

Otis: Giving Rise to the Modern City. *By Jason Goodwin*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001. xv + 286 pp. Illustrations, appendix, index. Cloth, \$27.95. ISBN 1-56663-385-0.

Reviewed by Amy Bix

One of the best-known episodes in the history of the elevator occurred at the 1854 New York World's Fair, when Elisha Otis stunned crowds by deliberately slashing the ropes in his safety hoist with a saber to demonstrate its automatic stopping mechanism. This dramatic showmanship soon passed into corporate legend. Indeed, later Otis advertising drew on the company's reputation for safety by suggesting that anyone purchasing other makers' elevators should be considered guilty of criminal recklessness.

Jason Goodwin argues, in *Otis: Giving Rise to the Modern City*, that while the elevator alone did not create the modern vertical city, the mechanism was one of the necessary components for the skyscraper's evolution as part of the era's "desire for change. Americans were eager to experiment. . . . Americans wanted to see their cities soar" (p. 47). Goodwin details how Elisha's son Charles built up the family's manufacturing company in the increasingly competitive market of the late 1800s, expanding and modernizing production facilities. The first half of the book, which describes the company's nineteenth-century history, offers a sound treatment of technical details. For instance, Goodwin devotes an entire chapter to the development of hydraulic elevators, whose more exacting specifications altered corporate culture and necessitated the employment of engineers and draftsmen and the adoption of more sophisticated financial practices.

Goodwin then takes the Otis history through the turn of the century, when its predatory business practices, harassing lawsuits, and other tactics, devised to intimidate small independent competitors, ultimately led to an antitrust indictment. On the technical side again, Goodwin describes the invention of the gearless traction elevator as enabling systems to be installed in the new generation of rising skyscrapers. "[I]t was the great new skyscrapers, equipped with Otis gearless elevators, each put up as artwork in its own right, that began to define a truly American, exuberant landscape" (p. 95). Undoubtedly there must be all sorts of fascinating stories and significant details associated with

elevator installation and use in landmarks like New York's Woolworth tower, yet Goodwin pauses to relate none. The author seems to be checking off landmarks in a company timeline as steps toward his glorification of Otis: "a miracle in business terms—still thriving after 40 years in the hothouse of development and competition. Every year it went from strength to strength, with higher profits, increased turnover and market-winning products" (p. 103).

Goodwin devotes considerable space to the history of Otis's cultivation of markets outside the United States. Stories about the company's work on the Eiffel Tower's elevators, for example, afford fascinating glimpses into cross-national business and engineering negotiations. Tantalizing references to Otis elevators installed in Beijing's Forbidden Palace, however, remain unexplained. Goodwin contends that the elevator business was a pioneer of globalization and a symbol of American technological glamour: "Otis acquired the mantle of the multinational corporation long before it became the American norm" (p. 162).

The second half of the book concentrates on the company's post-World War II management history, suggesting that, around the 1960s, Otis became trapped by an outdated, stiflingly centralized corporate structure. Goodwin indicates that it was innovative officers, particularly Europeans, in the company's international division who would pull Otis out of its tendency to drift. Goodwin discusses the international corporate history of Otis at length, particularly the interesting course of events in France and in Japan. He sees the hostile takeover of Otis by United Technologies Corporation in 1975 as a blessing that brought economic and technical benefits to both sides.

The conclusion of Goodwin's company history is sadly weak; in the end, he does little more than fall back on clichés about how corporations rely on people. This seems particularly ironic, since Goodwin's account gives short shrift to any company employees below the level of top management. He hints at the value of "elevator men" (technically experienced experts) to the company but, again, does not contribute any meaningful details. He pays tribute to the company's impressive research and development testing facilities, but gives no sense of what they actually do.

Scholars who might wish to use this book as the basis for further research will be frustrated by the poor quality of source information. Endnotes are far too few, often

incomplete, and dropped in apparently at random. Moreover, citations draw almost exclusively on material in the Otis archives; Goodwin makes a merely perfunctory attempt to discuss how his story fits into the broader context of business or technological history. His illustrations, which contain some nice nineteenth-century patent drawings and advertisements and some good twentieth-century photographs, add much needed life to the book. Doubtless *Otis: Giving Rise to the Modern City* will be required reading for some students of business history or the history of technology, but unfortunately, it is likely to disappoint other readers.

Amy Bix is associate professor of history at Iowa State University. She is the author of numerous articles on the history of technology, science, and medicine, as well as Inventing Ourselves Out of Jobs?: America's Debate Over Technological Unemployment, 1929–1981 (2000). She is currently working on a history of women's engineering education in the United States.