

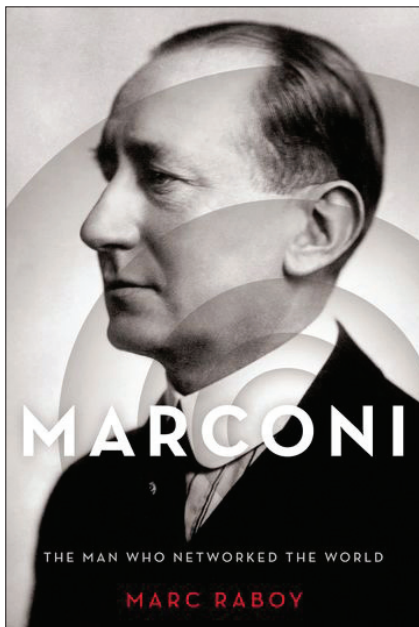
■ David Harris looks at a new biography of Marconi

# Marconi

## The Man Who Networked the World

*Marconi: The Man Who Networked the World* by Marc Raboy.  
Oxford University Press. 2016. 863 pp. Hardback. £25.  
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Courtesy of Oxford University Press



**G**uglielmo Marconi (1874 - 1937) was the founding father of radio. Everyone who uses a radio has a huge debt to this man of vision. **Marc Raboy**, Professor of Ethics, Media and Communications at McGill University in Montreal, Canada begins his book by speculating as to why Marconi has not been previously served by a comprehensive biography. He felt this was due to the fact that Marconi lived the latter part of his life in Italy and allied himself to **Mussolini** and his Fascist regime which somewhat tainted his reputation.

Raboy has produced a comprehensive biography of this great man which runs to 684 pages of text, 129 pages of referenced notes and a 14-page bibliography. Raboy's studies took him to the UK, Ireland, Italy and the USA where he had access to many archive sources that had not been previously available to scholars.

Raboy's thesis is that Marconi was not just an inventor but the first person to have a global vision for communications. From his first patent in 1896 to his death in 1937, Marconi was at the centre of every telecommunication innovation. Raboy makes some interesting comparisons between Marconi and companies such as Microsoft and Apple in that Marconi pioneered the business model of controlling all aspects of the business. Marconi not only built the radios, ran the radio stations and employed the staff but also tried to exclude any competitors through

complex licencing arrangements.

Marconi was born in Italy to an Italian father and an Irish mother. Marconi was always something of an outsider. When in the UK, he was seen as an Italian and when in Italy, he was perceived as an Englishman. Marconi was a bright child who grew up in a wealthy, supportive family. He studied the work of **Heinrich Hertz** (1857 - 1894) who proved the existence of electromagnetic waves. Marconi's great achievement was putting this discovery to use in the wireless transmission of telegraphic signals. Telegraphic signals had been being sent by wire since **Samuel Morse** patented his electric telegraph in 1837. By 1866 the first successful transatlantic cable had been laid between Ireland and Newfoundland. Although several other inventors such as **Nikola Tesla** (1856 - 1943) had been experimenting with radio transmission, Marconi was the first to patent wireless telegraphy in 1896.

Marconi never attended university but, through the support of his family, was able to develop his concepts. Marconi was not a theoretical physicist but a businessman who had vision. Raboy makes the point that Marconi often had an instinct that something would work, although he did not have the theoretical underpinning knowledge. Again, there are parallels with some of today's digital pioneers who dropped out of university to pursue their business ideas.

Marconi moved to England to set up the first of his many companies using contacts from his mother's side of the

family who were part of the Jameson Irish Whiskey dynasty. From 1896 onwards, Marconi began experiments in wireless point-to-point communication. In 1898, the first factory was opened in Chelmsford, Essex where the Marconi company had a presence up until 2008. Marconi kept on experimenting with antennas, wavelength and power, continually increasing the distance over which radio waves could be transmitted.

Initially, radio was used for point-to-point communication where cable was not practical or would have been too expensive. By 1900, the first Marconi radio transmitters were placed on board ships. Communication was still limited to fairly short distances. Nevertheless, Marconi was convinced that transatlantic communication was possible. He set up research stations at Poldhu and Cape Race and by 1901 the first transatlantic signal had been sent between Cornwall and Newfoundland.

The sinking of the Titanic in 1912 brought to prominence the importance of radio communications at sea. However, the first use of radio in maritime distress was in 1909 when RMS Republic was rammed off the east coast of the USA. The Marconi Wireless Telegraphist on board was able to send a distress call and most of the 1,200 passengers were saved by other ships that had been alerted by radio of the incident.

In addition to Marconi's technical and business achievements, the book considers his personal life. Marconi was always attracted to young women;

and in 1905 he finally married **Beatrice O'Brien** (1882 - 1976) who bore him three children. However, he might have had relationships with other women. The marriage broke down and in 1927 Marconi married **Christine Bezzi-Scali** (1900 - 1994), with whom he had a daughter.

Marconi was never a stranger to controversy. Things came to a head in 1912 in an incident referred to by historians as the Marconi Scandal. This was an early example of insider trading, whereby shares were bought by government ministers at a time when the Marconi company was being awarded a major contract. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Postmaster General and Attorney General, whose brother was the Managing Director of Marconi, were all implicated. However, they were exonerated when they successfully sued the publications that made the allegations for libel.

Marconi's links with Italy were strengthened when he was appointed as an Italian Senator. He allied himself with the nationalist causes of **Gabriele D'Annunzio** (1863 -1938) and then with Benito Mussolini (1883 -1945). Much of the final part of the book is taken up with Marconi's role as a prominent Italian supporter of the Mussolini regime. Raboy argues that the Italian racial purity measures were not introduced until after Marconi's death and that Marconi had an ambivalent attitude towards Fascism. He also debunks the myth repeated in many Marconi biographies that Mussolini was his best man at his second marriage.

*Marconi: The Man Who Networked the World* works well on a number of different levels. Firstly, it is a very comprehensive biography of a great man, covering every aspect of his personal and business life. It is a compelling read for anyone interested in

modern history. Secondly, it is something of a corporate history because Marconi was not a scientist who worked in an ivory tower but a hard-nosed businessman who built a multimillion-dollar global enterprise. On several occasions, Raboy makes the point that the global technology empire that Marconi founded provided a template for the digital corporations of today. Thirdly, it is a history of telecommunications as Marconi continually developed wireless technology through innovations such as continuous wave, duplex transmission, direction finding, short wave and VHF. He also envisaged radar and even speculated on the idea of the cell phone. Professor Raby is to be congratulated on producing this definitive biography that deserves a very wide readership.  
**David Harris**

David Harris is a freelance writer and broadcaster.

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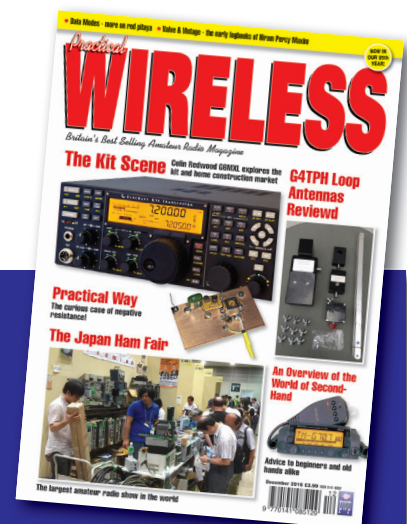
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