

Riding the Roller Coaster: A History of the Chrysler Corporation. *By Charles K. Hyde.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003. xix + 385 pp. Index, notes, illustrations, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$34.95. ISBN 0-814-33091-6.

Reviewed by K. Austin Kerr

A century ago Americans adopted a “car culture,” choosing automobiles as their desired system of personal and private transportation. America is also a nation of car cultures, plural. Automobile racing, for example, has become the most popular spectator sport. Other cultures are based on devotion to particular makes or models of automobiles, sometimes entailing their restoration or their metamorphosis into “street rods.” Various automobile “shows” attract large crowds, and some individuals even affectionately name their vehicles. With so many types of car enthusiasts, it is not surprising that the automobile, and its history, has spawned a voluminous literature, often both popular and commercial, often written for a particular audience of car aficionados. Automotive writers may seek to advance scholarly interpretations as well. This book, by Charles K. Hyde, was written for both audiences: fans of Chrysler vehicles and scholars. It falls short on both counts.

Surprisingly few authoritative, scholarly histories of automobile companies exist. Of the “big-three” American manufacturers that survived to near the end of the twentieth century, only Ford has sponsored a history of its cars, a three-volume account written by Allan Nevins in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, while Ford recently commissioned Douglas Brinkley, a writer with no particular background in business history, to compile a scholarly update of the firm’s more recent decades, the author subsequently persuaded the company to accept instead a new, general, one-volume history. The result was the popularly (albeit professionally) written *Wheels for the World* (2003). General Motors, the giant among American automobile firms and for a long time the world’s largest industrial corporation, has no full-fledged scholarly company history. Neither did Chrysler, the smallest of the “big three,” until the arrival of Charles K. Hyde’s book.

Professor Hyde brought a background in economic history and the history of technology, as well as considerable scholarly experience, to this project. His is a

carefully written, thorough account, based on wide reading in the trade press and in the scattered scholarly literature and firm memoirs. Hyde was granted unrestricted access to the Chrysler archives, although he does not explain the exact scope and nature of the manuscript sources that were made available to him, and almost all his citations are to printed sources. Judging by the book's contents, there were no manuscripts to look at. Thus there are gaps in the accounts of Chrysler's earlier strategies as it evolved in the years after its founding in 1925. Hyde's book is a condensation of an 1100-page manuscript, copies of which he placed on deposit in four places.

Chrysler began with the purchase of Maxwell and other failing automobile manufacturers. From its establishment as a small company in 1925 up to 1940, the company became "arguably the most successful American automaker" (p. xiv), surpassing Ford in volume of sales for some years. Thereafter, and especially after 1950, the firm's history was a "roller coaster," to use the title's analogy, marked by cycles of crisis and prosperity. Chrysler's market share slipped to third place, and eventually its relatively small size and small profit margin made it difficult to overcome the engineering and marketing mistakes of the sort that bigger firms—such as Ford with the Edsel—could overcome. Hyde argues that weak leadership after the withdrawal of its founder, Walter P. Chrysler, in 1937, caused the company to make too many of those mistakes. The executives who succeeded Chrysler were inexperienced in the automobile industry and lacked foresight, vision, and business acumen, or else they simply allowed their egos to get in the way of making good decisions.

Hyde sticks to this interpretation consistently throughout his narrative. For example, having carefully read the literature on Lee Iacocca and the Chrysler "bailout" of 1979–80, he shows how Iacocca contributed to the firm's roller-coaster history. First Iacocca saved and revived the firm; then he made investments outside the automobile industry that proved unprofitable; and still later, near the end of his career, he conducted himself in an autocratic and imperial manner, driving away or firing some of the firm's most able executive and engineering talent. Although some successful designs were produced under Iacocca's regime, ultimately the company underwent one crisis too many, which led to its takeover by the German firm of Daimler Benz in 2000. DaimlerChrysler, as the new firm was called, was not listed on the New York Stock

Exchange. Thus the third of the American “big three” disappeared as a separate American entity.

The book is disappointing because it fails to advance our interpretative and scholarly understanding of either the automobile industry or large industrial firms. With little apparent grounding in the business history scholarship on the large industrial firm, Hyde often lapses into detail about particular models. This approach may interest hobbyists pursuing the study of old Chrysler vehicles, but it probably offers less detail than a hobbyist would want, and it intrudes on Hyde’s analysis of the firm. In condensing the longer manuscript, author and editors made unwise decisions, often overwhelming the reader with details about the cars. Absent is a clear thematic explanation of the company’s strategy and structure rooted in the archival material, such as it exists. The result is a mixture of the scholarly and the popular that will satisfy neither camp. Readers affiliated with a Chrysler “car culture” may enjoy discovering how the model they like fits into the larger company picture. Business historians, however, will have to wait for another book to provide a satisfactory scholarly history of this important firm.

K. Austin Kerr is professor of history at Ohio State University. Recently the Business History Conference launched a prize for the best first paper in his honor. He continues his interest in policy toward the alcohol businesses.