

An Engineer's Alphabet—Gleanings From the Softer Side of a Profession

by Henry Petroski

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Handbooks are books that, quite simply, are at hand, for just-in-time use: find the information and move on. So it's rare to find oneself more or less reading through such a guide. Some occasional hopping around usually occurs, what with the lack of a continuous narrative. Well, not since discovering Schott's *Miscellany* have I enjoyed sitting and thumbing through a little book as much as I have through Henry Petroski's *An Engineer's Alphabet – Gleanings From the Softer Side of a Profession*. To the man or woman in the street, engineering, by definition, is usually "hard engineering": bridges, highways, turbines, and so on. So it's refreshing to read of the softer, human side of the profession.

Prof. Petroski refers to the book as "an anthology, a commonplace book, and a reference volume." All of which are accurate, but I like an older term—*vade mecum*, what early handbooks were called—from the Latin "go with me." And following the good Professor's guidance is certainly a pleasant and rewarding experience.

A quick thumb-through of the index shows outlines of engineering-as-hard-engineering as well, but you soon find Aristotle, Asclepius, the Boston Red Sox, Walt Disney, Hamlet, Charles Ives, Dilbert (!), Henri Matisse, Thomas Pynchon, Ayn Rand, Shakespeare, Thoreau, Voltaire, Vonnegut, and Andy Warhol, to name just a few.

Interested in egg drop competitions? See page 83. This engineering staple for design contests for students of all ages is soon followed by "Elegy to an engineer's sweetheart" (85), "Faith of the Engineer" (106), fight songs for engineers (121), novels about engineering (222), and St. Patrick (see page 270 on why he's considered the patron saint of engineers). Shakespeare on engineers soon follows (286), as do slang and euphemisms of engineers (289). And what would the softer side be without the famous "Stress Analysis of a Strapless Evening Gown" (299)! See for yourself the many other gleanings.

Even though the book is a compilation of earlier writings, there is a consistency to Prof. Petroski's voice and style that unifies the selections. A most cogent assessment was made by one reviewer of an earlier work, who noted that "Petroski writes...with the observant eye of an engineer and the imaginative heart of a novelist." (Review of Paperboy Memoir in Cambridge Book Club interview).

Finally, having Prof. Petroski at my elbow has me thinking along classical lines and recalling the sentiment of Callimachus (b. ca 350 BC) who lamented that excessively long works were being produced by the likes of fellows such as Homer. He suggested that *mega biblion, mega kakon!*—loosely translated as "A big book is a big nuisance." By that criterion, "An Engineer's Alphabet" is indeed a delight—enjoyable in any form, whether electronic or traditional, though I'd argue for the latter, as it's a handbook that nicely fits in one's hand! □

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