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Marconi: The Man Who Networked The World



Synopsis

A little over a century ago the world went wireless. Cables and all their limiting inefficiencies gave way to a revolutionary means of transmitting news and information almost everywhere, instantaneously. By means of "Hertzian waves," as radio waves were initially known, ships could now make contact with other ships (saving lives, such as on the doomed R.M.S. Titanic); financial markets could coordinate with other financial markets, establishing the price of commodities and fixing exchange rates; military commanders could connect with the front lines, positioning artillery and directing troop movements. Suddenly and irrevocably, time and space telescoped beyond what had been thought imaginable. Someone had not only imagined this networked world but realized it: Guglielmo Marconi. As Marc Raboy shows us in this enthralling and comprehensive biography, Marconi was the first truly global figure in modern communications. Born to an Italian father and an Irish mother, he was in many ways stateless, working his cosmopolitanism to advantage. Through a combination of skill, tenacity, luck, vision, and timing, Marconi popularized—and, more critically, patented—the use of radio waves. Soon after he burst into public view with a demonstration of his wireless apparatus in London at the age of 22 in 1896, he established his Wireless Telegraph & Signal Company and seemed unstoppable. He was decorated by the Czar of Russia, named an Italian Senator, knighted by King George V of England, and awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics—all before the age of 40. Until his death in 1937, Marconi was at the heart of every major innovation in electronic communication, courted by powerful scientific, political, and financial interests, and trailed by the media, which recorded and published nearly every one of his utterances. He established stations and transmitters in every corner of the globe, from Newfoundland to Buenos Aires, Hawaii to Saint Petersburg. Based on original research and unpublished archival materials in four countries and several languages, Raboy's book is the first to connect significant parts of Marconi's story, from his early days in Italy, to his groundbreaking experiments, to his protean role in world affairs. Raboy also explores Marconi's relationships with his wives, mistresses, and children, and examines in unsparing detail the last ten years of the inventor's life, when he returned to Italy and became a pillar of Benito Mussolini's fascist regime. Raboy's engrossing biography, which will stand as the authoritative work of its subject, proves that we still live in the world Marconi created.

Book Information

File Size: 9159 KB

Print Length: 872 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press (June 28, 2016)

Publication Date: June 28, 2016

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B01HGW3ZUG

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #73,811 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #32 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Telecommunications #44 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Biographies & Memoirs > Professionals & Academics > Scientists #69 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Science > Technology > General & Reference

Customer Reviews

Finally--and nearly eight decades after the inventor/innovator's death--we have a definitive biography, the first in English. Authored by a McGill University professor, this nearly 900-page study covers every aspect of Marconi's long life, focusing on his wireless achievements. Raboy provides us, for the first time, with an impressively documented (about 125 pages of endnotes) assessment of just what Marconi accomplished--or didn't. This is a warts and all survey of the man, and to a lesser degree, his company which for years dominated the pre-broadcasting world of wireless telegraphy. The study's 36 chapters are divided among five sections: Marconi as a prodigy, the wireless industry player, the patriot who hewed closely to his native Italy (even under Mussolini), the outsider (in countries other than his native land) , and finally the conformist. Raboy points out that Marconi made continual attempts to control his own story, making the writing of a modern biography that much more difficult. That the inventor worked in numerous countries also served to disperse the record of what he and his colleagues accomplished. Despite all that, Raboy has given us the definitive treatment of a central figure in the development of wireless and then radio. I strongly recommend it.

Brilliantly researched, this book shows Marconi to be, in many ways, the Steve Jobs of the last century. Marconi's creation of wireless communication was the mother of all start-ups and his

business model provided the template for our digital age. Above all this book tells a terrific story and is a wonderful read.

Great book. Everything you ever wanted to know about Marconi.

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