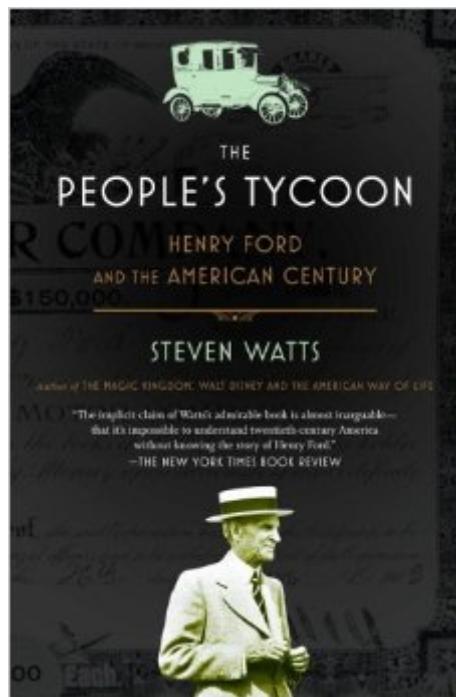


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The People's Tycoon: Henry Ford And The American Century



Synopsis

How a Michigan farm boy became the richest man in America is a classic, almost mythic tale, but never before has Henry Ford's outsized genius been brought to life so vividly as it is in this engaging and superbly researched biography. The real Henry Ford was a tangle of contradictions. He set off the consumer revolution by producing a car affordable to the masses, all the while lamenting the moral toll exacted by consumerism. He believed in giving his workers a living wage, though he was entirely opposed to union labor. He had a warm and loving relationship with his wife, but sired a son with another woman. A rabid anti-Semite, he nonetheless embraced African American workers in the era of Jim Crow. Uncovering the man behind the myth, situating his achievements and their attendant controversies firmly within the context of early twentieth-century America, Watts has given us a comprehensive, illuminating, and fascinating biography of one of America's first mass-culture celebrities.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

While the name of Henry Ford is still synonymous with automobiles and assembly lines, he does not fill the popular culture as he did even as late as the 1970s. This excellent book is not only a biography of the man, it discusses the cultural icon and how it was made and remade. We see a mechanical genius who "read machines as other men read books" and watch his fabulous success with the Model-T and the Highland Park plant. Steven Watts has organized this book so that it flows more or less chronologically in the broad sweep, but each chapter is really a different topic that exemplifies a certain stage in Henry Ford's life. Within each chapter, the author feels free to swing

into the past and recapitulate events that he has discussed previously but now fleshes out or to take us into the future to see how a certain aspect of his life played out in Ford's later life. One of the important reasons to read these kinds of histories is that without them our past becomes flattened and we lose the sense of what happened when and why. We tend to remember a couple of events that we think are important because we remember them, but we have no context and often jumble their actual historical context and meaning. For example, the famous \$5 a day is easy to misunderstand unless you also add in Ford's starting an organization that worked with his workers and their families (or intruded on them, depending on your position) to make sure they were using all that money properly. Also, not every worker was eligible for that wage. Single women without dependents could not sign up for that program. Ford also was a master of publicity. He kept himself in the limelight, partly as a way of not having to pay for advertising.

The name of Henry Ford surely stands high on anyone's list of the most influential Americans who have ever lived. He never held public office --- on the one occasion when he tried, he was defeated --- he hated public speaking and all his voluminous writings were ghostwritten by aides. Yet almost 60 years after his death in 1947, Ford's name is still instantly recognizable to just about everyone. He was the man who put America on four wheels, and America has stayed on those wheels ever since. Much of the vast literature about Ford has a partisan slant, either glorifying or condemning him. Steven Watts, a history professor at the University of Missouri, has tried in this book to find a middle ground. His verdict acknowledges Ford's genius at industrial organization and celebrates the populist rural idealism that motivated him, but faults him for inability to change with the times, unwillingness to let others make decisions, and general anti-intellectual stubbornness. Ford's brilliant ideas and his childish follies thread through the book like Wagnerian leitmotifs, reflecting on and influencing each other. Watts's subtitle is important. At every stage of Ford's career Watts tries to relate him to the wider currents of American experience, showing how in his early years he understood what sort of country he was inhabiting and capitalized on that knowledge -- but then foolishly refused to change his ways as the social and political ground shifted, allowing his great company to slide into a long decline. This sociological slant gives *THE PEOPLE'S TYCOON* considerable depth, but it also makes the book a bit ponderous and slow-moving. Watts has mined the vast Ford archives in Dearborn, Michigan, deeply --- too deeply, in fact.

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