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ANTONY KAMM and MALCOLM BAIRD, John Logie Baird: A Life

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John Logie Baird is closely linked with the history of television in the UK. This book, at 4 cm thick probably the most sizeable treatment in a long lineage, is a carefully researched and informative account of the man behind the inventions.

As the title states, this is 'a life': a detailed biography that provides a balanced view without placing undue emphasis on any particular aspect. Thus we learn much about Baird's undistinguished school career, his childhood inventions – including a glider, neighbourhood telephone line and battery-powered electric lighting for his home at the age of 12 – along with his adult tribulations in influencing the market for practical television. The account is chronological, with several of the sixteen chapters covering two-year periods. There are few detours to discuss the wider environment or consequences of Baird's achievements. Thus his activities in television development are carefully sequenced and recorded, but not closely related to parallel developments elsewhere.

Co-authored by Baird's son, this book makes good use of family archives and the reminiscences of those who knew him. Sixty photographs illustrate little-seen aspects of his life; diagrams of apparatus and laboratory layouts are informative, but do not always fully illustrate the operational principles of Baird's equipment. A wide range of other sources and interviewees are marshalled, ranging from research undertaken on the authors' behalf by librarians and archivists, to the comparison of successive drafts of Baird's autobiography, *Sermons, Soap and Television*.

The authors adopt a fairly indirect writing style, and the book is presented almost entirely as narrative rather than analysis. While this portrays Baird's life as an undirected existence jostled or swamped by his circumstances – arguably a common feature of many lives, and one that the authors may wish to emphasise – it also provides few markers to motivate readers. An excellent index helps greatly in this respect, but in places the remarkable characteristics of this creative and tenacious man can be submerged in the particulars.

Such details provide some valuable insights, however. One example is an illuminating comparison between Baird and John (later Lord) Reith, head of the BBC and a critic of early television and Baird's mechanical version in particular. The two first met as students at the Glasgow and West of Scotland Technical College around 1907. Both were the youngest sons of fathers who sought reform of abuses of the social system and who idolised their mothers; both were widely read but limited to technical college educations (pp. 109-111). Their subsequent interactions reveal the extent to which Baird's

fortunes (or lack thereof) were determined by their personalities. Similarly, the fascinating account of Baird's early promotion of his work in the UK and America (1927-8) reveals how seriously his commercial secrecy hampered his reputation and commercial alliances.

Baird's reticence challenges biographers. He had a complex and ambiguous character, and this biography provides a wealth of contrasting details that illustrate the futility of attempting to categorise him. Baird's life-long poor health is repeatedly illustrated – including his rejection for military duty during the first world war for “conjunctivitis, poor vision and flat feet” (p. 13), but we get no nearer to understanding how this changing collection of symptoms interacted with his creativity or constrained his stamina.

The book weaves together anecdotes with other documentary evidence extremely well. For example, it makes palpable the combination of commercial and physical risk during the BBC's comparison-testing with the rival Marconi-EMI system with descriptions of high voltage running through the machine, floors wet with cyanide fixing fluid and large 6000 rpm spinning discs susceptible to imminent disintegration (p. 286). The technical accounts are accurate, although a couple of errors regarding stereoscopic technology are to be found (p. 335).

The authors have documented their research well, cross-referencing facts routinely and dismantling myths. I would have welcomed further technical detail both on Baird's designs and those of his competitors. The Epilogue interestingly addresses the post-war technical competition and historiography, describing the downs and ups of Baird's posthumous reputation. An Appendix on ‘John Logie Baird and the Supernatural’, while enlightening, is rather disembodied from the spirit of the rest of the book.

This work contrasts with another recently reviewed book on Baird (Russell Burns, *John Logie Baird, Television Pioneer* (London, 2000), which highlights the technical details of his biography. Although only slightly longer, the Kamm & Baird version seems a more substantial tome providing a continuous and meticulous narrative of Baird's life. It fills in gaps, such as information about his work on electronic television during his later years as well as his unusual romances, which are only touched upon by previous works. On the other hand, Kamm & Baird have provided relatively little interpretation of Baird's life or work. There is much material here to write a contextual history of technology, but this worthy biography accomplishes much by focusing on Baird the man as seen by those around him.

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