



<http://www.ucalgary.ca/hic> • ISSN 1492-7810
2014-16 • Vol. 11, No. 1

Eva Hemmungs Wirtén, *Making Marie Curie: Intellectual Property and Celebrity Culture in an Age of Information*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. Pp. 248, illus. US\$35 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-2262-3584-4.

Reviewed by Katie Baca, Harvard University

In *Making Marie Curie: Intellectual Property and Celebrity Culture in an Age of Information*, Eva Hemmungs Wirtén investigates the work that went into the creation of Marie Curie as a celebrity, as a commodified brand. Wirtén uses a breadth of materials to substantiate her analysis, including the Curies' scientific and biographical publications, contemporaneous newspaper and magazine articles, correspondence, YouTube videos of duels fought over Curie in the wake of news about her affair with married scientist Paul Langevin, and analysis of the contemporaneous legal terrain. Through meticulous close reading of these materials, Wirtén powerfully demonstrates that Curie's legacy has been oversimplified. As Wirtén puts it, there has been "a bit too much myth and not enough *mensch* when it comes to Curie" (164).

Wirtén engages with three central motifs: intellectual property, the organization of scientific knowledge, and celebrity culture. However, Wirtén structures her book around four central historical events: the Curies' choice to not patent radium, the five duels fought over Curie, Curie's 1921 visit to the United States to accept a gift of radium, and Curie's work on the Commission internationale de coopération intellectuelle (CICI). Although this disjuncture between the central themes and the structure of the book at times obfuscates the purpose of each microhistory, *Making Marie Curie* nonetheless provides fascinating insights into the people and events that shaped Curie's reputation and legacy.

Wirtén's analysis of Curie's relationship with intellectual property focuses heavily on the Curies' decision not to pursue a patent for radium. Wirtén highlights the fact that although much has been made of this decision, Curie could not legally have owned radium because she was, as a married woman, legally subordinate to her husband Pierre. Thus, Wirtén pushes for an understanding of the ways in which "autonomy and authority follow from the 'sexing' mechanisms of the law" (5). Wirtén further suggests that although the Curies did not have legal ownership of radium, they did manage to exert significant control over it. Indeed, Wirtén argues that by *not* patenting radium, the Curies "paradoxically ensured...the strongest possible entitlement to the fluorescent new element they had given away" (12). This is reflective of a larger scientific norm that was also present in the nineteenth century, according to which selling the rights to your scientific work or objects lessened its prestige and diminished your claim to it (30).¹ In short, Wirtén demonstrates that Curie's strategies for maintaining control over radium were reflective of the gendered legal landscape in which she worked, as well as the scientific ethos of her era (18-19).

¹ Janet Browne, "Do Collections Make the Collector? Charles Darwin in Context," in *From Private to Public: Natural Collections and Museums*, ed. Marco Beretta (Sagamore Beach, MA: Science History Publications, 2005), 171-187.

Although the Curies did not patent radium, they still managed to profit from their scientific work. For example, Pierre had patented scientific instruments, some in collaboration with his brother Jacques, before his marriage to Marie (20). Further, Curie found ways to claim priority over her scientific domain through publishing. Indeed, much of the book focuses on the tension inherent in Curie's view of a distinction between the scientific ethics of publishing and those of patenting. To investigate this issue, Wirtén examines Curie's investment in the CICI's project of creating an international bibliography of scientific work; here, Wirtén investigates the organization of scientific knowledge. In her work with the CICI, Curie maintained her "longstanding commitment to 'pure' science and disinterestedness through publishing," while also fighting to expand intellectual property law (7). Thus, as Wirtén illustrates, Curie had a complex relationship with intellectual property: "... renouncing patents but making a substantial income from patents while Pierre Curie was alive; embracing copyright and author's rights as a suitable inspiration for the *droit du savant*; and very carefully policing the Curie name" (161).

Wirtén also unpacks the ways in which the Curie persona, that is, "the culturally produced trace or copy of the person," was built (6). Wirtén emphasizes the importance of the press and journals in the making of Curie's public reputation. She underscores the fact that scientific work is a public phenomenon, and that the public reputation of scientific figures is critical to the uptake of their work. Wirtén finds that although Curie cast herself as a reluctant celebrity, she nonetheless meticulously crafted her public persona (45-46).

While married, Marie and Pierre emphasized the unity of their work. In the wake of Pierre's tragic death in 1906, however, Marie needed to reinvent her public image. Wirtén suggests that 1911 – which she calls Curie's *annus horribilis* – was a critical period in this reinvention. In 1911 Curie's affair with Langevin came to light and she made an unsuccessful bid to be the first woman to join the prestigious Académie des Sciences. Wirtén makes the powerful point that these events were all the more impactful because they occurred during a crisis of masculinity in France (64, 147-148). Building on this crisis, the Parisian press (with its loose slander laws) played an important role in the molding and re-molding of Curie's persona. Indeed, contests within the press about the Langevin affair led to five duels in which male members of the press fought to defend their viewpoint.

In spite of the tumultuous events of 1911, Curie accepted her second Nobel in November of that same year. In so doing, she rebuked the notion that the value of her scientific work should be affected by her private life (72-73). However, as Wirtén explains, the events of 1911 nonetheless proved that in an age of celebrity culture it is difficult for even scientists to maintain a distinction between public and private life (73).

After her examination of 1911, Wirtén turns to a study of Curie's 1921 trip to America to receive a gift of radium. More could be done to transition from Curie's *annus horribilis* to 1921; the reader is left wondering how Curie's reputation recovered in the intervening decade. Nonetheless, Wirtén's study of Curie's American trip is captivating. Missy Brown Meloney, the editor of an American women's magazine entitled the *Delineator*, exerted powerful influence over the American reception of Curie. Meloney was not only a colleague, she was a confidante, friend, and fundraiser who helped Curie build her legacy. Through her analysis of Meloney's alliance with Curie, Wirtén demonstrates the significance of non-scientists to the uptake of scientific work.

Together, Curie and Meloney devoted a great deal of attention to the management of Curie's financial future while also working to uphold the dignity of her name (135). Meloney's American networks were essential to Curie's work; for example, in 1921 Meloney rallied American women to provide Curie with the gift of a gram of radium. Curie was active behind the scenes, pushing for a gift of radium rather than a gift of cash. This decision, to receive radium rather than cash, was indicative of the ways in which Curie shrewdly managed her public reputation. By avoiding a cash gift, Curie was able to maintain the perception

that she was engaged in pure and disinterested science – she was able to cast the radium as a gift to science that had been made *through* her, as opposed to a gift to herself (82-83, 91).

This same sort of strategizing was evident in Curie's publication of *Pierre Curie*, a biography of her husband, in America in 1923. By writing Pierre's biography, Curie was able to make editorial choices that molded her public persona and her scientific legacy. Through *Pierre Curie*, Marie was able to cement her and Pierre's reputation as a scientific couple that worked intimately together. Wirtén illustrates that Curie carefully crafted the narrative in *Pierre Curie*, presenting herself as an active agent in decisions with Pierre but making it sound as if her candidacy for the Académie had not been her own idea. In this manner, *Pierre Curie* is shown to have provided Curie with a means of fashioning the public's understanding of her work.

Making Marie Curie focuses upon the ways in which Curie's scientific reputation, brand, and legacy were shaped while Curie was still living. A more thorough examination of the material record of Curie's celebrity in the decades since her passing would have further illuminated how the Marie Curie persona came to be. Curie is still being *made* through the continuing publication of texts about her and her work, the celebration of events in her honor, the ongoing use of radium, and her uptake in popular culture. Much could be said about the ways in which the Curie 'brand' continues to be molded to suit the needs of our current historical moment. Admittedly, this analysis would, perhaps, provide fodder for another book entirely. In spite of this quibble, Wirtén's book offers valuable insight into the people, processes, events, and ideas that went into the making of Marie Curie's public legacy. Ultimately, Wirtén pushes her readers to recognize that Curie was not only a brilliant researcher but also "an institution builder, a networker of the highest order, ... [and a] modern scientist that built alliances, attracted other scientists around her, and protected her investments" (165).