

McKinsey's Marvin Bower: Vision, Leadership and the Creation of Management Consulting. By *Elizabeth Haas Edersheim*. New York: John Wiley, 2004. xiii + 305 pp. Figures, notes, index. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 0-471-65285-7.

Reviewed by Christopher D. McKenna

It is telling that Elizabeth Haas Edersheim's biography of Marvin Bower is entitled "McKinsey's Marvin Bower," since the management consulting firm that Bower refounded in 1939 and directed through its most important years of expansion from 1950 to 1967 remains Bower's lasting legacy. Almost everyone agrees that Bower, who inspired both awe and fear among his contemporaries, was both a formidable figure in management consulting and the self-professed architect of the modern profession. Although largely a hagiographic account, Edersheim's biography is a good starting point for business historians who wish to understand the history and institutional impact of McKinsey & Company during the twentieth century.

Edersheim describes how Bower, who was a graduate of Harvard Law School and held an MBA from Harvard Business School, engineered the rise of a small, almost bankrupt "management engineering" partnership into the formidable force that the London *Sunday Times* once called "the McKinsey Mafia." Bower, whose productive years straddled the "middle half" of the twentieth century—from 1925, when he graduated from Brown University and entered Harvard Law School, through 1967, when he stepped down as managing director of McKinsey & Company—continued to serve as McKinsey's symbolic leader until his death at the age of ninety-nine in 2003. For many years, Bower's personal history of McKinsey & Company, *Perspective on McKinsey*, was required reading for new consultants when they first joined the company, and Bower continued, into his late nineties, to take an active interest in the firm, the profession, and the public perception of management consulting.

Bower's career within McKinsey & Company and the years he spent in retirement illustrate the truism that history is written by the victors. Edersheim details Bower's unusual fascination with the power of language—a trait that his legal and consulting background only accentuated. His interest in language caused him first to shape, and

then continually to reshape, the language of consulting: he was the first to use the term “management consulting” in order to distinguish the nascent profession from either accounting or engineering. Bower was also the leading advocate of employing the language of professionalism (insisting on the words “firm,” “client,” and “engagement,” for example), rather than relying on the terminology of industry (“company,” “customer,” and “job”) within McKinsey. Yet this same fascination with the power of language, and his concern that consultants present themselves and their material with precision to the public, also drove Bower to spend the last three decades of his life writing, and then rewriting, the history of the firm that he had so powerfully shaped during his professional career. Whether he was engaged in assembling the firm’s private archives for his internal history, *Perspective on McKinsey*, or in rewriting his private history for public consumption in his autobiography, *The Will to Lead* (1997), or in extending the considerable amount of editorial assistance he provided to Edersheim for her biography, Bower was determined to ensure that later generations would view his firm and his life from his own personal perspective. Unfortunately, the awe Edersheim accords Bower’s achievements does not stand her in good stead, since the biography largely follows the script first written by Bower himself in the late 1970s and subsequently adapted for the Harvard Business School case study of McKinsey & Company.

In the second half of the book, Edersheim’s strategy of writing essentially an exegesis of a saint’s life is more difficult for the academic reader to set aside. Having detailed Bower’s own considerable achievements, Edersheim sets out to demonstrate Bower’s broad impact on elite institutions and to show the intellectual development of Bower’s protégés by chronicling the company’s prominent assignments and describing a series of leading executives. Unfortunately, she does not support her glowing accounts with internal records from the firm’s clients, and the saccharine tone of the quoted tributes to Bower by former colleagues, past clients, and sometimes by people whom he never even met, hardly lends itself to a balanced, retrospective evaluation of her subject’s lasting impact. Perhaps it is fitting that this book was published soon after Bower’s death, because it represents more of a funeral tribute than a true biography. This is a pity, since Bower’s achievements were substantial. In his prime, Bower certainly would not

have condoned the publication of a similarly uncritical appraisal of McKinsey's institutional clients by his firm's consultants.

Business historians, however, would be wise to look beyond the celebratory tone of this account and concentrate on the archival sources drawn from within McKinsey & Company that Edersheim quotes at length. Because she often allows the original documents to speak for themselves, resourceful historians may find her biography useful as source material for their own independent analyses of McKinsey's corporate culture, the firm's impact on its international clients, and Bower's strong management style. As the readers of this book will soon recognize, Bower really did exhibit extraordinary "vision and leadership" in the "creation of management consulting." Business historians, however, will no doubt prefer to wait for a more balanced consideration of McKinsey & Company's role in the development of management consulting.

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