Giants of Enterprise: Seven Business Innovators and the Empires They Built. *By Richard S. Tedlow.* New York: HarperCollins, 2001. 528 pp. Cloth, $30.00. ISBN: 0-066-62035-X.

Reviewed by Maury Klein

In this genial volume aimed at a general audience, Richard S. Tedlow offers a gallery of portraits of business leaders in the tradition of Jonathan R. T. Hughes, Harold Livesay, Robert Sobel, and Gerald Gunderson, spicing it with a newer mix of subjects. Andrew Carnegie and Henry Ford represent the usual suspects; joining them are George Eastman, Thomas J. Watson Sr., Charles Revson, Sam Walton, and Robert Noyce. Of this group only Revson seems a clear misfit, largely because available source materials are far too scant to answer most of the questions posed about him. For large stretches of his chapter, Revson virtually disappears; a third of his sketch is devoted to the issues surrounding the controversial television show *The $64,000 Question*.

The chief difficulty with this genre has always been to find a theme or technique that would unify a narrative built around separate portraits of distinctive individuals. Hughes chose people who represented five different stages of American economic development; Livesay selected men who were all manufacturers; Sobel picked men he thought had not received their just due from historians; and Gunderson used his subjects to illustrate an entrepreneurial history of the nation. None really succeeded in weaving an integrated, cohesive tale out of the individual sketches, and Tedlow fares no better at this formidable task. The introduction offers a variety of reasons for selecting this particular ensemble but finally concludes that their lives "serve as a lens through which we will see the history of American business unfold" (p. 10).

What did this select seven have in common besides the creation of a business empire? They were "risk takers, innovators, experimenters . . . more hungry for success than they were afraid of failure . . . men of extraordinary self-confidence. . . . They were business titans . . . . And they were Americans" (p. 9). Yet Tedlow acknowledges that their differences outweigh their similarities, not only in personality but in business style, strengths and weaknesses, and backgrounds. Some were inventors; others excelled at

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selling. Some became great philanthropists, others not. Some were personable while others possessed crippling personality flaws.

The structure of the book offers little thematic or unifying help. Carnegie, Eastman, and Ford represent “The Rise to Global Economic Power,” Watson and Revson “The Heart of the American Century,” and Walton and Noyce “Our Own Times.” Without apologies to Lord Acton, Tedlow explores the notion that power deranges and absolute power deranges absolutely, but the theme fades away after Carnegie, Ford, and Watson, and he concludes only that such an effect is “very common among the powerful and very destructive” (p. 427). He observes that all seven men “either created a new technology or welcomed it” (p. 424) and stresses that “openness is a key component of the American Business Tradition” (p. 433), but the conclusion rambles over a number of issues and makes no serious attempt to organize the book or its subjects around a coherent theme.

The result is a series of discrete sketches through which an occasional thread is stitched to connect some of the subjects to one another. Taken by themselves, the portraits are lively, informative, and entertaining. Tedlow leavens familiar material with humor, asks probing questions, offers fresh insights on his subjects, and does not hesitate to put them on the couch for examination when he deems it necessary. From this approach emerges a mixed bag of astute observations and curious reflections that amuse and inform when they work, and annoy when they fall flat. Tedlow does not shrink from overarching generalizations. “This is a book about what Americans do best—founding and building new businesses,” he declares on the very first page. “Had these seven men been Italians, perhaps they would have become composers. . . . Had they been Portuguese, perhaps they would have been navigators; Germans, soldiers; Japanese, servants of the state; Romanians, gymnasts” (p. 1). The image of Ford or Walton astride the uneven parallel bars boggles the mind.

Tedlow is at his best in pointing out unlikely connections or exploring some unfamiliar aspects of his cast of characters. He forges a fascinating link between Carnegie and Ford in their quixotic fool’s errands on behalf of world peace. Without forcing or even emphasizing the contrast, he neatly portrays the quiet dignity of George Eastman and the down-home earthiness of Sam Walton against the megalomania that

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overtook Henry Ford and Tom Watson. He examines the effect of wealth on the lives of all seven men but does not offer an analysis or summary of the cases beyond the obvious one that the rich live different lives from the rest of us. Of Noyce, the least familiar figure to most readers, Tedlow says simply, "[W]hen one considers his life, one feels one is encountering America at its best" (p. 418).

Unfortunately, this book is not Tedlow at his best. It is an uneven work that should satisfy the general reader with its casual, lively style and exhortatory tone. However, business historians may be frustrated by the lack of a thematic or structural center and may wish that he had probed more deeply into his subjects, their careers, and their connections.

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