



The Lost Art of Finding Our Way

By John Edward Huth

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Long before GPS, Google Earth, and global transit, humans traveled vast distances using only environmental clues and simple instruments. John Huth asks what is lost when modern technology substitutes for our innate capacity to find our way. Encyclopedic in breadth, weaving together astronomy, meteorology, oceanography, and ethnography, *The Lost Art of Finding Our Way* puts us in the shoes, ships, and sleds of early navigators for whom paying close attention to the environment around them was, quite literally, a matter of life and death.

Haunted by the fate of two young kayakers lost in a fogbank off Nantucket, Huth shows us how to navigate using natural phenomena—the way the Vikings used the sunstone to detect polarization of sunlight, and Arab traders learned to sail into the wind, and Pacific Islanders used underwater lightning and “read” waves to guide their explorations. Huth reminds us that we are all navigators capable of learning techniques ranging from the simplest to the most sophisticated skills of direction-finding. Even today, careful observation of the sun and moon, tides and ocean currents, weather and atmospheric effects can be all we need to find our way.

Lavishly illustrated with nearly 200 specially prepared drawings, Huth’s compelling account of the cultures of navigation will engross readers in a narrative that is part scientific treatise, part personal travelogue, and part vivid re-creation of navigational history. Seeing through the eyes of past voyagers, we bring our own world into sharper view.

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The Lost Art of Finding Our Way By John Edward Huth Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review

Lamenting the loss of navigational skills, [Huth] set out to collect in one volume the many schemes that kept our forebears alive. Ancient explorers could, through navigational nous, undertake voyages over great expanses of ocean and land to establish settlements and trade routes, and return home. (Peter Monaghan *Chronicle of Higher Education* 2013-04-01)

Humanity's lust for exploring terra incognita shaped and tested our prodigious capacity for mental mapping. Now, with the advent of the Global Positioning System, wayfaring skills are on the wane. Physicist **John Edward Huth** turns explorer in this rich, wide-ranging and lucidly illustrated primer on how to find yourself in the middle of somewhere. Huth's prescription for navigating fog, darkness, open ocean, thick forests or unknown terrain rests first on harnessing compass, Sun and stars; then on the subtleties of weather forecasting and decoding markers such as the wind, waves and tides. (*Nature* 2013-05-02)

Early humans learned to navigate on land and sea by watching the world around them...**Huth** recovers some of this history by looking at Norse legends, the records of Arab traders moving across the Indian Ocean and Pacific Islanders...Huth's subject is fascinating...We have lost many of our innate abilities on the way to this technologically

advanced moment in time. But John Edward Huth believes, and his book shows, that some of what was lost can still be found. We just need to relearn how to read the signs.

(Anthony Sattin *Literary Review* 2013-05-01)

Just as we are said to have abandoned the art of memory when we started writing things down, so **Huth** says that we have lost our instinct for knowing how to get from here to there. Before the scientific revolution we had the ability to interpret environmental information that enabled us to navigate long distances. Huth surveys Pacific Islanders, medieval Arab traders, Vikings and early Western European travellers before examining techniques for navigators to look to the stars for astronomical beacons, as well as to the weather and the water. (Iain Finlayson *The Times* 2013-05-18)

One of the repeated themes of *The Lost Art of Finding Our Way* is that even the most confused of us can improve our navigational understanding by paying closer attention to the world around us...A learned and encyclopedic grab bag, packed with information drawn from study and **Huth**'s own experience. (Michael Dirda *Washington Post* 2013-06-13)

[An] irresistible book...**Huth** has an affable, smart tone, as welcoming as a Billy Collins poem. His knowledge of way-finding and its history is rangy and detailed, but his enthusiasm never flickers, lifting the educational factor to higher ground: rewarding, artful, ably conveying what can be some fairly abstruse material, the finer points of navigation being among them. There are, by the way, many, many fine points regarding navigation, and if Huth gets a bit windy in pointing them out, well, let the wind blow. It's refreshing. (Peter Lewis *Barnes & Noble Review* 2013-06-26)

[Huth's] exuberance shines through: he makes gadgets in his garage and narrates adventures at sea. Huth's is

a book filled with joy about what we might term the everyday mathematics of living on the Earth...Huth is concerned that we have become desensitized to our physical environment because of technology such as smartphones and global positioning systems, which do the work of plotting and routefinding for us. To live in what Huth dubs 'the bubble' created by such devices is to lose not only our wonder at the world but also a bundle of precious survival skills. To be able to find our way in the world is to reconnect with its value in a virtuous spiral of environmental awareness.

(Robert J. Mayhew *Times Higher Education* 2013-08-01)

The book offers a clear, comprehensive, and entertaining short course in navigation that draws on Earth science, history, anthropology, neuroscience, archaeology, and linguistics. It provides both a primer on navigational techniques and a tour through 'the historical evolution of way finding.' **Huth** punctuates instruction on celestial navigation and reading wind, weather, and currents with engaging stories and images. These are derived from sources as varied as the oral histories of Pacific Islanders and Inuit hunters, Homer's *Odyssey*, Icelandic sagas, navigational tables from the medieval Islamic world, and contemporary news reports and sailing accounts.

(Deirdre Lockwood *Science* 2013-08-09)

It's a great reference, filled with personal and historical anecdotes and fascinating bits of physics, astronomy, oceanography, and meteorology. And that's one of **Huth**'s central points: To find your way in a world without maps, you can't rely on any single cue--you need to make the best of whatever combination of cues is available to you...With a little study, *The Lost Art of Finding Our Way* could be your guide to reconnecting with the navigational aids in the world around you.

(Greg Miller *Wired* 2013-09-05)

Full of wisdom that is fast disappearing in an age of satnav and GPS. (Arthur Musgrave *The Guardian* 2013-12-28)

John Huth's *The Lost Art of Finding Our Way* is a book for anyone who's ever cursed themselves for not being able to get home by way of the stars and winds. Or for anyone who wants to learn how the Vikings and others once managed to. (Thomas Meaney *Times Literary Supplement* 2014-06-13)

About the Author

John Edward Huth is Donner Professor of Science in the Physics Department at Harvard University.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Karen Plum:

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