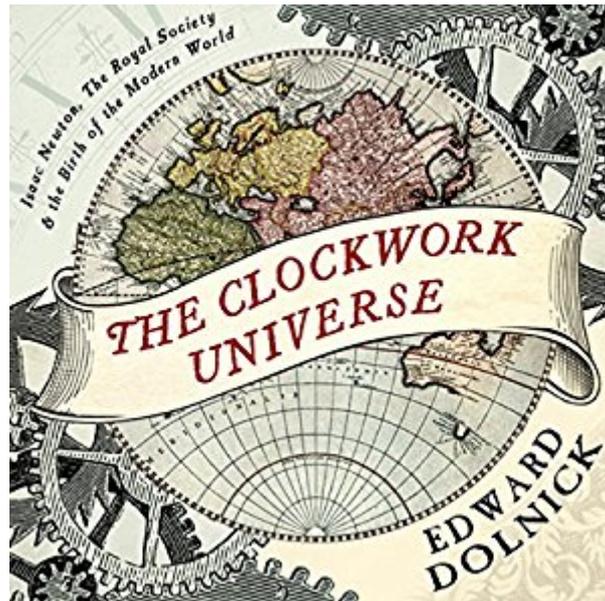


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# The Clockwork Universe: Isaac Newton, The Royal Society, And The Birth Of The Modern World



## Synopsis

The Clockwork Universe is the story of a band of men who lived in a world of dirt and disease but pictured a universe that ran like a perfect machine. A meld of history and science, this book is a group portrait of some of the greatest minds who ever lived as they wrestled with nature's most sweeping mysteries. The answers they uncovered still hold the key to how we understand the world. At the end of the 17th century, an age of religious wars, plague, and the Great Fire of London when most people saw the world as falling apart, these earliest scientists saw a world of perfect order. They declared that, chaotic as it looked, the universe was in fact as intricate and perfectly regulated as a clock. This was the tail end of Shakespeare's century, when the natural and the supernatural still twined around each other. Disease was a punishment ordained by God, astronomy had not yet broken free from astrology, and the sky was filled with omens. It was a time when little was known and everything was new. These brilliant, ambitious, curious men believed in angels, alchemy, and the devil, and they also believed that the universe followed precise, mathematical laws, a contradiction that tormented them and changed the course of history. The Clockwork Universe is the fascinating and compelling story of the bewildered geniuses of the Royal Society, the men who made the modern world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Science and religion are often at odds in today's highly polarized and contentious world, each sneeringly scornful and antagonistic toward the other. Yet that relationship was very different when

some of the greatest leaps of scientific understanding occurred. Edward Dolnick gives us excellent and readable biographical profiles of the greats like Galileo and Kepler, Leibniz and Newton as well others who were instrumental in the birth of modern science. He says "Newton's intent in all his work was to make men more pious and devout, more reverent in the face of God's creation. His aim was not that men rise to their feet in freedom but that they fall to their knees in awe." (pg 308) But this book is about much more than just the religious thoughts of some of history's greatest thinkers. It also profiles the world they lived in, from the superstitions and diseases the people faced to the unsanitary conditions that produced such maladies (and pity those who had access to the doctors!). And it humanizes them (most were pretty ill-tempered) even though they had talents we can only dream of. It also seeks to convey - in layman's terms - a basic understanding of the principles and truths discovered by these geniuses, and why they were so earth-changing. I read a significant amount of history and you get used to a certain format when opening a book, a format that conveys a certain seriousness. So I was surprised (and even a little disappointed, too) when I saw the larger and heavier font more typical of pulp fiction. But in spite of that it's a very interesting read, particularly for those of us who aren't as familiar with the history of these men or their discoveries.

God was a mathematician. He designed the world in cosmic codes that only a few men have been able to solve in pieces. Brood over that for a while and then be ready to start a reading adventure with this well-written book. The year is young and already I have found a book I'd rate as "Best General History book of 2011." This book is that good. Edward Dolnick, who himself is an amateur theoretical mathematician, has a great story to tell that is backed up with documented evidence and a plethora of research. He knows his stuff. He's also an excellent, engaging writer who makes this story of 17th-century scientific geniuses an interesting read. The great part is that you don't have to be a mathematician yourself to enjoy such an entertaining, interesting story, but you may wish you were. Dolnick takes London of 1665, its stinking, filthy, fecal-infested city streets and turns these rather rancid images into an engrossing story of how Isaac Newton, an ill-tempered and vain man who left Cambridge during a plague outbreak to hide out on his mother's farm, as the setting of this book. Newton, however, wasn't the only one interested in celestial beings or the concept of gravity, motion and speed. There were others in Europe adept at critical thinking who formed what became the Royal Society. The almighty church, however, branded anyone who questioned God's universe as a heretic. Many gifted scientists were killed, others went into hiding. Only the lucky few were able to make themselves heard and live to write about it; Galileo himself died while under house arrest. Thank God for those courageous men or else Dolnick wouldn't have such a fascinating story to

tell. The book is divided into three parts, each focused on a separate theme.

The year 1660 was a turning point in British political, cultural and intellectual life. The restoration of King Charles II, after eleven brutal years of military dictatorship, awoke a new spirit of vibrancy and optimism in Britain. And one of the earliest yet most enduring results of the new era was the formation of the Royal Society. It was a heady time and there are heady tales to be told of it, both in history and in fiction. Among the most successful of the latter are Neal Stephenson's three-volume Baroque Cycle, and one suspects that it is their readership whom Edward Dolnick may have had in mind when writing "The Clockwork Universe: Isaac Newton, the Royal Society, and the Birth of the Modern Universe". Dolnick's writing style is immediately engaging; he is good-humoured, possessed of a dry wit and a pleasing turn of phrase. In his presentation of mathematical and scientific ideas, he takes great pains to render them clear to an audience not only of non-specialists but of complete novices. He writes of science like one of those inspirational teachers who can make these things make sense to the least scientific of students. The book is structured in three parts. The first sets the historical scene of 1660s London - the Restoration, the plague of 1665, the Great Fire, the early work of the Royal Society. Part Two discusses the work of Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo and even the ancient Greeks, to provide the scientific context for Newton's discoveries. Part Three focuses on Newton himself, his discoveries in the fields of mathematics, physics and astronomy, and his long-running feud with Leibnitz over the "invention" (sic) of calculus. (Surely mathematical laws are discovered, not invented?)

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