

# Old Babbitts Die Hard by Wilfred M. McClay

*"Believe me, it's the fellow with four to ten thousand a year, say, and an automobile and a nice little family in a bungalow on the edge of town, that makes the wheels of progress go round."*

—George F. Babbitt

*Ford: The Men and the Machine* by Robert Lacey, Boston: Little, Brown; \$24.95.

The most prominent buildings of a civilization speak eloquently of what it esteems. The great medieval cathedrals of France rose in splendor over their Gothic towns, and the upward pull of their inner space offered otherworldly consolation to the souls around them. Some 200 years ago, a foreign traveler arriving in one of the coastal cities of English-speaking America would have been awed by the profusion of church steeples towering over the skyline. Today, the seaborne visitor to Manhattan Island will find himself arrested by a very different vision, of concrete or steel-and-glass behemoths that dwarf all human scale, swallowing up such once-imposing ecclesiastical edifices as Trinity in Wall Street or St. Patrick's in midtown.

In nearly every American city, the physiognomy is much the same. The business skyscraper dominates the urban vision. Of course, such buildings tell us even more of the special place that business holds in our civilization. More specifically, the evolution of skyscrapers—from the nuanced structures of Louis Sullivan to the unabashed virility of the Empire State Building to the glass towers and mirror-skinned hotels that now dominate the American downtown—embodies the changes in the nature of American business. The more recent styles of business architecture perfectly express the bureaucratic and impersonal imperatives of contemporary business. Form follows function in more ways than one.

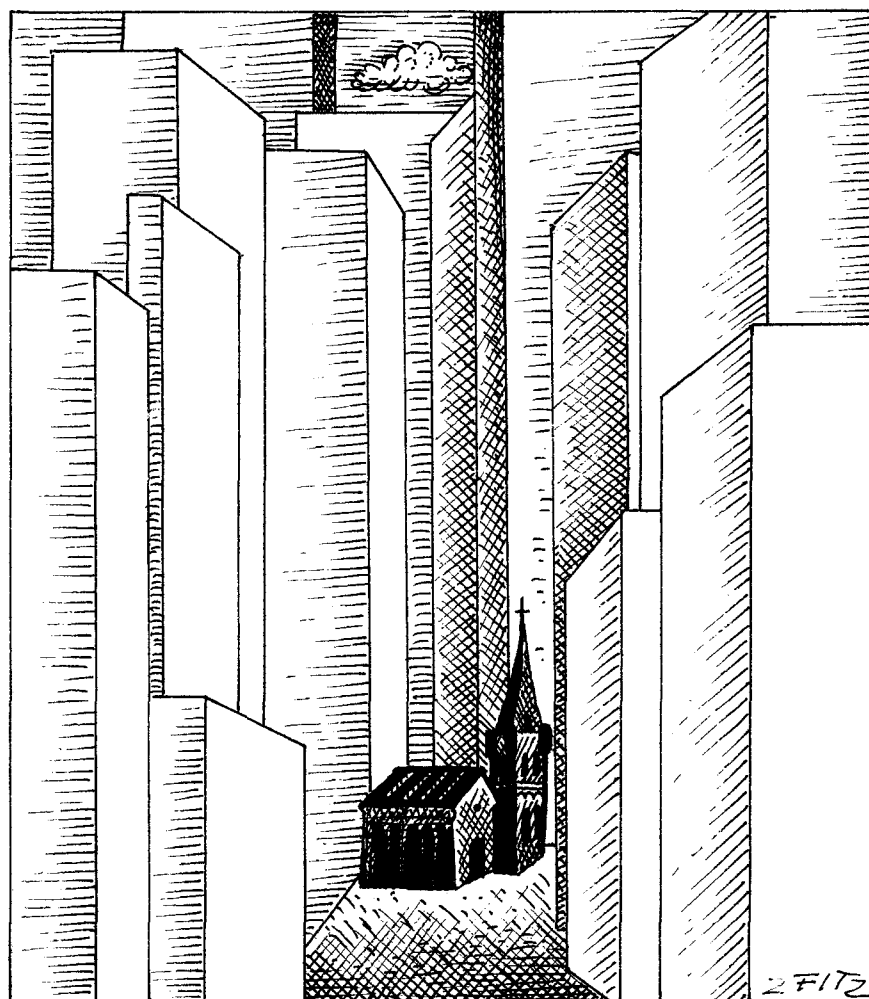
A people so singlemindedly devoted to commerce as Americans ought to

have yearned for a literature that reflected upon the nature of that devotion. If the business of America is business, then the American novelist ought to be willing to depict the stage upon which so much of the drama of our people and our time is set. Such a literature, however, has not been forthcoming. The single most celebrated American novel about a businessman, Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt*, while it fails to meet the need, does touch upon the ambivalence American intellectuals have always felt about the American ideal of worldly success. "The exclusive worship of the bitch-

goddess SUCCESS," William James lamented, "is our national disease"; and the burgeoning skyline of contemporary Manhattan would seem to bear him out.

The rise of the political right in the 1980's should present an opportunity to correct our misunderstanding of the business world. Although journalists have probably overinterpreted the phenomenon, there can be no doubt that lucrative business careers have a renewed allure, particularly among younger Americans.

George Gilder's *Wealth and Poverty* and Peters' and Watermans' *In Search of Excellence* reflect our revived admiration for the entrepreneur, the rugged individual who cuts through the red tape and turns ideas into reality. The image of heroic entrepreneur fuses the romantic artist with the captain of industry; a great entrepreneur can be at



Wilfred M. McClay is an assistant professor of history at the University of Dallas.

once as sensible as a banker and as visionary as a mystic—a quintessential American hero.

The entrepreneur has proved to have considerable appeal for the liberals who bait the bureaucracy in Charles Peters' *Washington Monthly*. Even PBS is getting into the act with a television series, *The Entrepreneurs*, aired this spring. Surely the astounding popularity of Lee Iacocca's autobiography owes much more to that erstwhile Ford salesman's ability to project a hardworking, scrappy, entrepreneurial image than to any of his concrete achievements. No doubt, this image helps account for the persistent suggestions that Iacocca would make a creditable Presidential candidate.

---

***Ford was very far from being the simple man of American folklore.***

---

It is not the first time in this century, though, that a prominent automotive executive has been put forward for the Presidency. As Robert Lacey reminds us in his splendid book *Ford: The Men and the Machine*, that honor belongs to Henry Ford, himself, perhaps the greatest of all American entrepreneurs. The glimpse Lacey's book affords into the strange life and mind of this entrepreneurial exemplar, as well as into the tangled psychological legacy he bequeathed to his offspring, may impart a more somber hue to our image of the buccaneering business-adventurer.

Although he was a man of demonic energy, with a kind of rough and unreflective integrity about him, Ford was very far from being the simple man of American folklore. Indeed, the words *paradox* and *irony*—not to mention *inconsistency*—are likely to recur in any discussion of Ford's life and work. He was a man able to look both forward and backward, often exhibiting both traits at the same time. Such a fusion of futurism and nostalgia was characteristic of many Americans who came of age during the Progressive era; one can find a similar pattern in such different men as Frank Lloyd Wright, Woodrow Wilson, John Dewey, and Charles Ives. Ford was merely the most extreme example of such split-mindedness. Although he

had the prejudices of an agrarian populist, complete with anti-Semitism and hostility to bankers, Ford was one of the most powerful of American industrialists, pioneering not only the assembly line but also something called "human engineering"—an intrusive and coercive form of labor control. He repeatedly affirmed the solid and middle-American moral teaching of the McGuffey Readers but also kept a mistress directly under his wife's nose and delighted in the cruel and repeated public abasement of his son and heir apparent, Edsel. He is famous for his injunctions about the uselessness of history but was obsessed with his own history, and, as Lacey shows, he loved to tinker with machinery. Ford hated farming but, in the best Jeffersonian fashion, idealized the virtues of country life; indeed, he spoke of his greatest achievement, the universally affordable Model T, as a means by which a man could "enjoy with his family the blessing of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces."

Here is where the ironies of Henry Ford begin to extend beyond personal idiosyncrasy and begin to take on cultural significance. Ford was the most powerful force behind the automobilization of America, yet he had no intimation of the effects of this technology on "God's great open spaces." Once he had become wildly successful and unimaginably wealthy, Ford plunged into what became the overriding passion of his later life: historical restoration. The irony in this development could hardly have been greater. It was as if Ford were trying to compensate for the forces he had unleashed, trying to preserve, in such projects as Greenfield Village, "the slow-paced, candlelit America," which writes Lacey, "he, more than anyone, did so much to destroy." Yet there is little evidence that Ford had anything like compensation in mind.

As Lacey's account of Ford suggests, the entrepreneur is not always able to sustain his efforts effectively. For, the same single-mindedness that fires his creative imagination can as easily blind him to realities. Henry Ford is a case in point. Although his determination to provide "a motor car for the great multitude" was fabulously successful, that success was shorter-lived than is commonly realized. Sales of

the Model T slipped steadily during the prosperous mid-1920's, as the Tin Lizzie became old hat and the public flocked instead to buy the more graceful and fashionable Chevrolets, manufactured at Alfred P. Sloan's General Motors (and marketed on the installment plan). Hardheaded Henry Ford could not believe that public dissatisfaction with his pet invention was responsible for the declining sales figures. He refused to listen to the sound advice of his son Edsel, that the Model T had to be replaced. Such obstinacy is not unusual among entrepreneurial pioneers, and it had unfortunate results. Thanks to Henry's insistence upon running the company with the same personal oversight that he had exercised in the beginning, by 1930 the Ford Motor Company lost its primacy in the industry to GM.

The Ford family's personal control, then, would have much to do with their company's erratic performance over the years. General Motors, on the other hand, had devised a modern management structure—a bureaucracy based upon systematic research, rational planning, and a well-defined chain of command—which left the chaotic, haphazard, and individualistic management style of Ford floundering in its wake. Only as Ford Motor Company began adopting similar methods—not wholly implemented until the retirement of Henry Ford II and the installment of Philip Caldwell as the first non-Ford-family chairman—was it able to keep pace.

So much, then, for the staying power of some entrepreneurs. For better or worse, their characters and contributions have not, in the final analysis, determined the fate of modern business. It was not in Henry Ford's fragmented and solitary life, as he shuttled daily between his gargantuan Rouge River plant and his ever-mounting collections of antiquities, that the future lay. Instead, it lay behind the walls of General Motors' offices on Grand Boulevard, the world's largest office building in its day, where GM devised and perfected the methods of modern management. Yet, our understanding of what goes on behind such walls, and particularly in the hearts and minds of those who labor within them, still languishes in obscurity.

# Fine China by Jonathan Chaves

*"In this age of decadence people love antiques and willingly submit to deception."*

—Cheng Hsieh, 18th-century Chinese poet and painter

*The Burning Forest: Essays on Chinese Culture and Politics* by Simon Leys, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Anyone who fondly supposes that the Chinese Communists are the "good" Communists should read this exciting, powerful book by the Belgian sinologist Pierre Ryckmans, writing under his *nom de plume*, Simon Leys. As far back as 1974, Leys's book *Chinese Shadows* (originally published in French; translated into English in 1977) was the first by a Western sinologist to tell the truth about the "Cultural Revolution": that it represented a chaotic explosion of totalitarianism run amuck, undermining virtually all Chinese values, both moral and aesthetic. It took immense courage for Leys to issue his passionate yet elegant *cri de coeur*. Why? Because most other sinologists and "China Watchers" were then engaged in the same self-delusory intoxication with the Great Idea that had entrapped so many intellectuals decades earlier with regard to the Soviet Union. I personally know scholars in the China field who would stop talking to a colleague who said anything kind about *Chinese Shadows*.

But surely, one would think, now that the CCP itself has admitted that horrors were perpetrated during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), the way has been cleared for the "China Experts" to step forward and openly acknowledge that they were wrong. Actually, only those unfamiliar with the writings of Solzhenitsyn, Paul Hollander, Raymond Aron, or Jean François Revel will be surprised to learn that nothing could be further from the case. Of course the Experts echo the

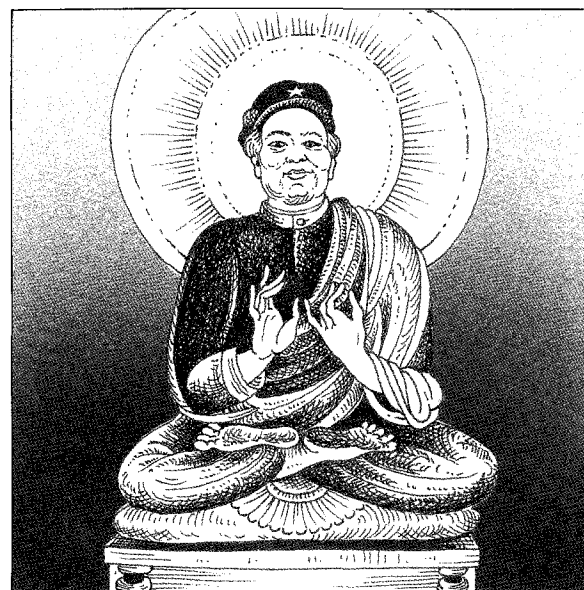
party line by bemoaning the Cultural Revolution as an unfortunate aberration, but never do they apologize for misleading their public, let alone think through the rather obvious implications of the period now known as the "Ten Years Holocaust" in Chinese: namely, that the ideas which had the Cultural Revolution as their inevitable consequence were those of Marx, Lenin, and Mao.

And so Leys's scathing indictment of the China Experts in this book—beyond doubt one of the most definitive polemics ever written against the tolerance among Western intellectuals for Marxist totalitarianism—is, sadly, relevant and necessary even at this late date. Small wonder that the doyen of the Experts, John K. Fairbank (for whom Harvard University's prestigious center of East Asian studies is named), in a recent review of this book in the *New York Times*, concludes by complaining that Leys's admiration for the traditional culture decimated by the CCP is elitist and therefore morally suspect. This is equivalent to castigating a scholar who professes admiration for the poetry of Dante or the painting of Rembrandt on the grounds that these artists did not live in "egalitarian" societies! After all, was that culture not built upon the backs of the oppressed peasantry? Besides, Fairbank's assumption that the CCP has in fact made things better for the peasants is highly disputable. Stephen Mosher's *Broken Earth—The Rural Chinese* (1983) paints a different picture.

Leys is, as it happens, a true connoisseur of the rich traditions of poetry and painting in China, and he is a trustworthy guide through the complexities of these arts. The opening essay of the book is as good an introduction to the poetry-painting relationship that was so important in China as has ever been published. Unfortunately, Leys does overstate the vagueness or looseness of syntax in

lines of Chinese verse (apparently under the influence of François Cheng's ill-conceived attempt to impose "semiotics" upon Chinese poetry); in so doing, he goes to the opposite extreme from such scholars as Edward Schafer, who insists on a tight rigidity of syntactic structure in Chinese poetic diction. Leys is on the right track when he emphasizes a certain flexibility but pushes the concept too far. A related mistake is his attempt to rehabilitate Pound's discredited reputation as a Chinese translator; surely Leys is intelligent enough to comprehend that there can be no good translation without a firm grasp of the original language, which Pound by Leys's own admission utterly lacked! But the essay is redeemed in the end by Leys's sensitivity and his obviously sincere love for Chinese culture.

There is, however, a serious problem with this book, one which I believe to be of broad significance in contemporary Western intellectual life. For many years, those like Leys and myself who admired the achievements of Chinese culture felt an almost missionary zeal to proselytize on its behalf in a world where the primacy of Western culture was supposedly taken for granted. But as early as the first decade of this century, G.K. Chesterton was describing the bizarre phenomenon of a sizable number of enthusiasts for things Eastern who were actually arguing (explicitly or implicitly) for the moral and aesthetic superiority of the East to the West! I



Jonathan Chaves is associate professor of Chinese at The George Washington University and author of *The Columbia Book of Late Chinese Poetry* (Columbia University Press).