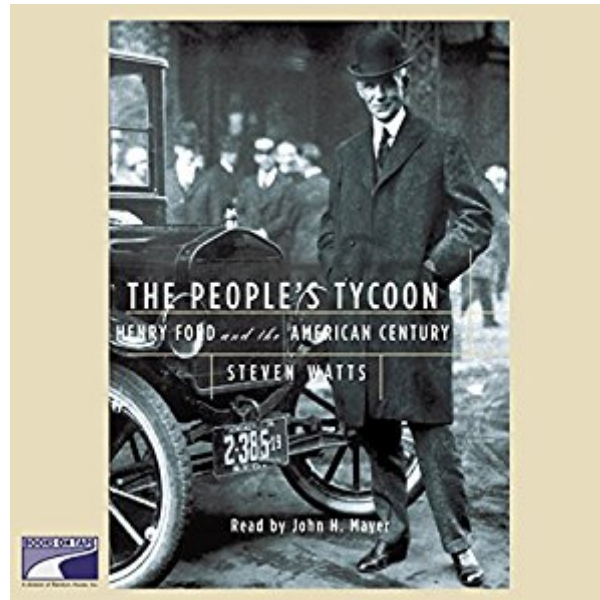


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The People's Tycoon



Synopsis

Henry Ford, a major architect of modern America, has lived on in the imagination of his fellow citizens as an enduring figure of fascination, an inimitable individual, a controversial personality, and a social visionary from the moment his Model T brought the automobile to the masses and triggered the consumer revolution. But never before has his outsized genius been brought to life so vividly as by Steven Watts in this major new biography. Watts, the author of the much acclaimed *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life*, has produced a superbly researched study of a man who was a bundle of contradictions. Ford was the entrepreneur who first made the automobile affordable but who grew skeptical of consumerism's corrosive impact on moral values, an employer who insisted on a living wage for his workers but stridently opposed unions, who established the assembly line but worried about its effect on the work ethic, who welcomed African Americans to his company in the age of Jim Crow but was a rabid anti-Semite. He was the private man who had a warm, loving marriage while siring a son with a mistress; a father who drove his heir, Edsel, so relentlessly that it contributed to his early death; a folksy social philosopher and at one time, perhaps, the most popular figure in America, who treated his workers so harshly that they turned against him; creator of the largest, most sophisticated factory in the world who preferred spending time in his elaborate re-creation of a nineteenth-century village; and the greatest businessman of his age who haplessly lost control of his own company in his declining years. Watts poignantly shows us how a Michigan farm boy from modest circumstances emerged as one of America's richest men and one of its first mass-culture celebrities, one who became a folk hero to millions of ordinary citizens because of his support of high wages and material abundance for everyday workers and yet also excited the admiration of figures as diverse as Vladimir Lenin and Adolf Hitler, John D. Rockefeller and Woodrow Wilson. Disclosing the man behind the myth and situating his achievements and controversies firmly within the context of early twentieth-century America, Watts has given us a comprehensive, illuminating biography of an American icon. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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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