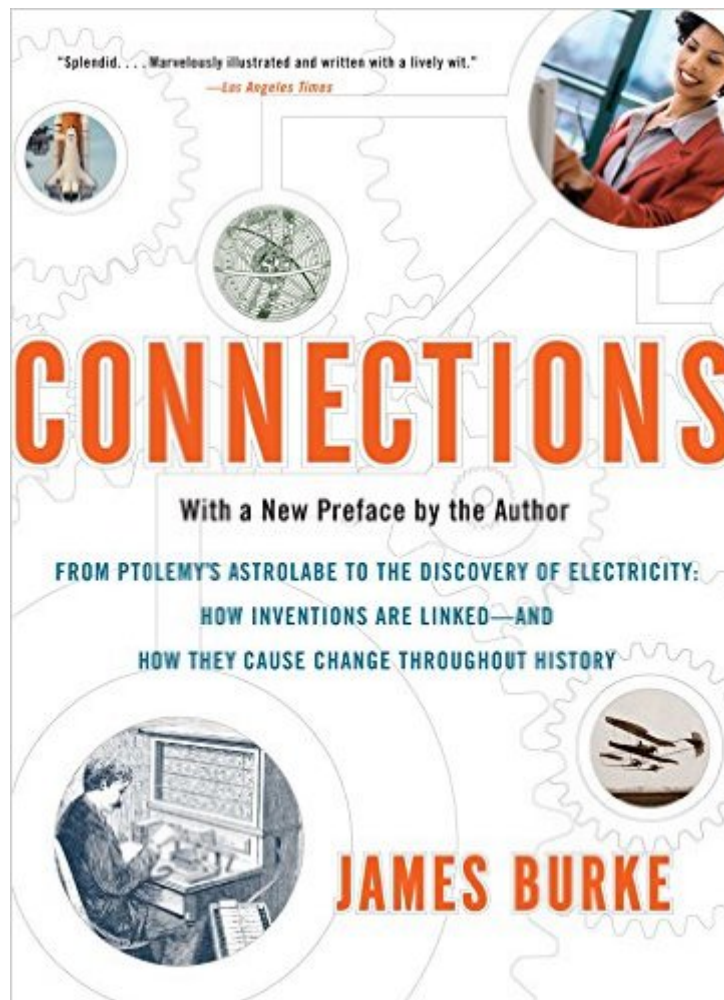


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# Connections



## Synopsis

Connections is a brilliant examination of the ideas, inventions, and coincidences that have culminated in the major technological achievements of today. How did the popularity of underwear in the twelfth century lead to the invention of the printing press? How did the waterwheel evolve into the computer? How did the arrival of the cannon lead eventually to the development of movies? In this highly acclaimed and bestselling book, James Burke brilliantly examines the ideas, inventions, and coincidences that have culminated in the major technological advances of today. With dazzling insight, he untangles the pattern of interconnecting events: the accidents of time, circumstance, and place that gave rise to the major inventions of the world. Says Burke, "My purpose is to acquaint the reader with some of the forces that have caused change in the past, looking in particular at eight innovations—the computer, the production line, telecommunications, the airplane, the atomic bomb, plastics, the guided rocket, and television—which may be most influential in structuring our own futures.... Each one of these is part of a family of similar devices, and is the result of a sequence of closely connected events extending from the ancient world until the present day. Each has enormous potential for humankind's benefit—or destruction." Based on a popular TV documentary series, Connections is a fascinating scientific detective story of the inventions that changed history—and the surprising links that connect them.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The point of James Burke's *Connections* is that material inventions and environmental conditions (not ideas) are the driving force behind the way that societal interaction is structured. As such, Burke reopens the centuries-old Marx-Hegel debate about whether or not our world is structured by the ideas of prominent thinkers (ie: Martin Luther) or the invention of certain objects (ie: the deep plow) and other material conditions (ie: the Black Plague). While you may or may not agree with Burke, on all levels, he does a great job of supporting his central argument. From the claim that the first cities were formed as the result of the receding ice age to the idea that romance became viewed by society as a "private" thing with the invention of the fireplace, he is consistent in his thinking. And while, the gaping hole in his argument is his failure to acknowledge that it was the \*ideas\* of certain "gifted" persons (ie: Thomas Edison, the Wright Brothers) to put available materials together in a useful way, he still reaffirms my conviction that social relations are a function of the material world around us. Bottom line is that we don't structure our world as much as we like to think. Sadly, I found the lack of illustrations in the abridged audio edition had the overall effect of weakening his argument to some degree. I'm really not big on illustrations in texts, but I think to thoughtfully appreciate James Burke's ideas, you have to "see them". For instance, it's very distracting to try to visualize "Volta's Electric Pile" in your head and keep track of what Burke is talking about. I suppose that's why the Mini-series and the book did so well.

This book suffers from comparisons to Burke's PBS series by the same name probably because this is more of a sampler of his perspectives than a comprehensive treatment. Still, it is an absolutely fascinating look at the history of technology and how a break in the smallest link in the chain of technological development might preclude an invention from ever coming forth. I enjoyed Burke's presentation style, written a bit like a mystery novel, giving us the pieces of the puzzle one at a time leading to the ultimate technology as we know it today. It leaves the reader guessing at each step as to what indispensable modern technology will result. Burke postulates that major technological advancements are not the result of geniuses slaving away in laboratories, but instead the amalgamation of numerous small inventions, mostly created by average folks trying to adapt to everyday problems. While I accept that premise prior to the 19th century and perhaps in certain cases through to the 20th century, I believe that with few exceptions (like Gates invention of DOS

for example), most major technological breakthroughs now result from concerted and organized R&D efforts that result from government grants and the corporate profit motive. The only difference today is that the geniuses are working in their den on a PC, and not in a lab. However, with the sophistication and innovativeness necessary to reach the next level in today's complex scientific fields, such breakthroughs are no longer the within the capabilities of the average person. Though one might point to the proliferation of dot com companies as support of Burke's position, I would argue that these are not average people, but rather the geniuses next door.

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