# of fact and fiction

When Dava Sobel's scientific history *Longitude* was published in 1995, the media was overcome with such awe it appeared dazed. As the New York Times wrote: "First, is everyone clear on the difference between longitude and latitude?"

Longitude chronicles 18th-century carpenter John Harrison's invention of the chronometer, which enabled sailors to determine their longitude at sea. Part novel, part history, part personal reminiscence, the book shifts styles in a way that seems, alternately, overly reverential and overly familiar.

On the other hand, the marriage of fiction and non-fiction is second nature to television; news broadcasts often include dramatisations, and many dramas are "based on a true story". Perhaps this explains why a forthcoming television adaptation of the book is so engaging. (A&E. Sunday, July 10 at 8pm ET.)

The film details the fierce competition, quackery, and genuine ingenuity that followed Britain's Longitude Act of 1714, which offered £20,000 to anyone solving longitudinal problems at sea.

The winner was John Harrison, who invented a frictionless timepiece that required no pendulum and thus kept accurate time even aboard a moving vessel. By keeping track of the time at the departure port, and then observing the heavenly bodies to determine the time at the ship's present location, the longitude could be established.

This film adaptation was written and directed by Charles Sturridge, best known for his Granada Television production of *Brideshead Revisited.*

In that earlier work, Sturridge demonstrated a flair for fleshing out characters so prepossessed by their personal journeys that the warring world outside seems a dim and hazy distraction. So it is unsurprising that Sturridge rewrote *Longitude* to suit his proven strengths, focusing almost entirely on Harrison's struggles.

The film rests heavily on the Longitude Board's ignoble attempts to deny Harrison the prize for more than 40 years.

Though Harrison's clocks were tested and ship's captains swore by them, the board continually added clauses requiring Harrison

cogs going round – both those of the clocks and of Harrison's keen mind. But, occasionally, the explanations slip into vague shorthand, the screenwriter's equivalent of mumbling: "I've made several improvements over the last clock." No elaboration.

Michael Gambon (who played the thief in the 1989 film *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover)* is extraordinary as John Harrison. He nearly hijacks the film, showing a full determination to make it into something more than a mere hagiography.

Also keep an eye out for a cameo by the hopelessly gifted Stephen Fry, who gives us the film's most memorable scene. As a bungling competitor for the prize, he suggests "stabbing a dog and putting it aboard a ship, with one shipmate ensuring that the dog's wound does not close".

The dog would then be made, in some supernatural fashion, to howl at noon – a proposal put to the board in the 18th century, but probably not by anyone with Fry's gift for the deadpan.

The weak link in the cast is Jeremy Irons, but it's not his fault. He plays Rupert Gould, a Royal Navy retiree and shell-shocked victim who, in the inter-war period, took an interest in Harrison's clocks and restored them to full operation.

Sobel's book devoted only a few pages to Gould, but Sturridge drags in this part of the story, so as to present Gould's and Harrison's stories in tandem: the 18th-century scenes are evenly interspersed with the 20th century ones.

Jeremy Irons has no choice but to behave like the afterthought that he is. His presence is barely memorable yet jarring, like a scratch on a film projector's lens that makes a black line appear on every frame.

Sobel explained in an interview that Sturridge drew out the Gould character "to make *Longitude* livelier . . . we know Harrison as a workaholic who spent 40 years building the clocks. This fact is an amazing piece of perseverance, but it wouldn't be interesting to watch on television."

What is unclear in this statement is whether Sobel is criticising her own book, or taking a thinly veiled