BIBLIOPHILES Meeting #23


This book was much loved by virtually all of our readers, leading to impassioned reports of its story-telling power, and surprising depth of political reporting and historical perspective. Its focus on engineering design and project management, while challenging for many, was a marvel of clarity and revealed complexity. The paucity of detailed technical diagrams, however, was a gap that many readers regretted.

McCullough highlighted y outstanding qualities of character in John and Washington Roebling. Both father and son were highly skilled engineers, visionaries, working on the technological frontiers of bridge building in the late 19th century. In addition, they had well-practiced planning and execution skills that allowed them to succeed in projects where many others had failed. The diligence, craftsmanship, and Germanic stick-to-itiveness of the linked families was almost beyond belief.

Chris Behr, an engineer who reads, pointed out that the Brooklyn Bridge exceeded by several orders of magnitude its calculated design requirements. Like the ancient Roman bridges, it was thus “overbuilt” to provide extra margins of safety. It survives today, after more than a century of hard and continuous use, as a work of technological bravura. It is likewise a work of great
beauty, economic power, and a testament to the hard work and sacrifice of thousands of people at all levels of society. These included many Irish and other poor emigrants who endured the most risky and trying of work environments.

McCullough also does a masterful job of revealing the “grass roots” history of occupational hazards (caisson disease, aerial challenges), political skull-duggery, contract fraud and financial shenanigans that plagued the construction of the bridge.

As Carl Camp judiciously pointed out, the Great Bridge may never have been built without the dominating power of corrupt city bosses “on the take” in New York and Brooklyn during the late 19th century. And as McCullough says on the marvelous documentary film by Ken Burns, entitled “The Brooklyn Bridge”, the bridge continues to repeat truths that we need to remember.”

Our next book choice is **THE ROUND HOUSE**: A Novel, by Louise Erdrich. It is a National Book Award Winner. We will meet at Caniglia’s, at 11:30 on January 8, 2014. I look forward to seeing you there. Copies should be available for Bibliophiles at 20% discount at the Book Worm.

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