

# Dark Hero of the Information Age: In Search of Norbert Wiener, The Father of Cybernetics

*Reviewed by Michael B. Marcus*

**Dark Hero of the Information Age: In Search of Norbert Wiener, The Father of Cybernetics**

*Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman*

2005, Basic Books, New York

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The thesis of this book is that Norbert Wiener, 1894–1964, was unknown outside the mathematical community until shortly after World War II. Then he invented cybernetics, which has the capacity to enormously transform the world for the better. The authors believe that since the promises of cybernetics have not been realized, Wiener is not the recognized genius of the Age of the Information, but its dark hero. And what, according to the authors, was the greatest of the forces that prevented the realization of the cybernetics utopia? It was a single person, Wiener's wife Margaret, née Engemann.

There are many points to be examined here. First of all, was the significance of Wiener's mathematical contributions really secondary compared to his latter work in naming and championing cybernetics? More significantly, what is cybernetics, and what does its implementation promise? Also, what did Margaret do and what good does it do us and Wiener's memory to dwell on it? And, finally, why is there such a continuing fascination with Norbert Wiener?

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teen, with a B.A. in mathematics. He received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Harvard in 1913 when he was eighteen years old.

Wiener spent his first postdoctoral year in Cambridge, England, studying mathematical logic with Bertrand Russell. As P. R. Masani writes in his biography of Wiener ([4], p. 55), "Russell urged Wiener to approach mathematical philosophy from the broadest standpoint, to concentrate not just on foundations but also to look at the frontiers of mathematics and theoretical physics. This advice not only brought Wiener into contact with G. H. Hardy... but it also exposed Wiener to Bohr's atomic theory, the work of J. W. Gibbs on statistical mechanics, and the Einstein-Smoluchowski papers on Brownian motion." (Most of the biographical details of Wiener's life in this review are taken from

I'm sure that every reader of the *Notices* knows that Norbert Wiener was a child prodigy. He was "home schooled" for a few years, by his overbearing father, a professor of Slavic languages at Harvard, who continued to teach and torment him until he graduated from high school at eleven. Young Norbert graduated from Tufts in 1909, at fif-

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