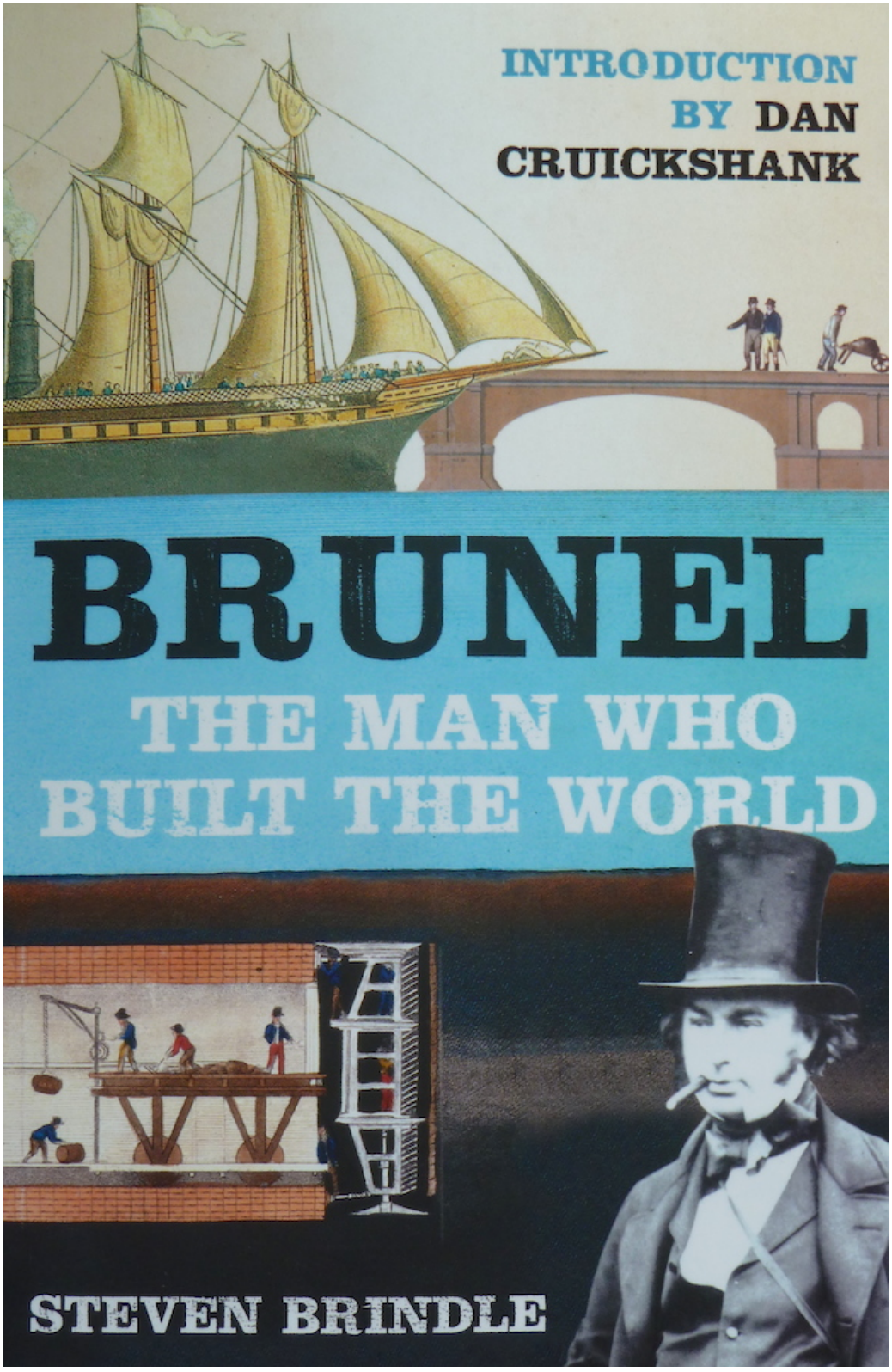
Book Review – Brunel – The Man Who Built the World

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INTRODUCTION
BY DAN
CRUICKSHANK
BRUNEL
THE MAN WHO
BUILT THE WORLD
STEVEN BRINDLE

Book Review –

Brunel – The Man Who Built the World

Reviewed by Kim Henson

Title: Brunel – The Man Who Built the World

Author: Steven Brindle

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The extraordinary engineering achievements of Isambard Kingdom Brunel (following those of his father Marc Isambard Brunel) were as comprehensive as they were daring, original and innovative. With new standards continually being set by him in developing railways and their motive power, as well as ships, viaducts, bridges, tunnels and buildings, his legacy lives on. The fact that he did all this within a remarkably few years in the early/middle years of the 19th Century makes his contribution to everyday life then and now even more remarkable.

The history of how it all came about and much detail regarding how Brunel approached his projects are chronicled in this fascinating book, written by Steven Brindle and with an in-depth and useful ‘scene-setting’ introduction by Dan Cruickshank.

You may well be wondering why I am including a book on ‘engineering’ feats in my motoring magazine website… The reason is that I know that many of our readers are interested in the history of railways and general engineering as well as motor vehicles, and I felt that this book would appeal to many.

I should also confess that since I was a lad I have been interested in the achievements of Brunel, and over many years have read several different accounts of his life and his works. In each volume I have discovered information that was new to me and my interest has only deepened. The same has applied to Steven Brindle's book…

It starts with a brief history of Brunel's start in life and how his interests developed, not least due to the work and inspiration of his father Marc.

The text continues with descriptions of each of Isambard's projects, taking the reader through the ups and downs, the difficulties encountered and their solutions, the successes and failures, talking candidly about (for example) the demise of his 'atmospheric' railway – partly due to the weakness of available materials in the 19th Century to form effective seals within the vacuum set-up that enabled the railway to operate.

Brunel was always determined to take his projects well beyond established thinking, and this applied to all aspects of his work. He also dedicated his life wholeheartedly to each task, in each case working 'all hours' to ensure completion. As one example the heartbreaking setbacks – but also sheer determination – with regard to the Thames Tunnel are also covered in detail.

I found the book to be well-written and very 'readable', engaging the reader to the extent that in virtual 'time travel' one could easily be transported back to Brunel's heyday, to imagine what it must have been like in the mid-1800s to see and experience his great ships, railways, bridges and tunnels.

Favourite sections? Difficult to select as I enjoyed the whole story as told in this book. However here are just three examples:

First, I have always found intriguing Brunel's development of the broad gauge Great Western Railway network, although ultimately it was ditched in favour of our 'standard gauge' system. Coverage of this era within the book brings Brunel's dream back to life.

Second, the three great ships inspired by Brunel's imagination were nothing short of amazing for their time, 'The Great Western', 'The Great Britain' and 'The Great Eastern'. All deserved their respective places in history, despite the many difficulties encountered in bringing these projects to fruition, and operating them. Remarkably, and thankfully, SS Great Britain survives and can be viewed at Bristol. She was launched in 1843, operated until 1933 and was brought home to Bristol in 1970 after years of dereliction and decay in the Falklands.

Last but not least, the coverage in this book of Brunel's wonderful bridges is excellent. Like many others, every time I cross the River Tamar (to Saltash and back), I marvel at and admire his famous railway bridge, built in 1859 and still carrying trains between Devon and Cornwall.

VERDICT

A 'must-read' volume. Full of detail but easy to read, in an engaging manner this book covers Brunel's inspirational career from its start to his death at a far-too-early age.

In addition to the enjoyable text, there are many terrific illustrations, drawings and photographs from the 19th Century, which help underline the importance of, and bring to life, the amazing achievements of this most famous engineer.