

Time can wait;Book of the week



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THE CLOCK OF THE LONG NOW: TIME AND RESPONSIBILITY. By Stewart Brand. Weidenfeld £12.99.

Don't bother looking at your wristwatch. What we need to measure now is the progress of humanity. Tom Deveson finds some clues as to how we might do it

Last year, Brian Eno, the rock musician and installation artist, was 50. So was I. Very recently my mother died, I was made redundant after 30 years in teaching and my youngest child became a voting adult. I don't know what else happened to Eno, though doubtless, after a few months pass, both of us will notice the change of millennium.

Some of these events are momentous from anyone's perspective; some are peripheral consequences of our decimal or legal system. Teachers have an idiosyncratic approach to time, having traditionally not only measured out their life in coffee spoons, but also drawn up its dimensions in three terms based on the Christian calendar.

Now some of them are having to adjust to the prospect of a five-term year. As for me, a newly self-employed person, I am able to contemplate going on holiday in September for the first time in my adult life.

In a world dominated by short-term decision-making and urgent deadlines - a world we transform more quickly than we understand the changes - we need to find ways of conceiving and imagining time more impersonally and more responsibly than our culture and science encourage us to do.

Eno has coined the term "the long now" to denote such a way of thinking, and Stewart Brand, compiler of the US counterculture directory, *The Whole Earth Catalog*, has written this book about it.

Brand, Eno and other colleagues - a collection of corporate futurologists, computer adepts and creative/media people - have worked on the idea of representing time as both a mechanism and a myth.

They want something we can visit and see as well as something to make us think and feel. They have conceived a plan for a long-term clock and a long-term library. In a mosaic of chapters containing energetic argument, technical exposition, gnomic assertion and unfocused autobiography, Brand explains how the schemes might work.

The tone is generally cheerful rather than doom-laden. He envisages the Clock as a monument with a sense of living direction towards the future. It must slow down our sense of the present, become a place of deep pause, remind us of those who will live on Earth 10,000 years hence, and contain and enact its own instructions for repair and renewal in the event of catastrophe. The "ambition and folly" of this enterprise are addressed with animation and honesty.

The technical requirements, too, are expounded clearly. The choice of a timing mechanism entails something that is accurate though unreliable (solar alignment) and inaccurate but reliable (a pendulum) which will enable it to be adjusted on days when there is sun or even readjusted after years of volcanic eruption or nuclear winter. In effect, it is to become a very precise but extraordinarily slow computer and, like the oldest clocks, a simulacrum of the heavens.

The discussion from which this design-brief emerges provides its own challenges and rewards. The argument of Brand and his colleagues that we need to reframe our thinking about time - as our thinking about the environment was altered by the first photographs of the planet from space - is forceful and persuasive.

So, too, are the passing observations about how computer technology, while making information simultaneously immortal and obsolete, is creating "legacy systems" (programs that have been patched-up and rewritten by a series of different users) that are at once essential and incomprehensible to future generations.

I am less convinced by Brand's analysis of how a robust and adaptable civilisation operates. This indicates the existence of a deep level of civilisation (Nature) stepping via Culture, Governance, Infrastructure and Commerce to a quick and frothy level of Fashion/Art. This last reads more like a personal statement by former habitués of the New York avant-garde than a fully thought-out notion of what makes and keeps us human.

It's not just the references to cult musicians Laurie Anderson and John Cage, or the assertions that "my generation" (Brand's, and probably mine) thought Pol Pot and cocaine were harmless until we learned a painful lesson.

Nor is it simply that I don't want to know that Eno "was particularly fascinated by the elegance of the fist-size cams" inside Big Ben, any more than I wanted to be told in his published diaries that he drank his own urine while watching Monty Python.

The concept of the long-term library - a data store in a remote location, perhaps buried in a cavern surrounded by rock, he suggests - to which successive generations of both "experts" and the public can add their messages to the future, is still firmly at the fantasy stage.

The suggestions for library stock, both print and electronic, include history, archaeology, science fiction, time capsules, predictive "time mail" and a "responsibility record" in which those whose decisions have contributed to global warming, for example, would explain themselves to those who have to live with the consequences.

Yet it seems there will be little in the way of poetry and canonical literature. This self-denying ordinance leaves a whole range of art (that which isn't Fashion) in unnecessary limbo.

From Homer to Heaney, poets have meditated on the idea of time and taken a long view that looks beyond death. And the best novelists have often set human lives in dense generational contexts that reflect and refract the essential metaphors of the world's religions.

Though Brand quotes occasionally from classical writers, it is as though they are mouthpieces for their characters' views; the sturdy objectivity of great literature seems to escape him.

Yet telling stories of Odysseus to small children immediately makes you part of a process that has already lasted three millennia.

Brand invites readers to contribute to the Long Now website (www.longnow.org) with more ideas. One contribution would be to think how we can make education truly fulfil his engaging aphorism: "The debt we cannot repay our ancestors we pay our descendants."

Tom Deveson was until recently an advisory teacher for the London borough of Southwark

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