



## The Calendar

*David Ewing Duncan*

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## **The Calendar** David Ewing Duncan

Measuring the daily and yearly cycle of the cosmos has never been entirely straightforward. The year 2000 is alternatively the year 2544 (Buddhist), 6236 (Ancient Egyptian), 5761 (Jewish) or simply the Year of the Dragon (Chinese). The story of the creation of the Western calendar, which is related in this book, is a story of emperors and popes, mathematicians and monks, and the growth of scientific calculation to the point where, bizarrely, our measurement of time by atomic pulses is now more accurate than time itself: the Earth is an elderly lady and slightly eccentric - she loses half a second a century. Days have been invented (Julius Caesar needed an extra 80 days in 46BC), lost (Pope Gregory XIII ditched ten days in 1582) and moved (because Julius Caesar had 31 in his month, Augustus determined that he should have the same, so he pinched one from February).

## **The Calendar Details**

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Author : David Ewing Duncan

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## **From Reader Review The Calendar for online ebook**

### **Rizwan says**

Very detailed but sometimes overly so, with the narrative getting slightly lost.

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### **Alyssa Macpherson says**

At first this was an interesting read, but as I read more the lustre has worn off. The author is focussing on his own narrative over historical detail and sometimes even facts.

This is especially egregious in the chapters about the early Middle Ages, wherein the fall of Rome is portrayed as hordes of bloodthirsty barbarians destroying something glorious without reason, while St. Augustine and the church hate time and science but need them to calculate Easter.

Someone got all their history from Gibbon's Rise and Fall. Very disappointing, am probably not going to continue reading.

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### **Frank Roberts says**

One gets the sense that the author felt the material on the actual calendar wasn't quite long enough for a book, and had to bulk the text out. Half of the book doesn't deal with the calendar at all, but rather digresses into lengthy exposition on how barbaric and benighted the middle ages were. There are also digressions into the history of our number system and into various other sorta-kinda related topics. I would have much preferred the author stuck to the topic.

Also, minor errors that were not caught in revision or editing make the credibility of the whole book suspect. One travels EAST on the Thames from London to reach Oxford? Quite a feat. The year 2000 is actually the year 1997, because Jesus was born in 4 BC? How does that math work? A work of popular scientific history should not have such obvious mistakes.

So, although there is definitely interesting material on the history of our calendar, this book suffers from serious flaws. I was disappointed.

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### **Jane Elliot says**

one of my all time favourite books

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### **Josette says**

This is a really interesting book. It's a little hard to get through in parts, but I gave it 5 stars because it's just so darn fascinating. Did you know about the 10 days that were removed from the calendar by Pope Gregory in 1582 (but not until 1752 in the American colonies?) Read this book and you'll know!

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### **Caitlin says**

A good read and as easy for a lay-person to understand as I think possible when it comes to talking about the intricacies of time. (Which means I didn't understand everything, but enough to come away with a comprehensive understanding).

My biggest beef is the obvious anti-Byzantine, anti-Eastern Europe historical bias. While giving due justice to the influence of Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, and Islamic figures, the book should be more precisely termed "Europe's Epic Struggle to Create a Year Acceptable to their Understanding of the World". A few mentions of the Mayan calendar are not nearly enough to truly explore humanity's encompassing idea of a 'year'.

There's also the old tired canard that every churchman or religious person is a power-hungry ignoramus unless they believe in science in which case they \*obviously\* can't be very religious. While not explicitly stated, it's clearly implied and shows a lack of attempt to understand any historical viewpoint that doesn't mesh with a modern one.

So this is a good book to read if you want a brief overview of pre-European time calculation and an in-depth view on the ultimate creation of the Gregorian calendar. But read with the knowledge of historical bias and maybe check out a different history or three in addition.

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### **booklady says**

Was combing my history shelves -- for something else -- and pulled this down. Remembered what a fascinating read it was. Tells all about how the modern calendar developed. This was a 'reading room' (AKA powder room) read which is why it took almost a year to finish, but still I did read the entire book. Never knew what a complicated thing Time and its tracking is.

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### **Stephanie says**

A deliciously scholarly book on the history and difficulties of creating accurate calendars across the centuries. If you think this sounds boring as hell, let me quote from the cover, "David Duncan takes his place in the ranks of the best explainers in print" (Hugh Downs).

I had a dim notion that politics likely had a bearing on the adoption of our current calendar (which it did and does), what I did not realize was how much religion was a factor. Duncan emphasizes the conceptual differences between the religious and the secular tensions of calendrical thought. For most of the centuries of Christianity's domination of Western religion, the church felt that 'God's time' was eternal and not only different from "man's time", but that it was sacrilegious to try to divide time into days, months, and years.

Duncan writes about the various geniuses (and dolts) that endeavored to formulate a calendar, the struggle of

Christianity to stick to their guns, but also correctly set the date of Easter. This became a huge conundrum for them, across both the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, and also the various calendars that different countries favored.

It's quite a well-written book, very engrossing. I give it 5 stars. And I'll leave you with my favorite quote from it (each chapter begins with a quote, a nice touch).

"Try as they may to savor the taste of eternity, their thoughts still twist and turn upon the ebb and flow of things in past and future time. But if only their minds could be seized and held steady, they would be still for a while and; for that short moment, they would glimpse the splendor of eternity, which is forever still."

-- Augustine of Hippo, CE 400

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### **Acquafortis says**

A appealing fact-jammed book about something we use everyday - the calendar.

I never thought there were so many events and people involved in its story dating back to time immemorial. Facts at times amusing, others outright dramatic.

It's fascinating the interplay between time and who dictates it. Control over time and its deployment gives boundless power to the beholder that usually one can't even ponder.

Last one on the list is the Roman Catholic Church, who's reform on the calendar is the one we're still using today.

A reform that started, not for any scientific endeavour but for the down to earth task of celebrating Easter on the appropriate day!

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### **Deborah Pickstone says**

Interesting examination of the concept of time, how the calendar (linear time) evolved and how human-made time doesn't reconcile with time as it happened and the confusion sown along the way by various interferences and the intersection of several different calendars. And all you asked was 'what time is it?' :)

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### **Tracy Black says**

At first I was disappointed that this was a history of only the western calendar. All others got, at best, a brief mention. But this was a THOROUGH history, of not only the calendar, but of the science and politics that influenced it. This is a well-written, worthy read.

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### **N.J. Ramsden says**

If popular science is your bag, this will go some way to filling up a corner - plenty of interesting material here about various aspects of the calendar as it is and has been, in various periods and cultures, and the science, numbers and reasoning behind it all.

My major gripe with this book is the sheer quantity of errors it contains - figures are bungled, names are wrong, facts incorrectly reported - anybody who has read other books on the matter will spot these a mile off. Sometimes Duncan gets things misaligned on the same, or adjacent, page - the kind of clumsiness a damn good edit should have cured, but didn't, nor did it in subsequent editions from what I've seen. A shame, as otherwise it's a neat little tome.

TL;DR: Nice work spoilt by sloppiness.

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### **Jennifer (the\_pumpkin\_reads) says**

The beginning with all the facts was interesting, but the book became more and more dry. I skimmed the last 70ish pages.

2.5 stars

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### **Carolyn says**

There is no year zero. Have you thought about that? Once upon a time--here is the word-- the subject of this thought-provoking book: time. Go back a mere five hundred years and people would rise with the sun, perhaps here a newfangled church bell rang at a nearby monastery, toil until the sun set, and then go to bed in order to repeat the same events the next day. Time had not been divided into hours and who needed a calendar to record a day that would be the same as its predecessors. Time has even been divided into A.C/B.C. Even that division had to be devised and come to be accepted as logical. Then came the move to the city with businessmen needing to pay workers, meet ships, schedule meetings and the need for a calendar entered people's minds. Actually, churchmen started it with a time needing to record the times of day to ring the time for prayer. The even more important reason that the Catholic Church had to devise a better calendar was to more accurately date Easter. What I also learned is that calendars--whether from India, Babylonia, China, or the Middle Americas involve a great deal of math. What I ultimately learned is that men's pursuit of absolutely precise measurement of time is impossible--even time measured on an atomic clock. In 1582 the Gregorian Calendar was made the official calendar in Catholic nations; Protestant nations followed more slowly with England and Sweden really taking their time, and China even adopted it under the rule of Chairman Mao. Today, the Gregorian Calendar is the world's official calendar with only a few local holdouts. This book makes you think about measuring time, cutting it into pieces on watches and into squares on paper. What motivated men to do this, what it took intellectually to create this now world calendar and why it matters. This is not a quick read, but it certainly is worth your time--pun intended. If you are a non-math person like myself, skim over the math and just enjoy the new thoughts and people you will meet in this fascinating story.

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### **Michael says**

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