

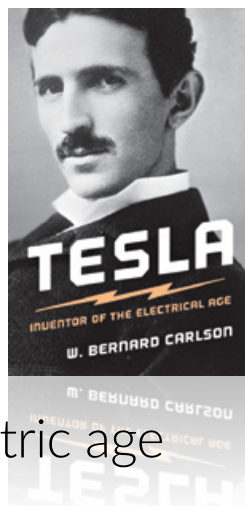
BOOK REVIEW

by The Editor

Tesla: Inventor of the electric age

W. BERNARD CARLSON

Quill Rating: 



Nikola Tesla is everywhere. We have Tesla AC power generation and supply, remotely operated vehicles, and he inspired radio and wireless power. In this book historian W. Bernard Carlson meticulously goes through the thought processes of how Tesla came up with these inventions, but also examines his great failures and repeated dips into depression.

Tesla's great rival was Edison, who helped turn the light bulb into a commercial success. If the world was left up to Edison we might still be running on inefficient DC power, but Tesla was an Orthodox Christian in search of an ideal. His ideal was to find the underlying perfect form and phenomena in the world around him. For electricity generation and transmission this was AC power, an ideal that revolutionised the world.

Tesla went to America from Europe, aged 28. Early on he learnt that he couldn't speak science to convince his audience and investors. He had to speak magic. He cultivated a public persona: The Magician, famous for brilliant electrical displays including 20-foot sparks of electricity and lighting bulbs in his hands. Thousands came to see Tesla when he performed. But this reputation backfired as the scientific establishment grew tired of his tabloid interviews and fantastical claims: 'free wireless power, talking to Mars, a race of robots, abolishing war, and death rays', and attacks on rival scientists.

Tesla was not a team player. He wanted to be the inventor of the electrical age and hated rivals. He went into a rage for not having beaten Marconi in transmitting messages across the Atlantic or making radio work. Tesla focused on transmitting power through the earth. He thought that the earth was already electrically charged and if he

built a powerful enough transmitter he would create a standing wave throughout the earth to freely deliver electricity to houses and street lamps. He even conceptualised the mobile phone. He was right about transmitting energy through resonance, now used to charge mobiles. But his ideal of transmitting energy through the earth was wrong. Not wanting to admit his mistake made him bankrupt and triggered a long depression.

Tesla was tall, slim, dark haired, and handsome and also anti-establishment, an elitist, and remarkably eccentric—living like a millionaire in hotels and frequenting high class bars. Friends included Mark Twain and a host of other great poets, writers, and socialites, though while scientists greatly respected his early findings he rarely made close friendships with them. This inability to discuss rationally with scientists prevented him from seeing his scientific dead end. He was also very imaginative (probably related to some mental condition because he had visions since childhood which he channelled into innovation) but wasn't very practical or good at turning them into products. He needed a good business partner. His greatest invention, AC power, was pushed by business man.

The book author's scientific explanations can be hard to understand and I needed to brush up on my electromagnetism theory. Carlson also doesn't go deep into Tesla's human side and how he related to others; when he does, it's far too late in the book. He only discusses Tesla's probable homosexuality towards the end. Regardless of this, this book is a comprehensive eye opener on one of the greatest inventors and most colourful magicians the world has ever seen. 