

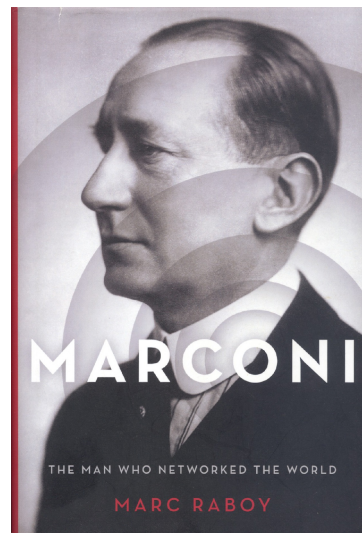
Marconi: The Man Who Networked the World

by Marc Raboy

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Marc Raboy, a professor in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University with a list of publications as long as your arm, has doubtless written what will be judged the definitive biography of Guglielmo Marconi for years to come. In his prologue he speculates as to why there had been no proper biography written of the man after all the years since his death in 1937. He believes it likely that Marconi's relationship with fascism inhibited potential biographers. Why should that be? Well, as Elena Lamberti, a scholar of comparative literature at the University of Bologna, told Raboy, "People are not ready to look at his uncanny relationship with fascism. Marconi is part of the mythology of modern Italy." Perhaps many potential biographers have been reluctant to soil the image of the iconic "father of radio," but Raboy was not.

The author reveals Marconi as possessing an elusive, complicated, and calculating character beneath a disarmingly modest and charming persona. The son of an Irish mother related to the Jameson whiskey dynasty, and an Italian gentleman, Marconi was always an outsider wherever he was. He was "not one of us" in England, "too British" in Italy, and "not an American" in the United States, but he attained rock star status the world over. Raboy opines that Marconi's invention of himself was his greatest invention. If a documentary drama of Marconi's life and career were produced, Raboy's biography should be required reading for the director and for the actor playing the role of Marconi.

His account of Marconi's career brings out Marconi's exceptional organizational skills, and he states that Marconi "was unquestionably more adept than his competitors as an entrepreneurial innovator, [who mastered] the use of corporate strategy, media relations, government lobbying, international diplomacy, patents, and litigation." Raboy acknowledges that his biography is not about the scientific and technological specifics of Marconi's methods and accomplishments, but "about a life and career that placed an indelible stamp on the way we live." In the prologue, Raboy crystallizes the essence of that indelible stamp, saying Marconi should not be remembered simplistically as "the inventor of radio," for his "contribution as an inventor" was "much more limited than is commonly thought." He should be remembered, Raboy says, for his single-minded pursuit of "the extension of mobile, personal, long-distance communication to the ends of the earth." In Marconi's vision, this was, of course, accomplished by wireless Morse code telegraphy (not radio broadcasting!), and "he was the first to develop a practical system for doing it using the newly discovered electromagnetic spectrum."

So, why should SWBC DXers and SWLs interested in short wave broadcasting history want to take up this 863 page biography? Well, while not going into the technical details of early wireless telegraphy and telephony, Raboy does narrate the chronology of Marconi's return, beginning in 1915, to experiments with the short wavelengths and with the construction of antennas intended to focus short wave signals directionally. After the conclusion of World War I, Marconi picked up these experiments again using his yacht *Elettra* as a floating laboratory.

Raboy also narrates in detail the history of Marconi's negotiations with the government of the United Kingdom concerning the establishment of an empire wireless telegraphy service connecting England with its dominions and India. Fortunately, those negotiations were interrupted by the war. Had they not been, the wireless telegraphy service eventually built would have been designed around the use of the long wavelengths. That would have entailed much greater construction and operating costs than the service ultimately constructed and designed around the use of the short waves.

Raboy also tells the story behind the formation of the British Broadcasting *Company* in 1922 and its significantly different successor, the British Broadcasting *Corporation*, instituted on December 31, 1926. He also illuminates the contrast between the U. S. and the U. K. in their differing approaches to the control of the new broadcasting industry. Concerning the use of continuous wave wireless telephony for broadcasting, Raboy notes Marconi's early and total lack of interest in broadcasting, saying, "Marconi did not see what the fuss about broadcasting was all about; [for Marconi] radio was about communication, not the one way delivery of light entertainment – which is basically how he saw what broadcasting was doing." Later on, Marconi did begin to acknowledge the potential benefits of broadcasting. He said that "broadcasting, properly handled, will make a material contribution towards greater understanding and amity between Nations, the cementing of home life and the happiness of the individual." However, at heart he was always much more focused on facilitating two-way, point-to-point communication by governments, militaries, maritime, and commercial organizations. The Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company, on the other hand, saw early on the potential revenue to be earned from the manufacture of broadcast receivers.

Despite his lack of interest in broadcasting, Marconi did personally supervise, perhaps for political reasons, the work of his company in creating the facilities for Vatican Radio. The inaugural international broadcast of the station occurred on February 12, 1931, carrying not only the pope's voice but that of Marconi as well. Raboy describes Vatican Radio as "the first global broadcasting service." That description might be misleading to some, might it not? Maybe he means that the broadcast schedule of Vatican Radio with its omnidirectional antennas was the first broadcast schedule *intended* to cover the population of the entire world, whether received directly or via relays.

In conclusion, Raboy's biography provides an excellent introduction to the social and historical context of early wireless telegraphy and telephony, albeit not in the use of the latter for broadcasting, and to Guglielmo Marconi, the first person to construct a practical wireless system for telegraphy and build a global business based upon it.