

conversation. This is particularly difficult these days for humane liberals, who are wont to take their own thick beliefs about human rights and democracy to be matters of obvious universal concern rather than legitimate difference, and to take their concern not to the United Nations for a debate but to the Pentagon for an air strike. When we go on the road, as Michael Walzer has said, we need to thin down our moral baggage considerably (which is not to say that we need pack only the equivalent of a toothbrush).

Perhaps because he is more attentive to positivism than to fundamentalism (including liberal fundamentalism), Appiah's book occasionally has a rather complacent air about it, as if the eventual hegemony of cosmopolitanism was just a matter of time and market share. Sometimes, he suggests, the smart cosmopolitan does not press a moral argument but merely awaits the *modus vivendi* that will follow once people simply get used to one another's strange ways. Opposition to gay rights, he avers, will disappear with time and the eclipse of a generation wedded to an outmoded taboo akin to the ban in Leviticus on sex with menstruating women or the Asante prohibition of male circumcision. Here I think he underestimates the staying power of his opponents.

Cultural imperialism is an overblown concern, Appiah argues, because the international market in cultural commodities is freely competitive, and you cannot force people to sustain one way of life when they clearly prefer to purchase another. Here, it seems to me, he confuses inequitable market relationships with equitable cultural conversations and conflates the desired with the desirable, which is, well, positivist (that is to say, market fundamentalist).

Still, on the whole, *Cosmopolitanism* is a welcome, illuminating work of wisdom. As those college faculties who require that their entering class read a common book meet this spring to make their selection, it should be on their short list. ■

Robert Westbrook is the author, most recently, of *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth* (Cornell).

Robert K. Landers

## God's Pitchman

### The Man Everybody Knew Bruce Barton and the Making of Modern America

Richard M. Fried  
Ivan R. Dee, \$27.50, 286 pp.

The revelation that Jesus Christ was "the founder of modern business," a powerful executive who "picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world," came in 1925 by way of the book *The Man Nobody Knows* by Bruce Barton, a successful adman. Reinhold Niebuhr was not the only one appalled to see Christ thus turned into a "typical Rotarian go-getter," "a kind of sublimated Babbitt," but in the first eighteen months after publication, more than a quarter-million copies of the book were sold.

Most American history textbooks mention Barton and his bestseller as risible evidence of Americans' giddy enthusiasm for business in the 1920s, when, as Calvin Coolidge famously observed, "the business of America is business." But in *The Man Nobody Knows*, Barton was seeking less to bless the pursuit of mammon than to boost his notion of liberal Protestantism, as historian Richard M. Fried points out in this brief, fair-minded, and well-researched biography. "[Barton] may have ended by sanctifying business, but he intended to show how religion could be made modern and relevant to contemporary life."

The advance of science, and indeed modernity itself, seemed by then to have put religious faith on the defensive. "Illusions have been lost one by one," journalist Joseph Wood Krutch wrote in *The Modern Temper* (1929). "God, instead of disappearing in an instant, has retreated step by step and surrendered gradually his control of the universe." For Barton (1886–1967), though, human intelligence and goodness pointed the way to the creator. "If there is a God," he re-

flected, "he must be good; for we are good. And he could not have made us better than himself."

Like many of his contemporaries in advertising, Barton was a minister's son. "The preacher is really a salesman," he once observed. By the time he and his partners founded their ad agency in 1918, advertising had moved well beyond simply providing information about a product. Information was not enough when competing products were readily available, often not easily distinguishable from one another, and perhaps not even needed. Enter the "professional" adman with glib patter, catchy phrases, and a willingness to exploit people's hopes and fears. "Two paths begin at the bottom of the hill of life," proclaimed a 1921 Barton ad for an "institute" that offered business training by correspondence. One path "winds about the base, thru years of routine and drudgery," while the other rapidly mounts "into positions where every problem is new and stirring, where the rewards are comfort, and travel, and freedom from all fear." Testimonials from happy graduates followed. For General Motors, Barton designed ads that offered parables about the noble uses to which GM cars were put. "One two-page sociodrama entitled 'That the Doctor Shall Arrive in Time,'" Fried notes, "pictured a dying girl, her grief-ridden mother, and the doctor, whose trusty GM car had enabled him to deliver artificial respiration in the nick of time."



"Hey, what's all this 'God forbid' stuff?"

BALOO

Barton, Durstine, and Osborn (later, after a merger, Batten, Barton, Durstine, and Osborn) rapidly proved a success, owing in no small part to Barton's skills at writing ad copy and at managing clients and prospective clients. Yet this advertising virtuoso at times harbored doubts about his profession's social worth. He told a friend in 1926 that he feared that much current advertising embodied "the most wasteful phases of the competitive system," that advertising seemed mostly intended "to steal each other's customers...switching people from... Williams's Shaving Soap to Colgate's Shaving Soap." For the most part, though, he kept such subversive thoughts to himself. In magazine and newspaper articles and numerous speeches over a long career, he tirelessly defended advertising, its general honesty, and its contribution to the common good. He always *seemed* sincere in making these justifications—and Fried judges that the sincerity wasn't fake.

"Whatever his persisting qualms in identifying with his profession, Barton may have modulated them," says Fried, "simply by making sure that advertising never became his entire life—even his working life....His career never consisted solely of writing ads and persuading clients. Politics, writing for audiences beyond consumers or corporate advertisers, and lay moralizing absorbed a great deal of his energies." In politics, Barton put his image-making talents to work for Coolidge and Herbert Hoover. A moderate Republican and a celebrity himself after *The Man Nobody Knows* was published, Barton ran successfully for Congress from New York's "silk stocking" Seventeenth District in a special election in 1937, and was reelected to a full term the following year. In 1940, he backed Wendell Willkie and ran for the Senate, railing against the "power-hungry" Franklin Roosevelt's bid for a third term. But FDR got the better of him late in the campaign, jeering at the Republican trio of "Congressmen Martin, Barton, and Fish" who had voted against repeal of the Neutrality Act's ban on arms shipments to belligerents. Linked together, the three euphonious names took on

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Clare Asquith

## More Acts to Come

### Shakespeare

#### The Biography

Peter Ackroyd

Doubleday, \$32.50, 500 pp.

In 1998 the American academic Park Honan published *Shakespeare: A Life*, a modest biography that reminded the literary world that, alongside the mass of peripheral material and speculation thrown up by centuries of scholarship, there has been a steady growth in what is actually known about William Shakespeare. Two years later Michael Wood's *In Search of Shakespeare* followed the same approach, meticulously examining all the known facts and confirming that many of them conflict with the traditional picture of Shakespeare. Katherine Duncan-Jones (*Ungentle Shakespeare*) highlighted the contrast. She drew the portrait of a wary, ambitious, and effective man of business, who pursued debtors relentlessly through the courts and was expert in the law, dodging taxes, and avoiding obligatory attendance at Protestant services. His rise was hard-working and meteoric: by his early

forties he had become the leading court dramatist, a best-selling author, and a box-office draw. Yet all three writers point out that he ran a surprising risk for such a canny operator: throughout his life his close friends, patrons, and colleagues were for the most part dissident Catholics. In 2004 Stephen Greenblatt brought out his phenomenally successful *Will in the World*, which brings the new context, particularly the unfamiliar world of persecuted Catholicism, vividly to life.

Honan sees the biographical approach to Shakespeare as essentially collaborative—a developing, collective portrait, “best...when we are not under the illusion it is to be finished.” The title of Peter Ackroyd's five-hundred-page *Shakespeare: The Biography*, is less tentative. Ackroyd flings his net over the whole contentious, contradictory world of Shakespeare scholarship, brings in a massive haul, and spends his book rummaging enjoyably through it all. In leisurely, speculative style he turns over the many questions that have vexed scholars for centuries—Shakespeare's mysterious youth, the acting companies he may have joined, his

a life of their own in the days before the election, and while FDR's catchy gibe could not be held responsible for Barton's defeat, it certainly didn't help him. The irony of this was not lost on Barton, who said that he was “enough of an adman to appreciate a terrific gag line when I hear one.”

All in all, then: an unimportant congressman, a fatuous popular theologian, and a successful but somewhat ambivalent adman who, as his profession matured, came eventually to appear, in the words of a rival on Madison Avenue, “like a preacher in a whore house.” Fried views him as a “transitional figure” in the nation's shift from the creed of hard work and thrift to “the new consumerism of the modern age.” If Bruce Barton was often conflicted and confused about this transformation, he certainly was not alone. ■

Robert K. Landers is the author of *An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell* (Encounter Books).



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