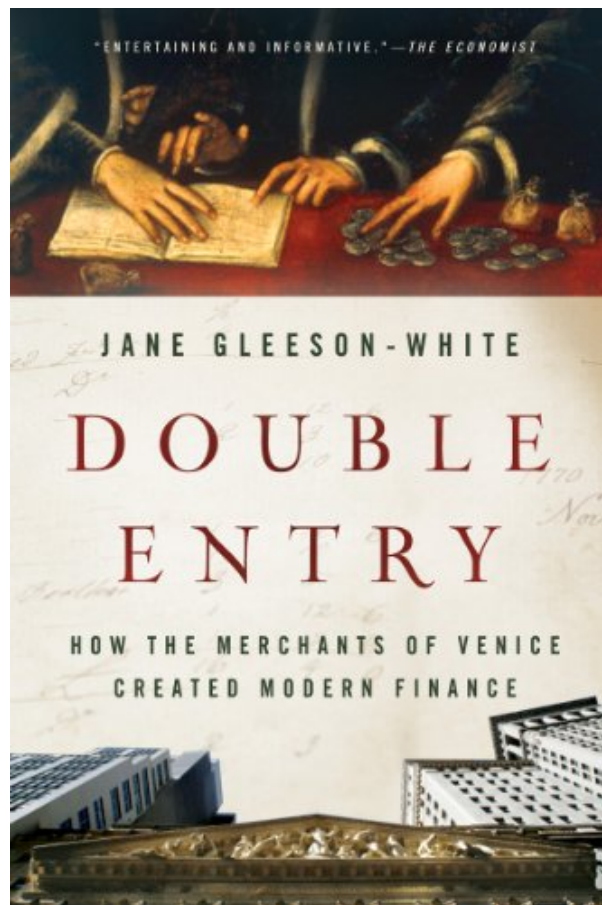


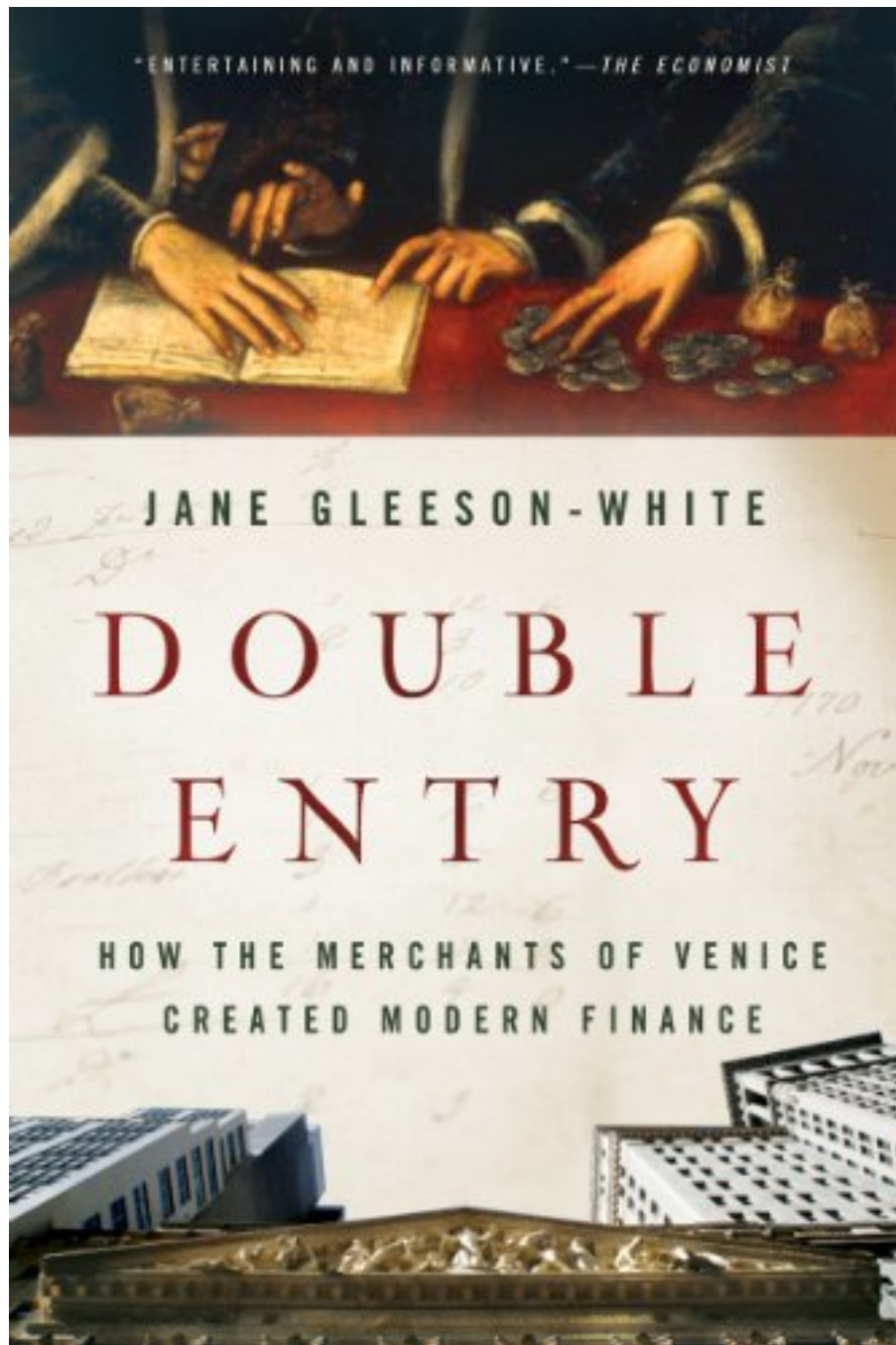
DOUBLE ENTRY: HOW THE MERCHANTS OF VENICE CREATED MODERN FINANCE

BY JANE GLEESON-WHITE



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Review

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“Starred review. Lively and elegantly written account of the history of double-entry bookkeeping.... This dynamic examination of the impact and legacy of double-entry bookkeeping is sure to appeal to those in the accounting profession, business leaders, and history buffs, and will likely become required reading in business school curricula.” (Publishers Weekly)

About the Author

Jane Gleeson-White is the author of Double Entry: How the Merchants of Venice Created Modern Finance, which won the 2012 Waverley Library Award for Literature. Gleeson-White has degrees in economics and literature from the University of Sydney.

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“Lively history. . . . Show[s] double entry’s role in the creation of the accounting profession, and even of capitalism itself.”?The New Yorker

Filled with colorful characters and history, Double Entry takes us from the ancient origins of accounting in Mesopotamia to the frontiers of modern finance. At the heart of the story is double-entry bookkeeping: the first system that allowed merchants to actually measure the worth of their businesses. Luca Pacioli?monk, mathematician, alchemist, and friend of Leonardo da Vinci?incorporated Arabic mathematics to formulate a system that could work across all trades and nations. As Jane Gleeson-White reveals, double-entry accounting was nothing short of revolutionary: it fueled the Renaissance, enabled capitalism to flourish, and created the global economy. John Maynard Keynes would use it to calculate GDP, the measure of a nation’s wealth. Yet double-entry accounting has had its failures. With the costs of sudden corporate collapses such as Enron and Lehman Brothers, and its disregard of environmental and human costs, the time may have come to re-create it for the future.

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Most helpful customer reviews

45 of 46 people found the following review helpful.

Quite Interesting

By The Emperor

I quite enjoyed reading this. The author does a good job in writing a lively and accessible book about what many might consider to be a somewhat dry subject.

I particularly liked the historical background. Some of it was truly fascinating. I hadn't realised that Pacioli was such a distinguished mathematician. It was fascinating to read the influence that double entry book keeping has had and how without it some have speculated that there might have been no "capitalism". There were some great details about Marx and Engels.

There are chapters on National Income accounts, scandals and criticism of accountancy and in particular audits. The final chapter on environmental accounting was very informative.

I am a qualified accountant and I think that I would have liked to have read more about the history of the profession. Other people might well like more explanations of accounting terms.

In a way I think that this book might attempt to do too much and the treatment of some subjects is a little shallow.

However despite these reservations I felt that I did learn a few things from this book and it was generally pretty interesting and it all seemed to be accurate.

29 of 31 people found the following review helpful.

A Gem

By Malcolm Cameron

Double Entry

How the merchants of Venice shaped the modern world - and how their invention could make or break the planet
by Jane Gleeson - White

This book is a gem! Dusty old "double entry accounting" is threaded together with stories of Renaissance Venice, its merchants and scholarly discoveries, development of capitalism, national GDP, and accounting for environmental damage.

After a shaky start resurrecting Senator Robert Kennedy, the scene moves on cue to medieval Pisa, Genoa,

Florence and Venice. There the Franciscan monk Luca Pacioli, mathematician, chess-player, and encyclopedist inadvertently immortalized himself as the "father" of double-entry bookkeeping.

Luca Pacioli made significant mathematical discoveries, taught Leonardo da Vinci, and in particular wrote a mathematical encyclopedia in 1494 allocating 27 pages to a bookkeeping treatise that bestowed him glory to this day. This was only a small part of Pacioli's work in "Summa de Arithmetica, geometria, proportione et proportionalità" or "Everything about Arithmetic, Geometry, Proportion, and Proportionality" plus other works including an unpublished treatise on chess which was rediscovered in 2006.

A brilliant intertwined history of merchants and mathematics is presented from Mesopotamian tablets and ancient Greek mathematics through to the Hindu-Arabic numerals and the new style bookkeeping. The dark arts of Egyptian priests and the commercial activities of early merchants triggered Augustine's warning that "The good Christian should beware of mathematics ... a covenant with the devil to darken the spirit and confine man in the bonds of Hell". The author successfully combines "the calculations used by merchants ... and the numbers used by philosophers to express the secret harmonies of the universe." This is a neat idea particularly for those new to the history of mathematics or finance.

The focus then turns to bookkeeping, bills of exchange, limited liability, cost accounting, National Accounts, GDP, etc. Pacioli tells us that "If you are in business and do not know all about it, your money will go like flies - That is, you will lose it"; " ... the merchant is like a rooster ... the most alert and ... keeps his night vigils and never rests". Just like modern continuous disclosure Pacioli advises "Frequent accounting makes for long friendship" warning that "if you are not a good bookkeeper ... you will go on groping like a blind man and meet great losses".

Finally, the author goes 'over the top' quoting claims not only that the concept of capitalism originated with double entry bookkeeping but the entire modern scientific capitalistic world as well. The book ends by considering environmental concerns excluded from company accounts longing for a sort of Accounting of Everything. Accounting can "make or break the planet ... there may be one last hope for life on earth: accountants". There are limits, if it is that bad, let us all just "drink and be merry ...".

Malcolm Cameron
13 May 2012

22 of 23 people found the following review helpful.

A book of two halves - debit and credit.

By ReynolA1

This is a fine, well researched (if short) history of double-entry bookkeeping. I was aware of some of the history of the practice before I read it, but this filled the history out to the early 1500s nicely. The chapters on the European adoption of the Indian / Arabic numbers out of the Roman and medieval numbering systems, the evolution of the double-entry system of bookkeeping and the early impact of double-entry were all good reading - and well written. It seems well-aimed at the students of the profession and is the most readable history of this subject I have yet read.

There were two disappointments, though. Firstly I would have liked the author to stick to the actual subject, and write a lot more on the development of bookkeeping from Pacioli through to the improvements, refinements and the development of modern accounting over the last century. A mention of Henry Rand Hatfield or Sir David Tweedie for example might have helped. Covering the modern innovation of legally enforceable standards would have helped more. Pointing out the errors that accountants sometimes make should not be the sole focus of this entire time period.

Instead, and secondly, what was there in the middle to end chapters was a discussion of how economists have obtained some of the data that the bookkeepers and accountants produce and added those to other numbers to create figures for politicians and economists to use to try to manage economies. Quite rightly, the author points out that this process is not necessarily likely to be useful, and can be harmful. How exactly this fits in with double-entry bookkeeping I am not sure. The author seems to be trying to justify some of the hype on the front cover, rather than providing a history of the practice and profession. Developing the first section on would have been much, much better.

The last chapter, covering the development of environmental and social accounting was also good reading, and provides a case for this area to develop further. To be honest, though, after wading through the section on the economists I had lost some of the interest that the early chapters had developed.

In summary - if you are looking for a good, well-written and very easy-to-read history of the practice of double-entry bookkeeping, then this is a very good book. It's not long and provides enough detail for most to understand where it come from. If you just want to learn about double-entry, then stop after the Pacioli section and then perhaps read the chapter on environmental accounting. If you also want a discussion piece on how economists can misuse data, then read the whole book.

This really is a book of two halves. Pity they seem so disjointed.

Another interesting point is all the other books that appear when you search for this one.

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