

Books

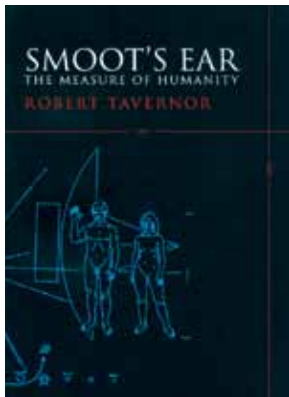
Reviewed by Ray Bert

Smoot's Ear: The Measure of Humanity

By Robert Tavernor. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2008; 249 pages; \$16.

FOR HUMOR, quirkiness, and, most especially, relevance in an opening anecdote, it's hard to top the story in Robert Tavernor's *Smoot's Ear: The Measure of Humanity*.

Kicking off his book on



the history of measuring devices, in particular, the ongoing evolution away from symbolic, anthropocentric units like the foot, Tavernor tells the tale of Oliver Smoot, a freshman at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology whose decision to join the fraternity Lambda Chi Alpha ultimately led to his immortalization in a group that includes James Watt, André Marie Ampère, and Nikola Tesla, all of whom have lent their names to units of measurement. At 5 ft 7 in., Smoot was the shortest member of his pledge class, and for that reason he was used to measure the length of Boston's Harvard Bridge; he lay down hundreds of times over the course of several hours to arrive at an official length of 354.4 Smoots, "plus or minus an ear."

Although the story is perhaps primarily there for its humor, Tavernor points out that something about it resonates. When the bridge was rebuilt three decades later, the Smoot "calibrations" (from the original chalk marks drawn on the night of the stunt) were repainted, and the author explains that the police still use the markers in defining the location of auto accidents on the bridge. This resonance is not an idle aside for Tavernor, who in the course of his book relates other instances where there is a clear longing for units deemed to have human relevance, as well as a resistance to changes away from that heritage.

Despite its somewhat glib opening, *Smoot's Ear* is a scholarly work, with a broad and deep examination of units of measurement both ancient (the cubit) and modern (the ultraprecise modern definitions of the meter). It is also serious in its examination of the underpinnings both of the move toward more precise, standardized units—especially for commerce and, later, scientific purposes—and of the loss of connection with what Tavernor deems the imagination. A book that views the United States as a paragon of sorts rather than as a pariah for its stubborn resistance to the metric system and that cites the work of philosophers and artists as freely as that of scientists and engineers clearly has something different to say.

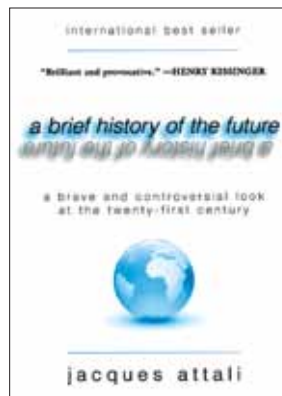
Smoot's work on measures did not end with Harvard Bridge. Indeed, he went on to become both the chairman of the American

National Standards Institute and the president of the International Organization for Standardization.

A Brief History of the Future: A Brave and Controversial Look at the Twenty-first Century

By Jacques Attali. New York City: Arcade Publishing, 2009; 291 pages; \$25.

TRANSLATED from the French, *A Brief History of the Future* is an attempt to predict the course of world events, sociopolitical shifts, and technological advances not just over the next few decades but deep into this century. In his vision—informed, author Jacques Attali says, by an analysis of past events—humanity will reshape itself through numerous upheavals and



arrive, ultimately, at "an earth hospitable to all life's travelers."

This is not a book you can jump into at any point. "For long decades," Attali writes in the book's final chapter, "super-empire will try to prevent the birth of hyperdemocracy. Some masters of the market, most of them hypernomads, will seek to under-

mine hyperdemocracy's values." It can all sound rather sci-fi unless you've grounded yourself in the author's terminology and ideas.

Such sweeping predictions may seem like folly because of the myriad unpredictable yet entirely plausible events that could alter the world's course. Attali addresses this reaction sideways: noting a long list of serious current or impending issues, he explains that while there is a "glaringly obvious" period of instability on the horizon, there are other, deeper trends still at work.

Attali states his thesis thus: "Viewed from an extremely long-range standpoint, history flows in a single, stubborn, and very particular direction, which no upheaval, however long-lasting, can permanently deflect: from century to century, humankind has asserted the primacy of individual freedom over all other values."

The implications of Attali's views are complex, but in essence he sees the continued rise of market forces to a degree that ultimately supplants nations with a single "super-empire," dominated by perhaps 50 million people (the "hypernomads"). Eventually, humanity may (not "will") balk violently and trigger a ruinous period of planetary war. The final stage, guided by altruistic "transhumans," will be an era of freedom and peace called hyperdemocracy.

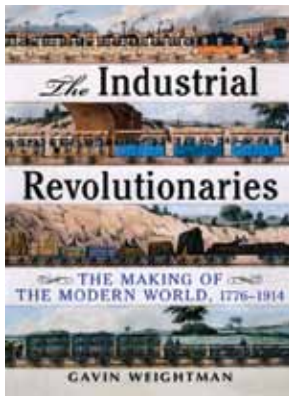
Whether you are persuaded to view *A Brief History of the Future* as a likely road map or see it as an entertaining amalgam of impending doom and ultimate

triumph, Attali's knowledge of past events and current affairs and trends is such that you will almost certainly learn something.

The Industrial Revolutionaries: The Making of the Modern World

By Gavin Weightman. New York City: Grove Press, 2007; 422 pages; \$27.50.

THE INDUSTRIAL Revolutionaries is not so much a social study of the Industrial Revolution as a collection of biographical vignettes loosely woven around the theme—a stepchild of



Andrea Barrett's *Ship Fever* (New York City: W.W. Norton, 1996) by way of a history book.

Weightman advances through the years from the early 18th century through the mid-20th by way of such tales as "Of Scots and Samurai," "The Wizard of Menlo Park," and "A Very Handsome Tail." Some chapters, for instance, those illustrating the advent of the railroads, cover territory that is probably familiar to the American reader, while others are more engrossing for their novelty.

In particular, Weight-

man's account of Japan's lightning dash from shogunate state to industrial power is not to be missed. The story arc begins with a series of events that bear an unmistakable, if improbable, resemblance to the premise of the former TV series *Gilligan's Island*. Five Japanese fishermen set sail one day, and their tiny ship is tossed onto the shore of a desert isle that if not "uncharted" is at least uninhabited. Rescued by an American whaling ship, they eventually make their way home to Japan, where the youngest castaway writes a travelogue of their adventures. From here, events begin to leapfrog. Soon Commodore Matthew Perry is steaming into Tokyo Bay. A few chapters and about a decade later, a small group of samurai with "smart suits and Western haircuts, and looking for all the world like a pop group" are stowing away on a ship to London to uncover secrets of Western technology. Another hop, skip, and jump later, a freshly industrialized Japan is demolishing Russian warships off the coast of Manchuria in the Russo-Japanese War.

The Industrial Revolutionaries is a collection of stories propelled by outsize personalities and stuffed with names that have grown famous or obscure over time: Samuel Morse, Richard Trevithick, Thomas Alva Edison (of course), John Wilkinson, the du Ponts (later the Duponts), the Rothschilds. The short and tight feel of the individual vignettes keeps the book moving forward with energy over a generous 412 cloth-bound pages, although at times the reader may lose

sight of the overarching progression of the narrative.

The Industrial Revolutionaries is likely to appeal to a broad readership, including those who enjoy books on popular science or engineering history.

Making Cities Work: Prospects and Policies for Urban America

Edited by Robert P. Inman. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009; 382 pages; \$29.95.

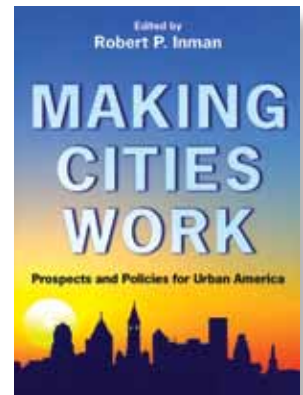
CITIES—in particular, what's not right with them—have long engrossed the attention of economists, engineers, planners, sociologists, historians, and others.

This is probably so in part because working out what ails a city is a more manageable—though still challenging—way of thinking about what ails a society or even our world. If we can make cities work better, maybe we can make everything work better.

The 10 authors who contributed to *Making Cities Work* are among the best urban scholars today, and they each tackle a broad topic in relation to cities that on its own could easily fill a book. Here, however, they discuss race, growth, immigration, transportation, housing, education, crime, finances, space, and poverty through the prism of managing cities using the best practices from the public and private sectors.

Whether discussing issues that may seem more "of the moment" in the middle of a deep recession, for ex-

ample, housing, city finances, and poverty, or such issues as race, education, and transportation, which may occasionally slip to the back burner but are always present, the contributors take a measured approach that is largely objective and is



based firmly on data.

These are not impassioned pleas to end poverty, provide high-quality education for all, and clean up the streets but rather analyses of current struggles from a pragmatic, unemotional point of view, along with ideas for what works. As editor Robert Inman writes, "Successful cities today must be self-aware: What makes our city economy work, and how can we best use our own resources to promote the long-run economic fortunes of our residents and firms?"

The book, as well as the conference it is based on, which was held in May 2007 at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, was conceived as a tribute to the late Kathryn J. Engebretson, Ph.D., who was closely associated with Wharton and championed the cause of civic improvement through government, nonprofit, and business organizations.

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