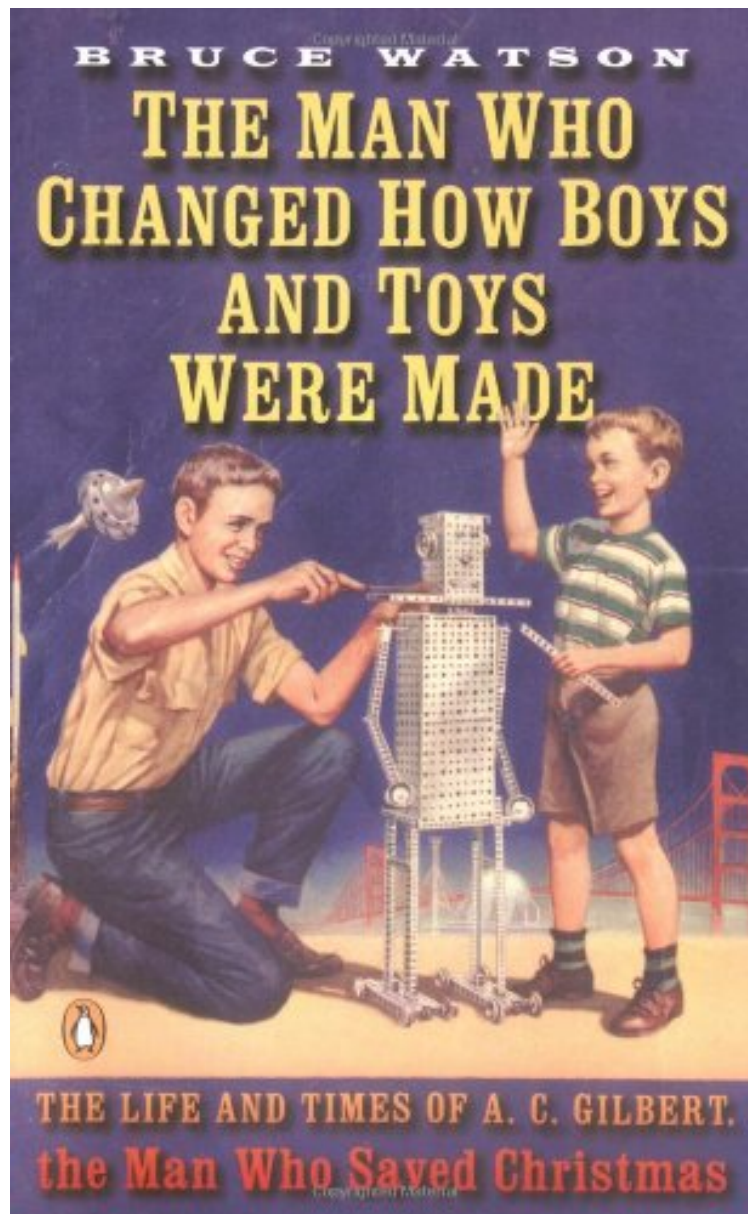


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## The Man Who Changed How Boys and Toys Were Made: The Life and Times of A. C. Gilbert, the Man Who Saved Christmas

Bruce Watson

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**Bruce Watson : The Man Who Changed How Boys and Toys Were Made: The Life and Times of A. C. Gilbert, the Man Who Saved Christmas** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and

all praised *The Man Who Changed How Boys and Toys Were Made: The Life and Times of A. C. Gilbert, the Man Who Saved Christmas*:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Hello, boys! By Leon Duminiak The story of A.C. Gilbert, a true American genius. Here is a very well written story of the man who made learning fun for millions of children. His scientific toys such as Erector sets, chemistry sets, microscope sets, physics sets, telescopes, and American Flyer trains were wildly popular and gave many budding scientists and engineers their first exposure to these fields. His understanding of children and success in toy making had a profound influence on the entire American industry. This book does a very good job of telling the story of this fascinating individual. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A highly readable but somewhat superficial summary of a great company By Paul Eckler "The Man Who Changed How Boys and Toys Were Made," by Bruce Watson, Viking, NY, 2002. This 216-page hardback is the story of AC Gilbert, the inventor of the Erector Set, early chemistry sets, and later owner of American Flyer Trains. Gilbert was born in Salem, OR, and grew up in Moscow, ID. His father and brother had come to the Pacific Northwest from Indiana. He was athletic and participated as a pole vaulter in the 1908 Olympics, where he tied for the record. He studied medicine at Yale, but had an early interest in magic. His company, Mysto Manufacturing, made and sold tricks for magicians. The market was limited, and the company did not prosper. Erector set came from observing New York skyscrapers. This was the age of steel structures. Gilbert sought to create a toy to allow boys to build such buildings. From a cardboard prototype, his father loaned him \$5000 to begin production. The sets were shown at the 1913 New York Toy Show, and were available for Christmas that year. The sets were numbered 0 to 8, and sold for \$0.50 to \$25. At the time, most toys were imported from Germany. Gilbert was well positioned when World War I interrupted imports. Erector was a hit, with sales totaling \$1MM within three years. In 1915, Gilbert founded Toy Manufacturers of America to work for ethical products and encourage sales of toys made in America. Lionel Trains and Louis Marx Co. were founded in the same era. During World War I, the Gilbert factory converted to manufacture parts for machine guns and gas masks and under contract with Winchester, Colt .45s. Gilbert promoted Erector with a series of ads and publications. They were directed at boys and encouraged creativity. One was Erector Tips, a newsletter for boys. He also leased a "Circus" railcar which he filled with Erector models and sent around the US with a staff to demonstrate in 1922. AC Gilbert of New Haven, CT continued to invent new toys. An interest in electric motors led to electric drills, fans, vacuum cleaners, hair dryers, and other consumer products. Gilbert patented enameled wire to make motors run better. The first Gilbert chemistry set appeared in 1917, three years after the pioneering Porter Chemcraft set. The chemistry set continued until 1967, when AC Gilbert himself disappeared. On election night in 1920, radio stations began to broadcast. AC Gilbert was an early supplier of crystal radio kits under the name Gilbert Wireless Outfit. In Sept, 1921, AC Gilbert began broadcasting from their New Haven factory as WCJ. The news was broadcast in Morse code, so listeners could practice their code. Gilbert abandoned manufacturing radio equipment and amplifiers after a patent infringement suit was filed by RCA over use of vacuum tubes in 1923. Gilbert acquired American Flyer in 1937 in the heart of the Great Depression from WO Coleman. In 1941, he leased a building at Broadway and Fifth Ave. in Manhattan and created the Gilbert Hall of Science to demonstrate his products. AC Gilbert retired in 1954, passing leadership of the company to his son, AC Gilbert, Jr. After his death, the company was sold to Jack Wrather, a Beverly Hills businessman. The toy industry began to consolidate as CBS bought Ideal Toys; General Mills bought Lionel; and Quaker Oats bought Fisher-Price. AC Gilbert Co. shut down in 1967. Its assets were sold off. American Flyer was sold to Lionel. Erector went to Meccano of France. This book is a highly readable summary of the AC Gilbert Company and its founder. The author weaves the story to include accounts of the times. The book is somewhat superficial in that it does not include the many details of the business that might be found in company annual reports. Instead its focus seems to be collector's information and news reports. Those interested in the history of toys or AC Gilbert products will find it informative. Index. Photos. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A.C. Gilbert By K. Black A. C. Gilbert was a doctor, an athlete, inventor, innovator, creator, and a leader. This story tells more about him. His love for his children helped him know what to market for kids (the Erector Set and chemistry sets, for instance.) He also valued his employees and gave them benefits and empathy, resulting in loyalty from them. I recommend this book.

Athlete, magician, marketing genius, millionaire- A. C. Gilbert was all of these, but he made his name by refusing to grow up. In 1913 Gilbert poured his boyish enthusiasm into a new toy. He called it the Erector Set, and the A. C. Gilbert Company sold 30 million of them. In this engaging book, award-winning journalist Bruce Watson tells the story of this amazing toy and its remarkable inventor-who, in 1918, became "The Man Who Saved Christmas" by convincing the U.S. War Resources Board not to ban wartime toy sales. Going beyond biography, Watson asks important questions about toys, boys, girls, science, and the way our perception of each has changed. The result is a quintessentially American tale of ingenuity, enthusiasm . . . and a marvelous invention that fit industrial America like a nut fits a bolt.

From Publishers Weekly  
The man who invented Erector sets might seem like an unlikely subject for a biography, but Watson (London Bridge: 2000 Years of a River Crossing) turns the story of A.C. Gilbert's life and most popular invention into a lively, entertaining read. Erector helped boys create their own miniature worlds; it taught them to use their ingenuity to play at being men. Adults who'd been "Gilbert boys" in their youth used Erector to create such things as the first heart-bypass machine with sets they'd hung onto from their childhoods. Gilbert himself was a "wide-awake" all American boy in the 1880s and '90s who showed his friends how to have a good time. As head of the Mysto manufacturing company and as publisher of Erector Tips (a magazine that not only contained new models to build and contests to win but also tips on life and growing up), he continued to spread his knowledge to boys all over. Gilbert saw opportunities where no one else did, banding U.S. toy manufacturers together and turning WWI into an opportunity to make American-made toys foremost in American homes. A true Renaissance man, he was an accomplished magician, a "4-minute man" promoting patriotism at movie houses and a pole vault champion. In 1918, he saved Christmas from the Council of National Defense, which had decided that parents should be forced to buy Liberty Bonds rather than toys for their children. Watson's spirited style adds a sense of nostalgic whimsy to Gilbert's intense life and makes this quirky book, just like Gilbert's toys, educational and good clean fun. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Booklist  
Watson's brisk biography of Alfred Carleton Gilbert, the inventor of Erector sets, pleasurably evokes a nostalgic corner of Americana. It is no exaggeration to credit Gilbert with creating the modern toy industry (he founded its trade organization and at his peak was the wealthiest toy manufacturer in the country). It is no surprise when Watson emphasizes Gilbert's marketing savvy. He was part of the product, presenting himself in ads as a boy who never grew up, though his friends, as Watson writes, "found Gilbert about as childlike as your IRS auditor." His business success, according to Watson, in part derived from a society worried about the "boy problem," as mischief making in the early 1900s was called. An athletics craze represented one solution (Gilbert himself was an Olympic pole vaulter), and what better way to occupy idle hands than with an Erector set? With a lively and inquisitive writing style, Watson embeds Gilbert in his times, producing an insightful, fluid narrative. Gilbert Taylor  
Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved "A lively, entertaining read." -- Publishers Weekly