

academics straining to avoid the conclusion that consumers are indeed a vast army of halfwits, it is comforting to think that people create themselves through the goods they buy. But the doctrine's roots run back to limited anthropological claims that cultural studies types subsequently have misunderstood and misapplied to contemporary America.

I am far more persuaded by McGovern's concluding observations that Americans remain uneasy about their comfortable enslavement; that their uneasiness comes to the surface when environmental breakdown, Wal-Mart monopolization, and deindustrialization call into question the social contract of consumer society;

and that when such crises appear, Americans find themselves having surrendered the very ideas that might generate a credible counter-vision of the good society. Such observations might offer the best explanation for why consumer capitalism holds the field against all opponents.

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Robber Baron

The Life of Charles Tyson Yerkes

By John Franch

(Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006. Pp. 374. Illustrations, notes, index. \$45.00.)

Anyone who has read about Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century has encountered Charles Tyson Yerkes. Street railway magnate, swindler, philandering husband, freewheeling businessman at a time when few laws prevented corruption, Yerkes would seem to be one of those larger-than-life figures about whom a biography would make scintillating reading.

Born in 1837 to a well-off Quaker Philadelphia family, Yerkes opened his own brokerage firm while in his early twenties. By the time he was

thirty-four he had amassed a great deal of money through a series of shady business maneuvers that landed him in prison for larceny in 1872. Pardoned quickly through political maneuvering, Yerkes began to rebuild his fortune in street railway construction. He left Philadelphia in the mid-1880s to avoid the social scandal of his divorce and remarriage to a much younger woman, and to seek better business opportunities in the rapidly expanding city of Chicago. There he built several traction lines

on the city's north and west sides and was highly instrumental in constructing the Loop elevated railway.

Yerkes's business methods in Chicago were as shady and political as they had been in Philadelphia. He proved ruthless with his competitors, dishonest with his investors' money, and totally unsympathetic to the traction workers. He controlled his interests through alliances with dishonest city council members. When municipal reformers did manage to thwart his plans, he turned to the state legislature and manipulated them into passing new laws that would allow him to secure long-term franchises from the city to maintain control of his railway lines. To help publicize his cause, he bought a newspaper, the *Daily Inter-Ocean*. In the end, however, he failed to secure his franchise extensions. In 1899, Yerkes left Chicago for London, where he participated in expanding the underground "tube" system. He retained control of his Chicago operations, but within five years these had fallen into severe financial trouble. Yerkes himself died in 1905.

Despite what might seem like a fascinating story, Yerkes the man is not very interesting. The result is a book that reads as a rather mundane accounting of a shady, arrogant, socially marginal individual who took advantage of the late stages of laissez-faire capitalism to enrich himself at others' expense. Yerkes, moreover, left behind few personal or business papers from which to tease out a more nuanced recounting of his life. There-

fore, some of the problem may lie in the author's need to rely largely on newspaper accounts of Yerkes's public activities. Moreover, while the era in which Yerkes lived and operated was more interesting than the man himself—especially in Chicago—Franch chooses not to focus on that context. He dubs Yerkes a member of the "Gilded Generation . . . [those men who] were especially tenacious in their pursuit of monetary success . . . such as the railroad speculator Jay Gould . . . the financier J. P. Morgan . . . and the oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller" (p. 13). This is heady company, but unlike these so-called robber barons, Yerkes left little legacy beyond his legendary corruption. His only major cultural endowment, for instance, was the Yerkes Observatory in Williams Bay, Wisconsin.

Readers interested in the details of Chicago's traction development will find a wealth of factual information here, as will those concerned with the details of Yerkes's public activities. But with little on the history of the U.S. at the time, Franch's book will offer readers few clues for understanding why Yerkes might warrant a full-scale biography.

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