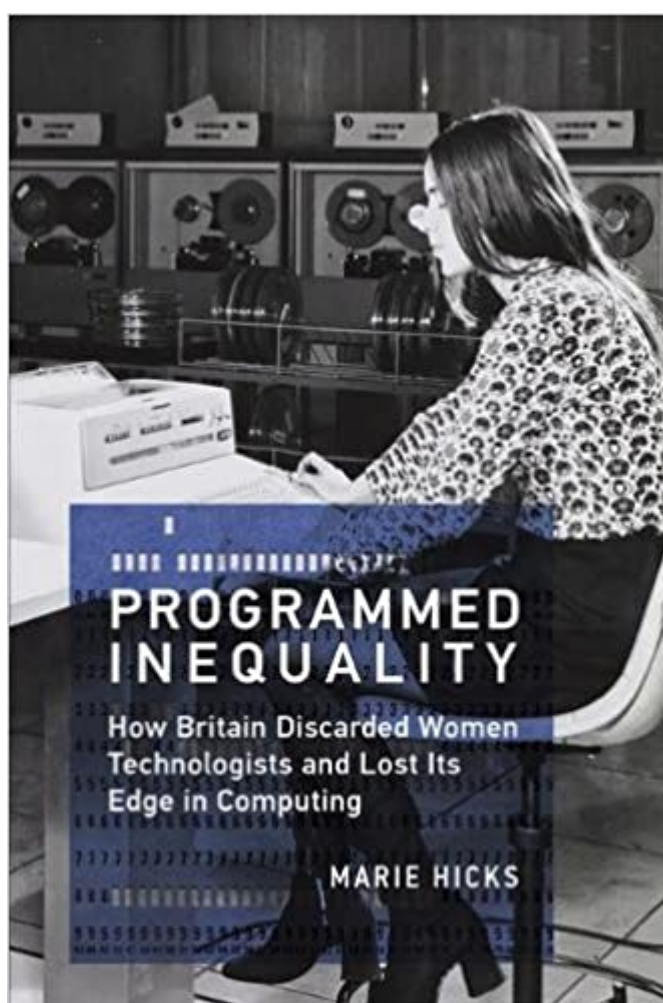The book was found

Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists And Lost Its Edge In Computing (History Of Computing)

Synopsis

In 1944, Britain led the world in electronic computing. By 1974, the British computer industry was all but extinct. What happened in the intervening thirty years holds lessons for all postindustrial superpowers. As Britain struggled to use technology to retain its global power, the nation's inability to manage its technical labor force hobbled its transition into the information age. In Programmed Inequality, Marie Hicks explores the story of labor feminization and gendered technocracy that undercut British efforts to computerize. That failure sprang from the government's systematic neglect of its largest trained technical workforce, simply because they were women. Women were a hidden engine of growth in high technology from World War II to the 1960s. As computing experienced a gender flip, becoming male-identified in the 1960s and 1970s, labor problems grew into structural ones and gender discrimination caused the nation's largest computer user -- the civil service and sprawling public sector -- to make decisions that were disastrous for the British computer industry and the nation as a whole.Drawing on recently opened government files, personal interviews, and the archives of major British computer companies, Programmed Inequality takes aim at the fiction of technological meritocracy. Hicks explains why, even today, possessing technical skill is not enough to ensure that women will rise to the top in science and technology fields. Programmed Inequality shows how the disappearance of women from the field had grave macroeconomic consequences for Britain, and why the United States risks repeating those errors in the twenty-first century.Cover Photo: Cathy Gillespie performs the initial program load on an IBM computer at the British Central Electricity Generating Board, c. 1970. Photo courtesy of Cathy Gillespie.

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Customer Reviews

This is a fascinating account of how the UK civil service gradually but deliberately pushed women out of computing technology jobs over a three-decade period. It's one of the best researched and most compelling examples of the negative impact of gender and class discrimination on a country's economy. (Maria M. Klawe, President, Harvey Mudd College)Marie Hicks's well-researched look into Britain's computer industry, and its critical dependence on the work of female computer programmers, is a welcome addition to our body of knowledge of women's historical employment in science and technology. Hicks confidently shows that the professional mobility of women in computing supports the success of the industry as a whole, an important lesson for scholars and policymakers seeking ways to improve inclusion in STEM fields. (Margot Lee Shetterly, author of Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race)This is a fascinating and disturbing account of women's roles in the British computing industry's rise and fall. In its analyses of job classifications and campaigns for equal pay, this study examines relationships between gender and computing in far greater detail than previous accounts. Deeply researched and persuasively argued, Hicks's study of computing in Britain complements existing accounts of women's exclusion from the US computing industry -- and offers important lessons for the tech industries of both nations today. (Jennifer S. Light, Department Head and Professor of Science, Technology, and Society, MIT) Programmed Inequality is a model of socially informed history that reveals deep linkages between technological modernization and profound cultural commitments to gender binaries and inequities. It defies any intention we may still hold to interpret the development of computing as distinct from matters of power, identity, and democratic participation. (Amy E. Slaton, Professor of History, Drexel University; author of Race, Rigor, and Selectivity in U.S. Engineering: The History of an Occupational Color Line)Computing is widely recognized as a male-dominated field, but how did it come to be this way? In Programmed Inequality, Marie Hicks illuminates how structural discrimination shaped the composition of the British computer workforce and created lasting gender inequalities. Clearly written and elegantly argued, Hicks's book is a must-read for those hoping to understand how ideas about gender, class, and sexuality became embedded in computing and how government practices and new technologies worked together to undermine social and economic equality. (Eden Medina,

Associate Professor of Informatics and Computing, Indiana University, Bloomington; author of Cybernetic Revolutionaries: Technology and Politics in Allende's Chile)In this volume, Hicks has delivered a sophisticated work of scholarship: detailed, insightful, deeply researched.... But the book has a much wider relevance, too, which it would be unwise to understate. Discussing, as it does, the role of profoundly structural gender discrimination in the collapse of technical dominance by a formerly great power, this book makes very uncomfortable reading -- on a number of levels. (John Gilbey Times Higher Education)Fans of the movie Hidden Figures may be interested in this scholarly analysis of goings on across the Atlantic, by an historian of science at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Her deep dive into 'how Britain discarded women technologists and lost its edge in computing,' the subtitle, is a sobering tale of the real consequences of gender bias -- a problem that persists in many technical fields today. (Harvard Magazine)

Marie Hicks is Assistant Professor of History at the Illinois Institute of Technology.

I'm a computer programmer, so this book was right up my alley. But still, I was surprised how much I learned, not just about computer history. This book shows how sexism hurts economies and entire nations. It's sad how much it resonates with what's going on today. A good read for anyone who is interested in why computing is the way it is right now and why talented, smart women still aren't given their due. The reason for this is all about power and history, not about women not being "good enough." And, the British example is a cautionary tale for the US: if we want to avoid a quick slide into second-rate world power status we'd do well to learn from their mistakes.On the brighter side, this book has tons of neat photos and cartoons of early computing, and the ways that women were represented in the early days of computing are truly surprising. From satirical cartoons to topless bikini shots (really) you'll see women represented as experts, idiots, and everything in between. The personal stories of the people interviewed were also great. Way more stories about people being electrocuted (or almost electrocuted) by computers than I would've imagined!

If you're a fan of Kara Swisher's "Recode Decode" and her uphill battle to convince Silicon Valley that it is a "mirrortocracy," not a meritocracy, this is for you. A timely book in so many ways. I am most struck by Hicks' painstaking account of the systemic devaluation of women's work in an industry that was shaped by women, the negative ramifications of which Britain is still struggling with today. Additionally, she explodes the myth of the lone male genius in countless ways. A cautionary and enlightening read.

Marvelous edition to the history of computing. This book does double duty, at least: shifting the lens of computing history toward an entire class of forgotten workers who happen to be women, and changing the tale of technological supremacy of the United States to another context: that of Great Britain. In addition to its many academic and intellectual achievements, it is a fun and engaging read filled with interesting characters and Hicks' own sharp analysis. In my top of the year picks, for sure!

This book looks at how labor feminization hurts all workers, not just women. It is a new and interesting take on a familiar story of imperial decline.

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