

How Innovation Works: And Why It Flourishes In Freedom by Matt Ridley

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Book Review by Wes McComb-

I am not sure why I hadn't come across Matt Ridley's writing until the release of his most recent book. His style of writing is accessible, well paced and keeps a reader or listener (I listened to Ridley narrate the book on Audible during my cottage drives) immersed the entire exciting ride . There are three distinct parts to the book. He begins with the history of innovation in various fields from steam engines, to vaccines to aviation. He then goes on to try to solve the enigma of innovation, what it is and how can we encourage it. He finishes with a strong set of opinions on what is holding back innovation today , including laziness and over regulation, that I generally agreed with but would not have the fortitude to express so candidly for public consumption. He strikes me as someone that would be fun to have a conversation with over a beer as long as none of your overly politically correct neighbours were within earshot.

His discussion of the steam engine as one of the most important innovations that started the Industrial Revolution is engrossing. I have always associated the steam engine with James Watt but the precursor to his design was in operation in the late 1600s , draining water from tin mines. Watt comes across as an innovator but also has a self publicist and very litigious. Ridley points out that in many fields the extreme protection of intellectual property does harm to the public good. And the list of innovators that he names that get caught up in trying to protect their patents and squandering their most productive years and resources is something that today's IP experts and legislators need to be made aware of.

He moves on to Thomas Edison and hard work, and his adage that genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. Or some variant of those ratios. This is brought home by Edison trying to find the correct material for the filament of the lightbulb. Many others, around the world were trying to perfect the lightbulb but Edison's team, whom he

worked very, very hard, came up with the ideal solution. Carbonized bamboo was the answer and it was painstaking experimentation which came up with answer and began the American icon General Electric.

Ridley goes on to trace the histories of vaccines, the use of chlorine for clean water, fertilizer (this story should be told in every grade school), aviation, transistors, computers etc. Everyone of these chapters is fascinating and even if you are familiar with some of them Ridley is able to tell them in a manner that makes them new again. I remember reading biographies of the Wright brothers when I was a kid but the author puts their world into context , with all the colourful characters that competed with them and helped them.

After outlining our past innovations that have allowed us to live longer, more productive lives he disturbs our complacency by listing all the obstacles we put up that may slow or even stop future advances. Ridley shows us that societies that innovated historically are ones that had a strong work ethic. The developed countries are losing that industriousness. He is correct that we have a more work/home balance than generations in the past but it is not to be unexpected. Our social safety nets remove the spectre of extreme poverty . Starvation can be a catalyst for putting in those extra hours.

However, we don't want to leave the innovation to developing countries that work harder and want it more. Though this is beginning to occur Ridley shows us a way out if we want to take it. Innovation comes from the bottom up. Individuals or small teams that experiment and aren't afraid to fail, are the ones who move us forward. Freedom is the crucial ingredient. Less regulation, fragmented governance, less intellectual property rights, and of course serendipity all are necessary to restart our innovation engine.

The author emphasizes an aspect of our modern world that we have overlooked. Innovations have been critical in helping us get to this amazing, flourishing time that we are in today. Innovation, that secret ingredient that includes tinkering and incrementalism, is the true hero of humankind's advancement . He gives innovation it's proper place as a foundational part of our culture. And, unlike other measurements of how well our society is doing, such as GDP growth and productivity, he proves that there is a way to encourage innovation. Ridley demonstrates that it can blossom with the right kind of freedoms.

Recommended for anyone that enjoys learning about history and science and wants us to have a better world for our children.

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