption has been very political, with the United States still not formally changing over. The metric conversion is now somewhat academic, with the computer able to make instant conversions. This is not to say there are no screw-ups, such as the NASA's 1999 loss of the Mars Lander due to unit conversion confusion. As for the calendar and time, there are celestial phenomena such as the day (one Earth rotation), the month (one rotation of the Moon around the Earth), and the year (one rotation of the Earth around the Sun). Fortunately, time and calendar were not metrified, although there were proposals for the 10-hour day and 10 day week etc. The book is well written, but could have used a more vigorous editor to cut through some of the endless political details. However, I particularly enjoyed the history and explanations of the original measurement units, and their basis in terms of body dimensions, or physical dimensions.

I made it about half way through this book. The beginning was promising - walking through the history of measurements from the minting of coinage to the invention of the decimal system. I particularly enjoyed learning the very practical methods that were historically used for measurement (for example, the amount of land that an oxen could till in a day was an acre). The book also walks through the influence that the American and French revolutions had on the adoption of new measurement standards, including interesting bits of history on politicians such as Thomas Jefferson and scientists like Lavoisier and Laplace. However, the book is pretty drawn out and felt

more like a history book with too many details, dates, and names. At the half way point, I abandoned ship.

It's funny how one can choose a book which by its title seems to be solely technical but then as one reads it one becomes engrossed in a completely different subject of history and philosophy. I found the book difficult to put down and wanting more information about, of all things, the French Revolution. I also found humor in the efforts to develop a more rational calendar. One that would easily tell me the number of days in April rather than having to rely on a silly rhyme or counting on my knuckles. Alas, I've grown up with the wrong units, don't have enough need to learn other units despite my desire. It's not the units that bother me it's getting accustomed to them. Time to learn my profession all over again. Learning is great fun particularly with the good writing in this book.

Well, eventually we find out what happened to the metric system, but the author explores a large number of other international standardization efforts, both those that succeeded and those that didn't. It's a pretty good read, but also a fairly long slog, unless you're REALLY interested in how the people in the French revolution wanted to create a metric calendar. On the other hand, there's lots of good interesting history including about the French and American revolutions that I didn't know about before, and which is snuck in pretty artfully.

I learned a ton. Not being a math guy, I was surprised and thrilled at learning the history of the issue. I had never thought of the American revolution as it played out in the philosophy of measurement and money. That Franklin and Jefferson and our other leaders were so involved in the decimal process, and the revolutionary reasons for their positions opened my eyes to all sorts of possibilities. My views on the American Revolution are changed forever and my respect for its leaders has tripled.

I never realized that there was so much history to the metric system. The author takes what should be a very dry topic and turns it into a very readable and fun book. I learned a lot about the politics and ideas that surrounded the metric system over the centuries of its history. A must read even if you don't like or know much about science.

A relatively fun exposition of the origination and evolution of the metric system...and some history on previous weights and measures systems, including the current system used in the US. Quite a bit of

general world history included to tie this all together - providing rationale for the changes and developments. Sometimes redundant, but otherwise a fun read.

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