

## AHS London Lecture Thursday 15 July 2021

### David Rooney, **About Time: A History of Civilization in Twelve Clocks**

In 1934, the chronicler of industrialization Lewis Mumford claimed that ‘the clock, not the steam-engine, is the key-machine of the modern industrial age’. For the historian E. P. Thompson in 1967, clocks and their time-discipline contributed to the ‘severe restructuring of working habits’ that formed industrialization. But there has always been a much longer story to be told, as the use of clocks to discipline society goes back as far as we care to look.

Since the earliest civilizations, people of all cultures have used clocks. From the city sundials of ancient Rome to the medieval water-clocks of imperial China, and from sand-clocks fomenting quiet revolution in the Middle Ages to Enlightenment observatories in India, a history of clocks is a history of civilization. Why have we made them? The clock is a frontline weapon in a civilization’s armoury in the battle for control – and its resistance.

In this talk, which accompanies the publication of a book of the same name, David Rooney will explore twelve case studies – twelve clocks – to show how, for thousands of years, time has been imagined, politicized and weaponized. With clocks, elites wield power, make money, govern citizens and control lives. And sometimes, also with clocks, people fight back. None of this is abstract. These are real clocks with recoverable histories that bring pivotal and sometimes violent moments from the past vividly to life.



London Stock Exchange trading floor and clock c. 1800, engraved c. 1878.

It is hard to find a historical depiction of a financial institution that does not include a clock prominently in view, since clocks enable capitalism.

Image: Walter Thornbury, *Old and New London*, 1878.

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*David Rooney is a writer and museum curator. He was formerly Curator of Timekeeping at the Royal Observatory Greenwich and Keeper of Technologies and Engineering at the Science Museum. He is a Council Member of the AHS and sits on the management committee of the Clockmakers’ Museum. His book About Time: A History of Civilization in Twelve Clocks was published by Penguin in June 2021.*

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