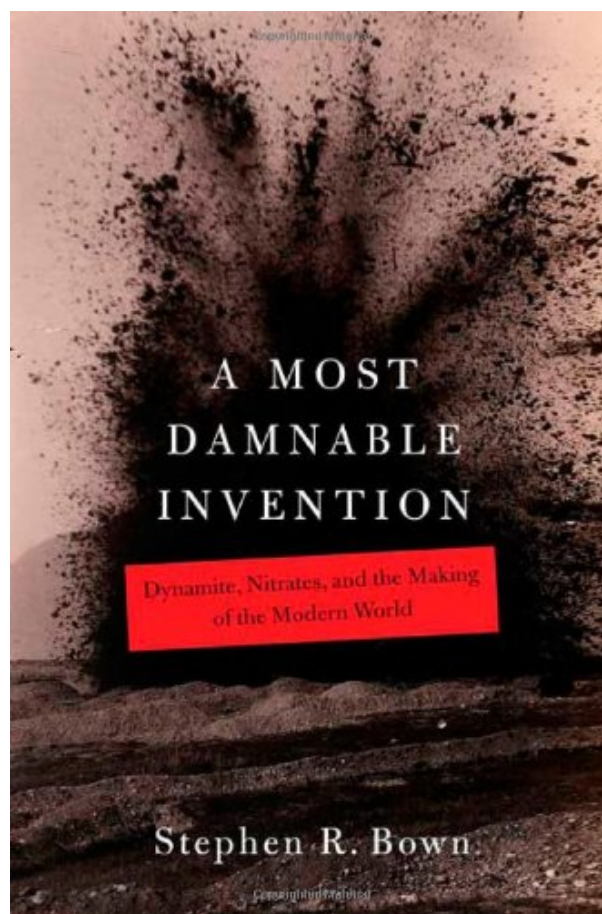
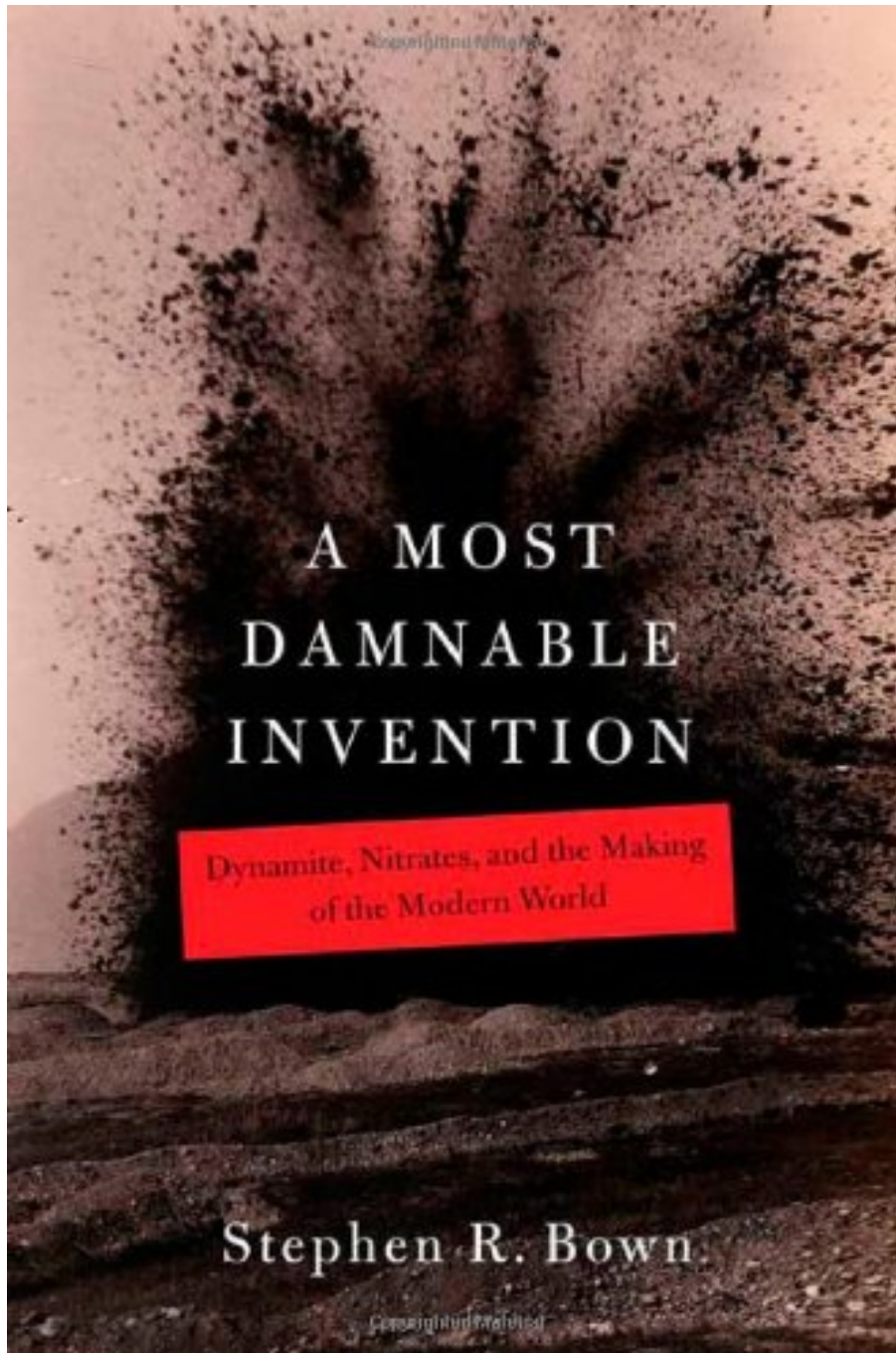


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DYNAMITE, NITRATES, AND THE MAKING
OF THE MODERN WORLD BY STEPHEN R.
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A MOST DAMNABLE INVENTION: DYNAMITE, NITRATES, AND THE MAKING OF THE MODERN WORLD BY STEPHEN R. BOWN PDF

Swedish chemist Alfred Nobel's discovery of dynamite made possible the famous industrial megaprojects that transformed the countryside and defined the era, including the St. Gothard rail tunnel through the Alps, the clearing of New York harbor, the Panama Canal, and countless others. Dynamite also caused terrible injuries and great loss of life, and, in some cases, incalculable and irreparable environmental damage. Nobel was one of the richest men in a society rapidly transforming under the power of his invention, but with a troubled conscience, he left his estate to the establishment of the world-famous prizes that bear his name. As the use of explosives soared and growing populations consumed more food, nations scrambled for the scarce yet vital organic ingredient needed for both. The quest for nitrates takes us from the rural stables and privies of preindustrial Europe to the monopoly trading plantations in India and to the Atacama Desert in South America. Nitrates were as valuable in the nineteenth century as oil is in the twenty-first and were the cause of similar international jockeying and power politics. The "nitrogen problem" of creating inorganic nitrates was solved by an enigmatic German scientist named Fritz Haber. His breakthrough not only prolonged the First World War but became the foundation of the green revolution and the tripling of world population since then. Haber is also known as the "father of gas warfare" for his work on poison gas. When he was awarded a Nobel Prize for his work in chemistry, it sparked international outrage and condemnation. *A Most Damnable Invention* is a human tale of scientific obsession, shadowy immorality, and historical irony, and a testament to the capacity for human ingenuity during times of war.

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The Boom in Boom

By Rob Hardy

Each year we are treated to the announcements of the Nobel Prizes, and are invited to consider the irony particularly of the Peace Prize founded by Alfred Nobel who made his fortune perfecting explosives. While some might argue that explosives have brought victory and peace, their immediate effects are simply destruction, even in the cases of destruction directed toward non-lethal activities like making tunnels or canals. Our ambivalent relationship to explosives has been constant ever since we have had them, and is a key part of the story in *_A Most Damnable Invention: Dynamite, Nitrates, and the Making of the Modern World_* (Thomas Dunn Books) by Stephen R. Bown. You would not expect this to be an exciting story, when you learn that a large part of it has to do with such things as compost and bird droppings and their strategic importance. Bown makes the case, though, that finding better explosives, and ways to tame them to our use, has been one of the foundations of our modern world.

Bown starts with black powder, and its manufacture from sulfur, charcoal, and saltpeter, the last one, the supply of potassium nitrate to the mix, being difficult to get, as its formation from decomposition was not well understood. The hunger for the potassium nitrate of saltpeter grew gradually over the centuries, but then expanded due to scientific and technical advances in the nineteenth century. In 1864, Alfred Nobel began making nitroglycerine, which had been invented in Italy twenty years before, in his family laboratory in Stockholm. It was dangerous, and there was an international public outcry against Nobel and his efforts. In

an attempt to tame nitroglycerine, Nobel tried combining it with inert ingredients, and found that a particular clay could be mixed with it to make the most stable explosive. Nitrates from organic sources only became more valuable. Bown estimates that Germany would have run out of armaments by 1916 if it had relied only on imported nitrates (mostly guano), but the second important chemist of this tale found an innovative way to get them in another fashion. After all, nitrogen is all around us, about 80% of the air we breathe, so there is an abundant supply. Extracting it from the air, however, was a goal unmet until Fritz Haber found a way to use high pressures and temperatures to get atmospheric nitrogen and hydrogen to combine into ammonia, to which oxygen could be combined on the way to making nitric acid. It was enough to prolong Germany's participation in the war, and Haber also developed a way of releasing chlorine gas, making him known as "The Father of Gas Warfare".

Both Nobel and Haber justified their efforts not only by stressing the peacetime use of explosives, which are many and valuable, but also by the rationalization that making armaments more effective and terrible was really a humane effort that would shorten wars and result in fewer lives lost in the long run. Haber never saw the futility of such self-justification, and never had qualms over his work, but Nobel did. Nobel wrote, "I wish all guns with their belongings and everything could be sent to hell, which is the proper place for their exhibition and use." The guns were not restricted to that theater, of course, and Nobel became enormously rich. His peculiar will setting up the Nobel Prizes might be seen as some sort of attempt at atonement. Explosives, like all our gadgets, are neither good nor bad; the uses to which they are put determine that. Bown explains that they are only reflections of the duality of the human mind: "On the one hand, murderous, frightening, and destructive; on the other hand, optimistic, determined, and wildly inventive." Their story, dramatically told here with much insight into human cleverness and human folly, is an important one in understanding human civilization.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Interesting Information.... Oddly Put Together

By George Poirier

There is much interesting information presented in this book. The topic of explosives is discussed from earliest times to essentially the end of World War I. The contributions of Alfred Nobel are particularly prominent, as are those of Fritz Haber towards the end of the book. The author's focus is mainly on the historical, political and sociological aspects rather than the technical and scientific details of the various inventions - in other words, no detailed recipes or chemical formulas of explosives are provided. The only aspect of this book with which I had some difficulty is its timeline which is rather erratic. The author zigzags from medieval times to the nineteenth century, then back to olden times then back again to more modern times, etc. Other than possibly being somewhat annoying for some readers, this format has resulted in a certain amount of repetition of some of the facts. Nevertheless, this odd quirk does not detract from the fact that the book does contain much very interesting information. It should be of great interest to history buffs, particularly those interested in the history of science and technology.

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

More bang for the buck!!

By Jerry Guild

This book is an excellent combination of many things: History, Biography, Business, Politics, Warfare, Sociology, Science, Advancement of Civilization, Human Nature, Greed, Oppression, Philanthropy, Loneliness, Failure, Success, and even much more.

The author covers the development of explosives from its earliest days to modern times, or at least up to pre nuclear times.

A large part of the book centers around the life and work of Alfred Nobel, why he experimented with explosives, and how he invented Dynamite. Of course, inventions that promise an advantage in military power, great riches, and particularly useful in making huge construction or destruction possible; will naturally

have far reaching implications. These implications are well detailed and explained throughout the book. However; whenever mankind finds a new, valuable and limited resource ;conflicts occur in its control;eventually the supply becomes scarce and an alternative is searched for. When the naturally occurring sources of nitrates can't keep up with the demand;then along comes a person who is nowhere as well known in history as Nobel,Fritz Haber,who develops methods to manufacture synthetic nitrogen and whole new worlds of advancement open up.While explosives,more often than not,thought of as warfare weapons ;the discovery of synthetic nitrogen,changed the world's food production with its ability to provide cheap,and highly efficient fertilizer for growing crops.While, with every advancement,there are also unforeseen problems.In this case, great advancement in food supplying ,came great advances in population.Now the earth has a population of over 6 billion where prior to the discovery of synthetic Nitrogen it was about 2 billion.Along with that,since the crops absorb only a small amount of these "artificial" fertilizers,the rest end up in oceans and rivers,creating huge,uncontrolled growth in algae and its accompanying problems.

Another part of the book covers what Nobel did with the huge fortunes his discovery brought to him.He had no family,and left almost everything to fund the Nobel Foundation that awards prizes we have all come to hear about.

In a way this book really looks at the great discoveries and advancement in civilization and wonders is it all really for the best. Mankind has always wondered this, and will continue to discover and ,advance and wonder.I guess the answer lies in the fact that ,despite the problems that come with advancement;they are never enough to turn back.

Mankind has learned to live with the advancements made with Gunpowder and Dynamite; will we also learn to manage Nuclear Energy as well?

Overall a very interesting and thought provoking book.

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From Publishers Weekly

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