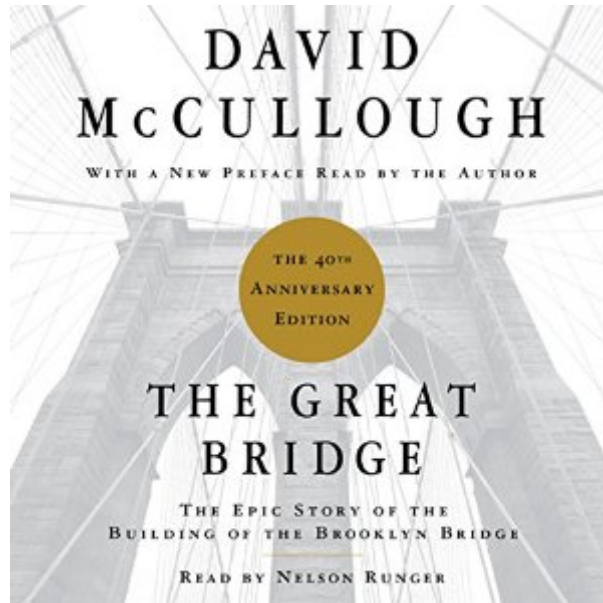


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The Great Bridge: The Epic Story Of The Building Of The Brooklyn Bridge



Synopsis

This monumental book tells the enthralling story of one of the greatest accomplishments in our nation's history, the building of what was then the longest suspension bridge in the world. The Brooklyn Bridge rose out of the expansive era following the Civil War, when Americans believed all things were possible. So daring a concept as spanning the East River to join two great cities required vision and dedication of the kind that went into building Europe's great cathedrals. During 14 years of construction, the odds against success seemed overwhelming. Thousands of people were put to work. Bodies were crushed and broken, lives lost, notorious political empires fell, and surges of public doubt constantly threatened the project. But the story of the building of the Brooklyn Bridge is not just the saga of an engineering miracle; it is a sweeping narrative of the social climate of the time, replete with heroes and rascals who helped either to construct or to exploit the great enterprise. The Great Bridge is also the story of a remarkable family, the Roeblings, who conceived and executed the audacious engineering plan at great personal cost. Without John Roebling's vision, his son Washington's skill and courage, and Washington's wife Emily's dedication, the bridge we know and cherish would never have been built. Like the engineering marvel it describes, The Great Bridge, republished on the 40th anniversary of its initial publication, has stood the test of time. Please note: The Great Bridge (Unabridged) is available for just one credit until June 20, 2012, after which point it will be priced at two credits.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It is hard for me to be objective about this book. First off, I am a great admirer of David McCullough's histories. Second, I have published two novels which are set in New York during the mid-19th Century. But what probably makes it hardest for me to be objective is that I have walked over that bridge for my own personal pleasure so many times over the decades that I consider it an old friend. It's my bridge. Having said all that, I can say that Mr. McCullough has written a history that is not only about a bridge and its builders, which are fascinating subjects in their own right, but it is also about what New Yorkers were thinking back then. This was still a horizontal world; the era of early skyscrapers was a few decades away. Because of this and the rapid growth in population after the Civil War, Manhattan was mostrously choked by block after block of four- and five-story tenements, warehouses and factories. The need for a reliable means to get to the vast open spaces of Brooklyn was urgent. Ironically, however, it wasn't the horizontal--the length of the bridge--which stunned the witnesses to the construction. Instead they marvelled at the height of the towers and the height of the roadway over the East River. Not as ironic, however, were the people who didn't marvel at the bridge's beauty and the strength of its construction. They were too busy licking their lips, wringing their hands and wondering how much of the bridge's budget would make its way into their wallets. The elements of corruption, then as now, always lurked near a great public work in New York. McCullough covers this tainted side just as carefully as he reports on the glory of the growth of the bridge. Heroes (the Roeblings) and villains (Tweed & Co.

My grandfather spent his whole life in Brooklyn and he loved the place. His apartment walls were lined with etchings of the city's buildings and landmarks by the now largely forgotten artist Joseph Pennell. Several times he took us to walk across the Brooklyn Bridge, which we often drove over when we went to visit them from New Jersey. So I, like David McCullough, and Ken Burns who made a nice film about it, and many New Yorkers, have always loved the Bridge. In a city which long ago came to be dominated by modernistic skyscrapers, the Bridge is such an obvious throwback, with its stonework, web of steel cables, and gothic arches, it just looks like it has a tale to tell. In this outstanding book, McCullough tells that tale--of how the bridge came to be built (from 1869 to 1883) and of the extraordinary difficulties, both man-made and natural, that had to be overcome. The story starts with the post-Civil War social milieu that gave rise to the project and the recognition on the part of the powers that be in Brooklyn that they had to be physically joined to Manhattan to keep pace in the emerging industrial world. The design for the project and the initial phases of building are largely the product of one unusual man, John Rebelling. In particular, the structure, much longer than any prior suspension bridge and required to bear significantly greater

weight, was made possible by the steel cabling which Roebling himself had perfected. By contrast, the greatest challenges he faced mostly stemmed from corruption; recall that this was Tammany Hall era New York.

It would be difficult to overpraise this splendid book - and indeed one might have thought it a unique achievement had McCullough not pulled off the trick equally well in "The path Between the Seas". The main theme may be the conception, design and construction of the Brooklyn Bridge, but into this are woven absorbing accounts of the social and political history of Gilded Age New York, the development of the technologies of underwater-foundations and of cable manufacture and spinning, the agonising quest to understand and treat the phenomenon of "the bends", the challenge of managing a project of a size unprecedented since classical times and, above all, the characters of a remarkable collection of men and women who were undauntedly resourceful in taking on the impossible. The story may be dominated by two engineers, the Roeblings, father and son, and by the latter's formidable wife, but a host of other fascinating personalities are brought to life, ranging from audaciously corrupt politicians, through noble and heroic army officers, down to individual technicians and workers. Mr. McCullough has a special gift for explaining technical complexities in simple and fascinating terms - this applies not only to the construction of the bridge and its foundations, but to the horrific and initially misunderstood challenge of what was termed "caisson sickness". The narrative never flags and the dangers and discomforts - indeed the sheer dreadfulness of working under pressure in the foundation caissons - are brought vividly to life. The writer excels at the moments of the highest drama - such as the almost catastrophic fire in one of the caissons, when the tension is almost unbearable, even when the final outcome is known to the reader a century and a quarter later.

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