

Philo T. Farnsworth: The Father of Television

Donald S. Godfrey

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People nowadays take the simple act of turning on the television for granted. Some young people can't even fathom life before cable, VCRs, or remote controls. (Heaven forbid some slothful viewer should have to get up to change the channel.) TV buffs might remember the early stars like Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, Lucille Ball, or Jack Benny. But few know the pioneers of the hardware—those who made it possible for those stars to come into our living rooms.

Fewer still recognize the name Philo T. Farnsworth. Sounds like the screen name of a W.C. Fields character. But if not for Philo T., who knows what people would be watching today? The author, a professor of communications at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Telecommunications at Arizona State University, has compiled an ambitious biography of the “father of television.”

Farnsworth began his career while still a teenager. His ideas and dreams belied his age and he was accepted with a minimum of the “pooh-poohing” that usually accompanies young genius. Although his formal education was truncated due to financial difficulties, his natural intelligence and curiosity led him to accomplish wonders. But genius for its own sake is only part of the story. Like most inventors, Farnsworth had failures as well as successes. Reminiscent of the motion picture *Tucker*, which chronicled the difficulties faced by an innovative automobile designer, this book reports on the competition that Farnsworth faced in developing the new medium. Once he had succeeded, he had to battle the powerful electronics concerns in defending his patents and his place as a leader in the medium. He also had to contend with the problems faced by businesses in general during World War II, with its strictures and shortages.

A topic such as this runs the risk of being too technical for the general reader, but Godfrey manages to leave out the technobabble. Farnsworth contains a great deal of technical information, but that in no way makes it unreadable. The author, whose previous books include *Historical Dictionary of American Radio* and *Electronic Media*, makes good use of time lines, comparing the innovator's progress with the others vying for superiority. There are numerous charts and photos to illustrate Farnsworth's scientific mind, as well as several appendices making note of his patents, a chronology of “firsts” in the field of television, and a brief history of Farnsworth's various companies.

RON KAPLAN (September / October 2001)

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