



John Von Neumann: The Scientific Genius Who Pioneered the Modern Computer, Game Theory, Nuclear Deterrence, and Much More

By Norman MacRae

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This volume is the reprinted edition of the first full-scale biography of the man widely regarded as the greatest scientist of the century after Einstein.

Born in Budapest in 1903, John von Neumann grew up in one of the most extraordinary of scientific communities. From his arrival in America in the mid-1930s--with bases in Boston, Princeton, Washington, and Los Alamos--von Neumann pioneered and participated in the major scientific and political dramas of the next three decades, leaving his mark on more fields of scientific endeavor than any other scientist. Von Neumann's work in areas such as game theory, mathematics, physics, and meteorology formed the building blocks for the most important discoveries of the century: the modern computer, game theory, the atom bomb, radar, and artificial intelligence, to name just a few.

From the laboratory to the highest levels of government, this definitive biography gives us a behind-the-scenes look at the politics and personalities involved in these world-changing discoveries. Written more than 30 years after von Neumann's untimely death at age 54, it was prepared with the cooperation of his family and includes information gained from interviewing countless sources across Europe and America. Norman Macrae paints a highly readable, humanizing portrait of a man whose legacy still influences and shapes modern science and knowledge.

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- Sales Rank: #174970 in Books
- Published on: 1999-10-05
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.75" h x 7.00" w x .75" l, 1.60 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 406 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Von Neumann (1903-1957), the mathematical prodigy who exercised deadly cool logic in developing the Los Alamos atom bomb and in placing Hiroshima on America's list of target cities, was an excessively polite, self-critical, shy genius. Born to a cultured Jewish family in Budapest, this bright light of Weimar Germany and of Depression-era Princeton is usually remembered as a warmonger and a right-wing hawk. But in this affectionate, humanizing biography, former Economist editor Macrae limns a prescient pragmatist who actively fought against fascism and who advocated a policy of nuclear deterrence because he foresaw that Stalin's Soviet Union would rapidly acquire the bomb and develop rocketry. A prime architect of the modern digital computer, von Neumann brought about a revolution in meteorology and left his mark on physics, game theory and economics. Macrae makes these contributions accessible to the lay reader, and also discusses von Neumann's relationships with two long-suffering wives, his political differences with Einstein and the cancer that killed him.

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From Kirkus Reviews

Macrae, former editor of the Economist and author of *The 2025 Report* (1985), offers an oddly jocular biography of the Hungarian mathematical prodigy who would become a highly influential cold warrior before his death in 1957--an account whose credibility is hindered by the author's unabashed reverence for his subject. One of the four Hungarian geniuses who would help introduce the Atomic Age at Los Alamos (the others were Edward Teller, Leo Szilard, and Eugene Wigner), von Neumann made his mark in Europe while barely past his teens through his contributions to a mathematical foundation for the new quantum physics. In 1930, the young, newly married mathematician emigrated to America to teach at Princeton. While von Neumann moved on in succeeding years to increasingly influential posts at the Institute for Advanced Study, the Los Alamos atom-bomb project, Teller's hydrogen-bomb program, and, finally, the freshly created Atomic Energy Commission, his agile and highly logical mind left an indelible mark on the computer revolution, games theory, economics, and, as his political clout increased, international relations. Despite the fact that the general reader is as likely to be interested in the development of von Neumann's hawkish political stance (particularly regarding the nuclear-arms race), and his odd fascination with such topics as global government and control of the weather, as in his scientific contributions, Macrae veers away from serious exploration of his subject's philosophical outlook--instead emphasizing (and applauding) the ease with which "our Johnny" used dirty jokes to evade emotional political debate, and ridiculing those of differing political temperament (e.g., deeming "Bertie" Russell and Norbert Wiener "geniuses turned emotionally too dotty"). The effect is off-putting, and though "Johnny's" romp through world affairs is dutifully recounted, the private motivations of this hard-drinking, power-loving genius remain, in quintessential 50's style, drowned in nervous laughter. (B&w photos--16 pages--not seen.) -- *Copyright ©1992, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Review

"Provides a nice and fascinating picture of a genius who was active in so many domains." -- --Zentralblatt MATH

"The American Mathematical Society should be congratulated for republishing the 1992 Pantheon Books biography about "Johnny" von Neumann. Biographer Macrae takes a "viewspaperman" approach which stresses the context and personalities associated with von Neumann's remarkable life, rather than attempting

to give a detailed scholarly analysis of von Neumann's papers. The resulting book is a highly entertaining account that is difficult to put down." -- --Journal of Mathematical Psychology

"A full and intimate biography of 'the man who consciously and deliberately set mankind moving along the road that led us into the Age of Computers'." -- --Freeman Dyson, Princeton, NJ

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