

The Man Everybody Knew: Bruce Barton and the Making of Modern America. *By Richard M. Fried.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005. xv + 286 pp. Index, notes, photographs. Cloth, \$27.50. ISBN: 1-566-63663-9.

Reviewed by Susan V. Spellman

Had Bruce Barton followed in his father's footsteps and ascended to the pulpit, we might speak of him today as popular religion's answer to the sound bite. Instead, Barton opted to follow other callings, most notably in advertising, statesmanship, and publishing. Those familiar with Barton through the work of Jackson Lears or Warren Susman know that he founded and directed Baten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn (BBDO), one of the twentieth century's most powerful advertising agencies. Others may recall Barton's Senate bid, quashed in part by Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1940 presidential campaign job at "Martin, Barton, and Fish," the congressional trio that vigorously opposed FDR's New Deal policies. Barton first became a household name, however, with the 1925 publication of *The Man Nobody Knows*, his gamble to turn Jesus into a pitchman by marrying religion and business.

Despite all we know of Barton, a full-length survey of his life has not been written. Richard M. Fried offers an effective correction to this oversight with his straightforward biography of a figure whose work garnered greater public recognition and sales than Hemingway's or Fitzgerald's in their time. Fried paints a broader portrait of Barton as a man who navigated the networks of religion, business, and advertising to become a modern-day *bricoleur*, a jack-of-all-trades, "importing the terms and metaphors of one [career path] into another, as with Jesus the Advertising Man" (p. 225). Where others may proclaim Barton a pioneer, Fried insists that such a label applies only to Barton's ability to turn his patchwork of many interests into a coherent whole. Barton considered himself a middling businessman and writer, blessed with the ability to translate human nature into effective advertising copy.

A preacher's son, Barton wrestled throughout his life both with his religious leanings and with the secular world of business. In his final year at Amherst College, he gave up the idea of joining the ministry. He also turned down both a fellowship and an offer from Frederick Jackson Turner to pursue a career as a historian at the University of

Wisconsin. Instead, he took up journalistic pursuits to pay the bills, entering the field of publishing to churn out articles, many with a religious slant, for leading magazines. In 1918, he set up shop on Madison Avenue, recruiting George Baten and Roy Durstine, along with Alex Osborn, to found BBDO. Publication of *The Man Nobody Knows* earned him both praise and ridicule, but it also brought him a following. He preached an updated vision of Jesus as a rugged outdoorsman and entrepreneur and, in the words of one of the book's chapter titles, as "The Founder of Modern Business." The adman's work became fodder for critics who read *The Man* as an apology for big business. Barton, Fried argues, was no apologist: religion was, and remained, his primary motive for writing. Nevertheless, Barton quickly became grist for the popular culture mill. Radio, magazines, and the movies lampooned him and his book. Barton rode the notoriety that accompanied publication of *The Man Nobody Knows* all the way to the U.S. House of Representatives, where he argued in support of small business and against interventionist foreign policy for Manhattan's "silk-stocking" district. In 1940, he ran unsuccessfully for the Senate, defeated by a combination of his isolationist stance, the success of the New Deal, and FDR's memorable tag line.

Fried is best when he is writing about Barton's congressional activities. An authority on McCarthy-era and cold-war politics, Fried's comfort with detailing Barton's political undertakings comes as no surprise, and it is in this area that he sheds the most light on Barton's life. Business historians may wish for greater detail and more discussion of Barton's dealings as founder and president of BBDO. While serving a high-profile clientele that included General Motors, General Electric, and the National Biscuit Company, the firm produced some of the century's most notable advertisements. Fried works quickly through a number of promotional campaigns that Barton piloted, noting the adman's knack for endorsing unfettered consumerism alongside traditional virtues. In one campaign for GM, his copy puffed the company's image by depicting a country doctor who relied solely on his automobile to carry out a quest to save dying children.

Fried concludes, along with others, that Barton was an ambivalent soul, caught between a traditional, small-town past he yearned for and a modern conurbation that he helped to bring about—or, as Fried terms it, a "podunk-to-metropolis dynamic" (p. 14). As a "transitional figure," Barton applauded the conveniences and advances consumerism

brought, yet he lamented what he saw as the deterioration of responsibility and hard work that came with the shift from a producer- to a consumer-oriented society. Fried notes the paradoxical nature of Barton's life and career but leaves readers to draw their own conclusions. This biography confirms much of what is known about Barton, but it misses the opportunity to probe more deeply the paradox that came to define Barton's role as business and religious interlocutor.

*Susan V. Spellman is Ph.D. candidate in history at Carnegie Mellon University. She is currently writing a dissertation on the grocery industry from 1860 to 1930, and she has published on the topic of women's consumer roles in the service-station industry. She is the recipient of a 2006 Alfred D. Chandler Jr. Traveling Fellowship in Business History, and a 2005 Littleton-Griswold Grant for Research in Legal History.*