

H-Net Reviews

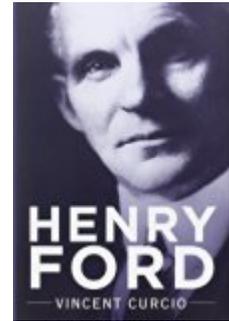
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Vincent Curcio. *Henry Ford*. Lives and Legacies Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. xiii + 306 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-531692-6.

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Henry Ford: A Life

Vincent Curcio gives a readable account of Henry Ford's life and career as tinkerer, auto manufacturer, tycoon, pundit, and larger-than-life American hero (and sometimes villain). The general reader will find amusing anecdotes and musings on the still-mysterious inner life of this enigmatic man. The professional historian may be frustrated by persistent vagueness and chronological disorder.

Curcio, who has previously written a biography of Walter Chrysler (as well as one of actor Gloria Grahame), has a deep interest in the auto industry, which motivates his exploration of Ford. This history of Ford seems particularly aimed at auto history buffs who already know a lot about Ford and auto industry history. Curcio often assumes knowledge on the readers' part, as when he references without explaining "the notorious Briggs Body Works" (p. 207).

The first several chapters proceed chronologically, describing Ford's farming boyhood; his first forays into the machine shops of Detroit; his marriage, and the series of experiments, partnerships, and failed companies that finally led to the success of the Ford Motor Company and its Model T in the 1910s. Chapters 6-9 cover the many events of the late 1910s and 1920s thematically, although the theme of each chapter is sometimes difficult to discern. The narrative jumps around, backing up to tell various stories "from the beginning," and the chronological disorder can be confusing for one without a clear sense of the chronology of Ford's life and business.

Among other topics, we learn about the five-dollar day (a boon for workers at first, though subsequently devalued); Ford's antiwar activities; various lawsuits; the expansion of his empire through vertical integration; his anti-Jewish writings; his charity work; the Henry Ford Museum; his attempt to build an industrial complex in Muscle Shoals, Alabama; and his possible presidential run. Chapter 10 picks back up in the mid-1920s, and the book proceeds more or less chronologically through the development of the Model A, the labor conflicts of the 1930s, and World War II war production (with detours into Ford's work with agricultural research into vegetable alcohol and soybeans and the history of labor relations in his firms), until Ford's death in 1947.

Unfortunately, throughout the book, the reader fails to get a real sense of Ford's character. His actions are recounted in great detail, but his inner life remains opaque. The problem may stem in part from a lack of sources. Ford seems to have left few writings that were not ghost-written (including the famous anti-Semitic columns in the *Dearborn Independent*). Curcio has relied mostly on secondary sources. Some of the fault, however, clearly lies with the author, who lightly skims seemingly important points about Ford's character or leaves them until quite late in the book. For instance, Ford had a long-term mistress by whom he fathered a child (and for whom he apparently arranged a marriage in order to deflect suspicion). The whole affair, which stretched for years, gets four paragraphs in chapter 10. Another affair, with one of his domestic servants, warrants a single sentence. Per-

haps Curcio did not find this interesting, or feels that Ford's indiscretions should be passed over lightly out of respect, but neither attitude serves the reader's interests. (Women in any role are notably absent from the book; after her part in their courtship and early marriage, Clara is merely a cipher, popping up here and there to deliver ultimatums.) We do not learn that Ford was terrified of public speaking till chapter 9, surely an important point about a man who led a business empire and considered a run for president.

The book relies heavily on anecdotes, which give a folksy, plainspoken character to the writing. One feels like one is listening to a story, rather than reading a history, and the general reader will view this approach favorably. However, the anecdotes are often frustratingly vague. On Ford's fear of public speaking, Curcio writes, "In his first public speech, at Sing-Sing Prison in Ossining, New York, he started by saying to the convicts, 'I'm so glad to see you all here'" (p. 187). The year is never mentioned or suggested; what year was this? Why was Ford speaking, in his very first public speech, to a group of prisoners? The reader is taken out of the narrative by unanswered questions. The book lacks notes and has only a bibliographic essay, making it impossible to track down the source of any particular information.

Curcio does well in discussing the subject of Ford's infamous anti-Semitism, expressed largely in a series of articles for the Ford-owned *Dearborn Independent* and later republished under the title *The International Jew*. Curcio places Ford's stated beliefs in the context of widespread American and European anti-Semitism, without attempting to excuse those beliefs through explanation. Ford's rather sudden vitriol against Jews seems to have represented a distrust of financial systems, which Ford believed to be controlled by Jews, and disapproval of the trappings of "modern life" (jazz music, bootleg liquor, the liberal press), which Ford vaguely as-

sociated with the urban Jew. Curcio writes that nothing in the *Dearborn Independent*, nor indeed almost anything attributed to Ford, was actually written by him. However, "the paper published no opinion except by his instigation and with his approval. There is considerable evidence that each issue was read to him before it was published" (p. 133). Therefore, Curcio concludes, Ford must be held responsible for contributing to an international culture of anti-Semitism; Adolf Hitler was a well-known admirer of Ford, for his Judeophobia as well as for his industrial genius. There is no hero-worship here; Curcio is as open about Ford's faults as he is about his more admirable traits.

Curcio points out that Ford both publicly disavowed his anti-Semitic statements for publicity purposes, but continued to privately express similar statements until his death. But at the same time, Ford retained lifelong friendships with Jews, including Albert Kahn, the architect of most of his factories, and prominent Detroit Rabbi Leo M. Franklin. He seemed genuinely surprised when Franklin cut off their friendship in light of the anti-Semitic articles. Ford's comfort with befriending individual Jews while denouncing Jews as a whole demonstrates what Curcio calls "one of the very oddest things about Henry Ford: his ability to have a stranglehold on an idea, and then in an instant completely reverse himself, contradictions be damned" (p. 96). This ambiguity is apparent in the matter of Ford's active and unpopular support of the "Peace Ship," an attempt at averting World War I through diplomacy, and his subsequent enthusiasm about producing boats, airplanes, and autos for the war effort. Ultimately, this willingness to completely change his mind is one of the most interesting aspects of Ford's life, and Curcio illuminates it well. Perhaps this mental inconsistency explains the reader's inability to really understand Ford as a person after reading this biography; Curcio has merely done the best he could to describe a person who seems nearly impossible to pin down.

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