

Top 10 Planning Issues:
SMART GROWTH & URBAN SPRAWL **PLANETIZEN**
www.planetizen.com

New! Buy archived articles for as little as 15 cents.



In this week's Books section:

- [Irrational exuberance springs eternal](#)
- [The forgotten author of the English Bible](#)
- [Soldiers of war and peace](#)
- [Organize the unorganized](#)
- [Voices through the air](#)
- [The landscape of a painter's mind](#)
- [Remember your place](#)
- [Long live the King](#)
- [The definition of persistence](#)
- [In the forest of the night](#)
- [A record of a lost generation in China](#)
- [Big Brother is watching you 24/7](#)
- ['Twas down the glen one Easter morn](#)

National Book Critics Circle Awards

- [Nominees: Biography](#)
- [Nominees: Fiction](#)
- [Nominees: Nonfiction](#)
- [Nominees: Criticism](#)
- [Nominees: Poetry](#)
- [Winners](#)

Bestsellers lists

- [Children's Books](#)
- [Hardcover Fiction](#)
- [Out of print](#)
- [Hardcover Nonfiction](#)
- [Religion Bestsellers](#)
- [Poetry](#)
- [International](#)
- [A Monitor Guide to Books of September 11](#)
- [Pulitzer prize winners 2003](#)
- [The Monitor's Annual Book Guide 2002](#)

Monitor reviewers present the year's best in fiction and nonfiction.

.....
[XML](#) What is this?

Books
from the September 25, 2003 edition



SIGNOR MARCONI'S MAGIC BOX
By Gavin Weightman
Da Capo Press
312 pp., \$25

Voices through the air

Signor Marconi discovered a way to transmit messages without wires

By Simson Garfinkel

In 1896, anyone who traveled from London to New York could only do it by boat, which meant being engulfed by a 10-day communication blackout. In severe cases, trouble at sea remained trouble at sea. Every year, boats were launched that were never heard from again.

This is the world in which the 21-year-old Guglielmo Marconi made the first public demonstration of his two magic boxes. One box contained a battery and a telegraph key: Press down on the key and a spark appeared between two pieces of metal. The second box contained a tube of silver filings that acted as a receiver: When the spark appeared in the first box, the silver became conductive, and a bell rang.

So begins Gavin Weightman's story of Marconi, a deeply flawed man full of contradictions, who nevertheless changed the course of history. Marconi was an Italian, yet he spoke perfect English, thanks to his Irish mother. Self-taught, he invented his wireless system trying to replicate experiments that he had read about in scientific journals. A handsome workaholic, he enjoyed hobnobbing with royalty and celebrities - while jealously forbidding his wife to socialize. And despite being awarded the 1909 Nobel Prize in physics for his invention, Marconi didn't truly understand the underlying physics of his wireless system.

Fortunately, Marconi's lack of understanding wasn't a barrier: Shortly after his discovery, ocean liners equipped with spark-gap transmitters were able to send out distress messages from sea. Within a few years, thousands of passengers owed their lives to Marconi's invention.

Like Marconi himself, "Signor Marconi's Magic Box" is serviceable, but limited in scope. Weightman does a magnificent job of painting a social history of technology in the late Victorian age. It was a time dominated by engineers and their inventions: In just a few years, the public had witnessed the dawn of electric lighting, the

monitortalk

Weigh in on issues of the day in our [forums](#).

- [E-mail this story](#)
- [Write a letter to the Editor](#)
- [Printer-friendly version](#)
- [Permission to reprint/republish](#)

MARKETPLACE

powell's books
Signor Marconi's Magic Box
\$25
from Powell's books

TREELESS EDITION™

New! Subscribe to the Treeless Edition!



SUBSCRIBE

Subscribe:

[Free sample issue](#)

E-mail Headlines
Enter your address to receive news alerts.

SCHOOL PROGRAMS

[Programs for teachers and students](#)

The Great Books Foundation
Readings in American Democracy

Own the Moment
Buy Monitor photos online!
Company Store



Subscribe to the Monitor for only 20¢ an issue!

(for 09/23/03)

09/24/03

[Bush holds line on Iraq](#)

09/23/03

[Clark's entry is reshaping the 2004 race](#)

09/23/03

[In Iraq's northwest, an emerging model](#)

09/24/03

[BBC row spurs call for reform](#)

09/23/03

[In search of the 'anti-drug'](#)

discovery of X-rays, and the creation of the first skyscrapers. Mesmerized by these stories, people on both sides of the Atlantic were quick to invest and lose money in the new companies.

It was a time when teenage boys playing with new communications technology created havoc for the businesses and governments who were trying to put the technology to practical uses. In short, Weightman portrays a time remarkably similar to our own.

But while he does a masterly job with the social history, his short volume omits much of the corporate history - a story that is fascinating in its own right, complete with cliffhanging business details, creative accounting, and political intrigue. Also missing are many technical details about the "magic" itself - details that are vital for understanding the story.

Fortunately, Weightman's work is not alone. The Marconi Corporation, the direct descendant of Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Co., maintains an informative website with details about Marconi's life, military service, businesses, and technology (www.marconicalling.com). Meanwhile, Degna Marconi's acclaimed 1962 book "My father, Marconi," was republished by last year by Guernica Editions.

A century after the invention of wireless telegraphy, "Marconi's Magic Box" may introduce a new generation of readers to one of the world's most important amateur inventors. But students of business or technology will want to dig deeper.

• *Simson Garfinkel is the author of several books on computers, security, and privacy.*

 [E-mail this story](#)

 [Write a letter to the Editor](#)

 [Printer-friendly version](#)

 [Permission to reprint/republish](#)

[back to top](#)

Buy Monitor photos

Celebrating the AMERICAN SPIRIT

