in Paris in February 1919, just as the peace treaty negotiations were getting under way.

Christopher Sykes handles all of this elegantly and ably, with a gift for succinctness when it comes to such matters as the Balfour Declaration or Britain's final wrangles with the French and the Arabs about the reshaping of the Middle East. For the modern reader, what is so striking about this period is the sheer confidence with which the British and the French handled the whole problem of the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. The British in Egypt and the French in Morocco could easily have said that they had done a good job of modernising derelict places, and so they had (if you are in Egypt, it is worth admiring the elegant and practical first Aswan Dam). They even supposed, in endorsing the Zionist project, that they could get Arabs and Jews to settle whatever differences they might have had. We can now see, of course, that this was all fantasy, but the people involved were very well educated. Did anyone, apart maybe from T E Lawrence, guess what a mess lay ahead?

The song 'Partant pour la Syrie' was written in Napoleon's time, but it became an unofficial French anthem under Napoleon III. The French involvement in Syria turned out to be disastrous, as can be seen in today's events: it is a tragic country, a misbegotten product, like so many others, of the First World War.

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GAVIN WEIGHTMAN

Making Waves

Marconi: The Man Who Networked the World

By Marc Raboy

(Oxford University Press 863pp £25)

As a boy I made little wireless sets out of tin cigarette boxes with a receiving coil wound in such a way that it was on the right wavelength for Radio Luxembourg. The ethereal sound of 1950s pop music in the earpiece was spellbinding. How that signal got to me, I did not bother to ask: the thrill of receiving it was enough. Today, as millions chatter away on their mobile phones, I fear that thrill is gone; the astonishing achievement of harnessing invisible, inaudible electromagnetic waves to send messages of all kinds is taken for granted. And the once-famous man who first showed how it could be done is now all but forgotten.

Guglielmo Marconi was born in 1874 in Bologna, the son of a moderately wealthy landowner and an Anglo-Irish mother whose family owned the Jameson whisky distillery. An unlikely couple, the widower Giuseppe Marconi and Annie Jameson met when she visited Italy to study bel canto singing. When her parents refused to approve her marriage to Giuseppe the couple eloped and made their home at his country house, Villa Griffone, a few miles from Bologna. It was here that Marconi grew up with his older half-brother, Alfonso, and where he conducted his first, very primitive experiments in wireless telegraphy.

His inspiration came from reports he read in technical magazines of the laboratory experiments of a brilliant German physicist, Heinrich Hertz, who had managed to generate magnetic waves and detect them over a distance of a few yards. Could this new and mysterious force be harnessed to send messages? The electric telegraph already circled the earth, pulsing with dots and dashes of Morse code. Marconi sought to refashion Hertz's laboratory equipment to make it send long and short electromagnetic impulses with a telegraph key. Telegraphy without wires! Just imagine: ship-to-shore messaging, crossing the land and oceans without cables. It was a dream he realised as a young man in his twenties and the barely believable achievement brought him international celebrity. His fame was never greater than when, on the night of 14 April 1912, the wireless operators on the *Titanic* signalled that the great liner was sinking. Without wireless there would have been no survivors: Marconi's invention saved more than seven hundred lives.

What might be regarded as the heroic period in Marconi's colourful life has been described many times. Marc Raboy, in this monumental biography of the wireless pioneer, does not dwell on the early years, but has left no note or intimate letter unexamined in pursuit of the inventor's later life. On his death in 1937, Marconi was revered around the world as a brilliant innovator; radio stations worldwide observed a two-minute silence in his honour. However, posthumous judgement has not been so kind and in writing the first full, warts-and-all biography of Marconi, Raboy reveals a life that is in many ways unedifying.

The young man whom journalists had judged very modest when he demonstrated and explained his wireless equipment became, in time, aloof, grappling with fame and fortune as well as the intense competition of rivals in the field. He had a kind of tunnel vision, showing no interest in the transmission of speech and music, remaining obsessed with the distances his Morse code messages could achieve. He married in 1905 but found that family life interfered with his work; although he had three children with his wife, Beatrice O'Brien, he saw little of them. In 1919 he bought a steam yacht, which he renamed the *Elettra*, and made it his floating home and laboratory. On board he would entertain film stars and royalty, and indulged in a number of romances with young women.

When Mussolini came to power in Italy, Marconi embraced Fascism enthusiastically. In 1927 he became honorary president of the British branch of the National Fascist Party, holding a 'blackshirt gala' at the Savoy in London to celebrate. He backed Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia. After Beatrice divorced him, Marconi sought to marry Cristina Bezzi-Scali, a 25-year-old Catholic whose father was a lay member of the 'papal family'. In order to proceed, he had to get his first marriage formally annulled. This involved an absurd and prolonged process of 'proving' that he and Beatrice had not intended to stay together when they made their vows.

Mussolini embraced Marconi as a Fascist who enjoyed international fame: he gave

him honours and made him president of the new Reale Accademia d'Italia. Whether or not Marconi was involved in the exclusion of Jewish candidates remains uncertain, though he definitely scribbled the letter E (short for *ebreo*, the Italian for 'Jew') against names on the list. Marconi's death in 1937 saved him from involvement in the worst Fascist atrocities in the war, but he did not escape the clutches of Mussolini. In the grounds of Villa Griffone is a mausoleum designed by a leading architect of the Fascist regime, Marcello Piacentini. It was completed in July 1941 and the exhumed remains of the great inventor were reburied there in the 'presence of Mussolini as well as a bevy of uniformed Fascist and visiting Nazi officials'.

Grimly fascinating as I found much of this impressive biography, it has not entirely sullied the schoolboy memories I have of the excitement of tuning in to Radio Luxembourg on my home-made crystal set. For all Marconi's faults, his name retains for me a touch of real magic.

To order this book from our partner bookshop, Heywood Hill, see page 3.

KEVIN JACKSON

Enfant Terrible

Jean Cocteau: A Life
By Claude Arnaud
(Translated by Lauren Elkin & Charlotte Mandell)
(Yale University Press 1,014pp £30)

It is almost half a century since the last full-length English-language biography of Jean Cocteau was published, and it has taken thirteen years for Claude Arnaud's work finally to be translated from the French. There are, no doubt, sound financial reasons for this. Although the elderly Cocteau of the 1950s and early 1960s was famous from Germany to Japan and from New York to Lebanon, the only fragments of his large oeuvre much known in the Anglophone world these days are two feature films, *Orphée* and *La belle et la bête*, and a brief novel-turned-film, *Les enfants terribles*. Are we wrong to neglect him? We are. Arnaud's eloquent and loving portrait of his hero should persuade all but the most dogged of Cocteauphobes that we are denying ourselves a great deal of pleasure.

Even if Cocteau had confined his career to film-making, he would have a solid claim to posterity's gratitude. *Orphée* was, and remains, unparalleled as a triumph of freewheeling imagination over sparse means: no director before Cocteau had ever had the audacity to shoot a scene in a bare, ruined room and tell us that it was Hell, and none had possessed the charm to make such a Hell not merely convincing but also beautiful. A list of the film-makers who learned from Cocteau would have to include Almodóvar, Kenneth Anger, Antonioni, Bertolucci, Carax, Joe Dante, Maya Deren, Godard, Derek Jarman, David Lynch, Paul Schrader and Andrei Tarkovsky. Along with his countryman Jean Vigo, he is one of the best teachers of how films made with the most modest of resources can still aspire to greatness, and sometimes attain it.

Cocteau: a hand in everything

Impressive though this is, Cocteau is more, much more than just a cineaste. He came to cinema quite late in life – he was approaching sixty when he made his two most famous films – and before that time had put his swift mind and expressive hands to many other arts. He was a poet, a playwright, a set designer, a theatre director, a novelist, a travel writer, a librettist, a jewellery maker, an actor and an autobiographer. There is a famous trick photograph by Philippe Halsman, used on the cover of Arnaud's book, that shows a six-armed Cocteau, like a chic Parisian Vishnu, wearing a reversed coat of his own design and holding a book, a pen, a pair of scissors, a cigarette…

Combined, his many talents brought him early fame. Ezra Pound said that Cocteau was the best writer in Europe, and in the 1920s he was the figure who at once presided over and epitomised the miraculous, jubilant Paris of *les années folles*, luring rich patrons and hard-up artists to the most exciting nightspot in town, Le Boeuf sur le Toit, teaching them to love the high life of jazz and cocktails (often referred to as Coct-ails) while bashing away gleefully on a drum set. The final coup of his first, dazzling period came in 1930, with the staging of *La voix humaine*, which thrilled almost everyone. With the single exception of one play, *La machine infernale*, he did not fare nearly so well in the later 1930s or during the occupation, when he seemed to be far too chummy with the more cultivated members of the German army. His wartime actions and inactions – on the whole fairly blameless, or at any rate no worse than those of other Parisian artists – damaged him for years to come. For a while, he even lost his audience among young people, and it is sad to read that on its first French release *Orphée* was an unmitigated flop.

A rebirth of fame would eventually come to him when he was becoming too frail fully to enjoy it. Through many years of neglect, he consoled himself with the memory of a remarkable feat: despite his origins as an esoteric Symbolist poet, he had won the love of the public for more than a decade.