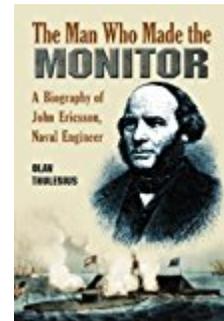


H-Net Reviews

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Olav Thulesius. *The Man Who Made the Monitor: A Biography of John Ericsson, Naval Engineer*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2007. viii + 255 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-2766-6.

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A Cranky and Enigmatic Genius

In this biography, Olav Thulesius is largely sympathetic, even admiring, of his fellow Swedish American, John Ericsson. It is, perhaps, inevitable that Thulesius emphasizes Ericsson's design and construction of the USS *Monitor*, the invention for which he is best known, but he also offers tantalizing glimpses of both the man and the engineer with nuggets of information about Ericsson's early years in Sweden and his enigmatic personal life in the United States. Moreover, Thulesius is knowledgeable enough about things mechanical and technological to make them interesting and comprehensible to a lay reader. What detracts from this book is Thulesius's curious organization in which much of his analysis of Ericsson as a human being is separated from his narrative chronology of Ericsson's life, and also the fact that the author was not well served by his editor who allowed far too many syntactical and typographical errors to creep into the final product.

Though it is presented in twenty-eight relatively short chapters, the book can be divided into three parts. The nine chapters (eighty pages) on Ericsson's fifty-seven years before the Civil War consist largely of a chronological narrative with minimal analysis. They cover Ericsson's youth in Sweden, his decision to enter the army, his dawning interest in things mechanical, his move to England, his disappointments there, and, finally, his move to the United States. Thulesius offers a few glimpses of the complex personality of the inventor. We learn that as a young Swedish Army cartographer "full of muscle and lust," Ericsson fell in love with Carolina Christina,

the daughter of his landlord (p. 16). Thulesius states that Ericsson was passionately in love and wanted to marry her, but her father found him unsuitable and sent him away. Soon afterward, she gave birth to a son, Hjalmar Elworth, Ericsson's only offspring. Thulesius indicates that Ericsson "never recovered from his loss," but not for another 182 pages does he explore the curious psychology of Ericsson as an absentee father (p. 17). Instead, the author, like his subject, hurries on to the next thing: Ericsson's move to England and his obsession with the hot air engine. Thulesius is both comfortable and erudite in describing Ericsson's several attempts to gain fame and fortune with his inventions. He makes complex technological problems clear (even to historians). It is easy to root for Ericsson's railroad engine, *Novelty*, in its competition against George Stephenson's *Rocket*.

The middle section of the book (eight chapters and sixty-four pages) covers the Civil War, and, naturally, it focuses heavily on the vessel that became the USS *Monitor*. Indeed, the *Monitor* so dominates the narrative that Ericsson all but disappears while the *Monitor* goes down to Hampton roads, fights its famous duel with the *Merrimack/Virginia*, and then subsequently founders off Cape Hatteras. In this section, Thulesius pays more attention to "the *Monitor* boys" than to its curiously absent inventor (pp. 126-132). This is a story frequently told, and Thulesius adds nothing new. Worse, he repeats the discredited tale that while the *Monitor* was sinking, crewman Francis Butts put the ship's cat into one of the big Dahlgren guns to silence its pathetic yowls, though one

hundred pages later, he acknowledges that the story is “a legend” (p. 232).

The last third of the book (ten chapters) is the most interesting and also the most disappointing, because it suggests what might have been. Here, Thulesius finally begins to explore aspects of Ericsson’s personality and character. By relying on Swedish archives as well as American sources, Thulesius offers new insights to an obviously complex and troubled individual. We learn that Ericsson was fastidious and driven to “tireless endeavor,” a man who was both impatient and stubborn (p. 182). “He did not seek fame,” Thulesius tells us, “but he had a childlike vanity” (p. 183). Naïve as a businessman, he did not profit as much as he could have from his many inventions. And, because he was “a very private man” who “disliked ceremonial events,” he declined to show up at the events that were organized to honor him (p. 187). He, Thulesius reports, was smug, confident, and touchy. Moreover, in these chapters, Thulesius finally investigates Ericsson’s curious relationship with his estranged wife, Amelia Byam, and his illegitimate son, Hjalmar. This is fascinating stuff, and if offered earlier in the book as context to the narrative, it would have made Ericsson a more three-dimensional character. Thulesius is even bold enough to speculate about Ericsson’s sex life, suggesting that his regular late evening strolls in Manhattan were less for exercise than for trysts

with one of two women who he kept in New York City. Perhaps the best comment on Ericsson’s personality and character was offered by navy Captain John Rodgers who Thulesius quotes: “‘He sees what other men do not, and cannot see plain things—he is a genius to be used, a man of sense to be followed—and yet so cranky and opinionated that doubt at his conclusions is an insult, or a proof of enmity, a gross stupidity unworthy of thought’” (p. 193). Sadly, Thulesius was ill served by his press. There are an unforgivable number of simple typos in the book, and in a chapter about Ericsson’s relationship to Alfred Nobel, every page of the chapter bears the heading “Alfred Noel.” Less egregious, but still disappointing, the editors at McFarland let stand a number of sentences that read as if they were imperfectly translated. A few examples will suffice: “A rush also happened”; “But soon it was not enough with the passaic”; and “When Ericsson in 1851 was reached by an invitation” (pp. 103, 140, 160). Whatever the source of these clunky sentences, a good editor would have found them and fixed them.

This is an interesting and valuable compendium of information about Ericsson, who Thulesius clearly believes should rank with Thomas Edison (who is also the subject of a book by Thulesius) as one of the great creative minds of the nineteenth century. As a biography, however, it is disappointing because of its missed opportunities and imperfect presentation.

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