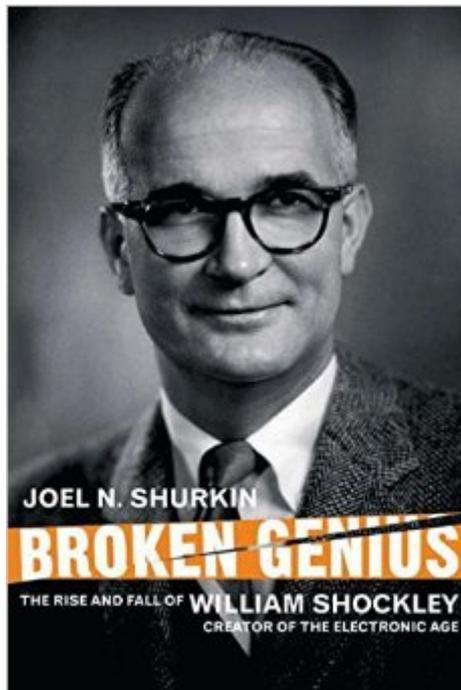# Broken Genius: The Rise And Fall Of William Shockley, Creator Of The Electronic Age (Macmillan Science)

Synopsis

This is the first biography of William Shockley, founding father of Silicon Valley - one of the most significant and reviled scientists of the 20th century. Drawing upon unique access to the private Shockley archives, veteran technology historian and journalist Joel Shurkin gives an unflinching account of how such promise ended in such ignominy.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Joel Shurkin has done a reasonably good job in this book, and it is well worth reading if you have an interest in the history of technology and the forces that shape our times. Shockley was a very important player in the development of the transistor at Bell Labs, and his story has a lot to inform the reader about how scientists in an industrial laboratory work together in a situation that demands cooperation to get to the objective, and the competitive personalities that are found in people who excel. The story is usually told in a very oversimplified version like this: "Bardeen and Brattain invented the transistor and their boss, Shockley took the credit. He later went off the deep end into eugenics and racism." Shurkin shows that there was a whole lot more to the story and presents a much more nuanced and sympathetic portrait of this complicated man.Apportioning credit in a group effort in an industrial setting is difficult and can be contentious even despite the best intentions of all concerned. Documentation is sketchy, memories often fail, lawyers are involved, and management has its own axes to grind. I've seen all this at first-hand in a large industrial laboratory, and have

participated in endless lunchtime conversations on the twists and turns the patent process takes. Sometimes hard feelings in supposedly mature scientists sour relationships and even sever productive friendships. Bruising, but inevitable, in a way...Shockley actually had three major phases in his working life as a scientist. In the first, he was an important and productive worker in the then new field of operations research applied to warfare in WWII.

Joel Shurkin, a science writer and author, has written this informative but hardly authoritative biography of William Shockley, a Nobel laureate and scientist whose accomplishments include:- helping the US Navy to win the Second World War with his spectacular work in Operational Research,- his pioneering work on nuclear fission that was suppressed because it was an embarrassment to the government labs he beat to the punch,- his invention of a transistor,- his close proximity to the invention of the first transistor, for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize,- his being an accomplished professor at Stanford- and his unhappy championing of a link between race and intelligence, which brought him into the close proximity of eugenic thinking, and made many deeply dislike him, such that his public appearances were often accompanied by demonstrations.I enjoyed this book as a chronicle of Shockley's life, but found it to be disappointing in that I felt that it failed to explain why Shockley did what he did, most particularly, why did Shockley insist on publicly discussing his eugenic views? Was it because he lived for the notoriety? Was it due to a form of egomania? Can it be attributed to his political views? Shurkin doesn't tell us.Shockley was, by all accounts, a very difficult, even insufferable, person, who, by the time he breathed his last, had few friends. To my mind it's clear that he suffered from what psychologists would describe as a personality disorder, and maybe even something similar to Asperger's. Shurkin explains these facts in a single paragraph; yet perhaps more than any other fact, they explain the trajectory of his life, the purported focus of this book.

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