



The Man Everybody Knew

Bruce Barton and the Making of Modern America

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Reviews

"Richard M. Fried has written an engaging, deeply researched, and admirably balanced brief biography of Bruce Barton - an adman, best-selling author, and politician who was indeed very well known during his heyday between the 1920's and 1950's. An accomplished historian, Fried is especially good at capturing the context of Barton's times"

-James T. Patterson, professor of history emeritus, Brown University

"In this wonderfully written and researched book, Richard M. Fried skillfully describes Bruce Barton's many legacies. *The Man Everybody Knew* will be necessary reading for historians of Americas' political and commercial cultures.

-James L. Baughman, professor of journalism and mass communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison

From the Dust Jacket

Everyone knew him then: Bruce Barton was a cultural icon of the mid-twentieth century - a pioneering advertising man, prolific writer, friend of presidents, and author of one of the most popular books ever. Two-thirds of American history textbooks cite Barton to illustrate the 1920's adoration of the business mentality that then dominated American culture. Historians quote from his enormous best-seller, *The Man Nobody Knows*, in which Barton became famous for calling Jesus the "founder of modern business" who "picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world."

But surprisingly few people know of Bruce Barton today: he is the most celebrated twentieth-century American without a biography.

Richard M. Fried's compelling new study of Barton captures the full dimensions of his varied and fascinating life and the culture of his time. More than a popularizer of the entrepreneurial Jesus, he wrote novels, magazine articles, interviews with the mighty, and pithy editorials of uplift. He edited a weekly magazine that anticipated the format of *Life*. Most famously, he co-founded the advertising agency that became Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn and grew to symbolize "Madison Avenue." He made GM and GE household initials

The son of a minister, Barton in his own religious writing - especially *The Man Nobody Knows* - epitomized modernist religious thought in the twenties. As a political spin merchant, he advanced the careers of Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover: his agency later scripted campaigns for Republicans, notably Dwight Eisenhower. Barton himself was twice elected to Congress, ran for the U.S. Senate in 1940, and that year lent his name to FDR's famous mocking litany, "Martin, Barton, and Fish."

In Richard Fried's illuminating biography, Barton comes to life as a man who often initiated, sometimes followed, and occasionally fought the social and political trends of his times - but always defined their essential qualities. He can truly be called a key figure in a large territory of the American mind.

1 A Son of the Manse

When BRUCE BARTON was born in Robbins, Tennessee, August 5, 1886, his father's family had been established on American shores for a little more than a century. On his mother's side, his line could be traced to early colonial Connecticut, to John Davenport, founder of New Haven, to Governor Robert Treat, who had hidden Connecticut's charter in the famous Charter Oak, and to the first president of Yale.

Barton's paternal great-great-grandfather was William Barton (1754-1829), son of a British soldier James Barton, who was killed in the French and Indian War. After also joining the British army, William was sent to North America during the Revolution. He pulled out of Boston with General William Howe, fought on Long Island, and campaigned up the Hudson River. But he came gradually to sense that he was enlisted in "the wrong army," one which his descendant Bruce Barton later described as pursuing "a mission of Bureaucratic Uplift." Grabbing a bucket on the pretext of fetching water one day, Barton strode toward the river. An officer ordered him back to camp; his refusal earned a nasty sword swipe that would leave a scar across his face. Striking back with his bucket, Barton unhorsed his superior, seized his sword and made his way across the Hudson. Welcomed into the Continental Army, he rose to the rank of Lieutenant. While manufacturing cannon shot for the Americans in New Jersey, he met Margaret Henderson and married her after three weeks courtship. The British officer's sword that William

Barton made off with what would become a treasured family heirloom. Archibald M. Willard, the artist whose *Spirit of '76* later became the central iconic representation of the patriot cause, also painted a canvas depicting the bucket-wielding Barton's confrontation with the redcoat officer. .

The Bartons' son Eleazar lived in New Jersey, but when two of his sons returned from the West with tidings of the prosperous hinterland, the family packed its belongings, took a ferry up the Hudson, traversed the Erie Canal, crossed the Great Lakes by steamboat, and arrived in Chicago. From there they headed west, in three days reaching Knox Grove, Illinois. There in 1846 the extensive Barton family settled.

Among Eleazar's ten sons was Jacob B. Barton (1834–1912), who had made the trip west as a boy. At sixteen Jacob suffered a severe case of pneumonia. A doctor's role in his recovery stimulated an interest in the healing arts and led Jacob to read medicine at this village practitioner's office. He returned to Knox Grove where he taught school, practiced medicine, and compounded remedies that he sold from his wagon to farmers in the surrounding countryside. Moving to Sublette, just four miles away, he opened a drug store. As other doctors came into the area, they asked Jacob Barton to fill their prescriptions; in turn, he all but gave up practicing medicine. Neither of these pursuits enriched him. In his own prime, Bruce Barton recalled his grandfather as "a kindly old country doctor and druggist, who brought babies into the world for whose arrival he was never paid, and passed out his healing drugs to the suffering but could never quite bring himself to insist that his bills be promptly met." To make ends meet, Jacob also took on the postmastership and installed two printing presses. Soon his store was crammed with drugs, printing gear, arriving and departing mail, and many of Sublette's 350 or so townspeople who were looking for one or another of these services.

In 1860 Jacob Barton married Helen Methven. Her father, a farmer and preacher, had emigrated from Scotland in 1837, the rest of his family soon following. In a room above the store, William Eleazar Barton was born on June 28, 1861. William, who became Bruce Barton's father, would have a powerful influence on his famous son and no small fame of his own. Although it would not be long before William left his rural youth behind, it would have a carry well into the next generation. Bruce Barton had little actual experience in such circumstances, but he would always idealize his adolescence as that of a "small-town boy." Other observers noticed the pattern this distant past had etched on Barton. In an obituary, Alistair Cooke, the astute English observer of the American scene, called Barton "a rampant individualist and frontier Republican to the day he died."

...In his senior year William E. Barton, who had envisioned himself as a lawyer and statesman, changed his mind and decided to enter the ministry. He had an invitation to preach as a home missionary employed by the American Missionary Association. Although he had been a fun loving undergraduate, Barton's seniors and contemporaries thought him a good fit for the ministry: he took some rushed lessons in theology and accepted the call. The president and other Berea faculty laid on hands in June 1885, and so he was ordained. Berea would continue to occupy an important place in the Barton family's affections. The Bartons embarked for Robbins, Tennessee, where William was

to ride circuit and conduct mission work on a salary of \$800 a year, thus launching a lifetime of preaching. He rode a white mare to visit seven churches in mountain country. On August 5, 1886, William and Esther's first child, Bruce, was born. Robbins was home for two happy, rewarding years, but William felt the need for deeper theological training: in 1887 the family departed for Ohio's Oberlin Theological Seminary. Robbins had provided two more additions to their household. At a sawmill, Reverend Barton chanced upon an abandoned mulatto boy of undetermined years (they assigned an age of twelve). They took Webster Beatty in, raised him as a member of the family, and provided an education that led him into the dental profession. They also were joined by Rebecca, a young African-American girl whose mother asked hem to raise her. From the train station to their little house in Oberlin in the fall of 1887, they formed an eye-turning procession: Webster leading the horse on which Esther rode cradling Bruce, Becky leading the cow, and William following on the sidewalk....

...Reverend Barton's religious beliefs had a marked impact on his son Bruce, who freely acknowledged his intellectual debt. For Bruce, said his brother Fred, religion was a "simple, rational, reasonable and pleasant part of life."....

...[Ernest] Hemingway once reminisced to one of Bruce's business colleagues that "the Barton brothers were always shooting at one another with twenty-two rifles." Although the story carries a scent of apocrypha, the Barton offspring seldom radiated the sanctity of the parsonage. One tradesman remembered having to replace the glass front of a shoulder-high bookshelf, a casualty of the boys' roughhousing. (One of Bruce's younger brothers had thrown a shoe, and the intended target ducked.) He also reminded Bruce that his parents were sometimes "at their wits' end" to know how to make the boys "control your selves."

The Barton manse hummed with more than flying brogans. Bruce's brother Fred later recalled that at a given moment the Bartons might host parishioners, one of their many relatives, "maybe a visiting college professor, maybe a missionary home from Africa to fatten up" before returning abroad. There were lecturers, writers, college presidents. Once "a struggling artist," his wedding performed in the Barton parlor, offered a painting, allegedly of a ship, in lieu of a cash fee. Presiding over this genial managed chaos was Esther Bushnell Barton, an ideal minister's wife, beloved of her congregation and all who knew her. She brought several hundred dollars into the marriage, and, since the fund was periodically replenished from sources that came Reverend Barton's way to further his work, it never ran out and was a reservoir that watered many growing projects of charity and goodwill. Thus the assembly hall of a mission compound in Madura, India, was named in her memory, as was an Esther Barton Hospital in China.

For the Bartons the Oak Park years were rewarding and, by Bruce's recollection, idyllic. Although, like his father, he would leave the cozy locale of his youth for a theater that more fully engaged his ambitions, Bruce Barton never saw his as the sort of forceful break with his boyhood environment that his father's had been. In his writings Bruce would often marvel at the inner spark that had driven exceptional small-town boys, including both the young Jesus and many captains of American industry, to sense that

their destinies must be fulfilled in a wider, more cosmopolitan world than the comfortable hamlets in which they grew up. Barton himself identified with this podunk-to-metropolis dynamic, though it fit his father better Reverend Barton probably stood near the top end of the ministerial salary scale, but at the turn of the century that was none too high. The Barton kids were comfortable but well short of spoiled. They did not feel themselves deprived. “No one ever talked about money at our house,” Bruce’s brother Fred recalled. Still, there were creature comforts. When the children “longed so for a pony,” their father, who wrote voluminously on the side, sold a “boy’s story” to a magazine and came home leading the pony. Reverend Barton never owned a car, but with a telephone call to a well-to-do parishioner one would materialize, along with a chauffeur, for an afternoon of pastoral calls. Bruce later generalized that one of the advantages preachers’ sons carried into life was the “high respect” yet corresponding “high disregard” for money, as well as other attributes that led to achievement.

The boy's story that leveraged the pony was no one time thing. Reverend Barton had an ease with the written word that led to numerous avenues of publication. Favored sermons often appeared as pamphlets. He wrote articles, both historical and fanciful. He took over a failing Congregational magazine and, among other insertions in its pages, created a character named Safed the Sage. The whimsical adventures and ruminations of Safed and his circle, depicted in quasi biblical language, appeared in numerous stories, which were syndicated to a number of other church papers. One even dealt with an ethical question raised by a golf game—the issue of whether to count a ball knocked into the cup by an earthquake. In his prime Reverend Barton took an abiding interest in Abraham Lincoln. He often retraced the Rail Splitter’s historical movements, examined several of the myths that gathered about that legendary figure, and wrote numerous articles and books, including a respected biography. In 1930, the final year of his life, his publications list was so extensive that his was the third-longest entry in that year’s edition of Who’s Who.

Later in life Bruce often enlarged upon the blessings of being a preacher’s son. He noted that a disproportionate number of those who made the pages of Who’s Who grew up in the manse. He recalled fondly that a preacher’s son “has the enormous advantages of poverty. He learns early what it means to have to work hard and live on little” yet to enjoy a life built on “good books . . . serious conversation and high thinking. We were poor,” he said with some exaggeration, “but we never thought of ourselves as poor.”

The full first chapter of Richard M. Fried's biography of Bruce Barton can be viewed on the publisher's website at: <http://chapters.ivanrdee.com/15/666/1566636639ch1.pdf>