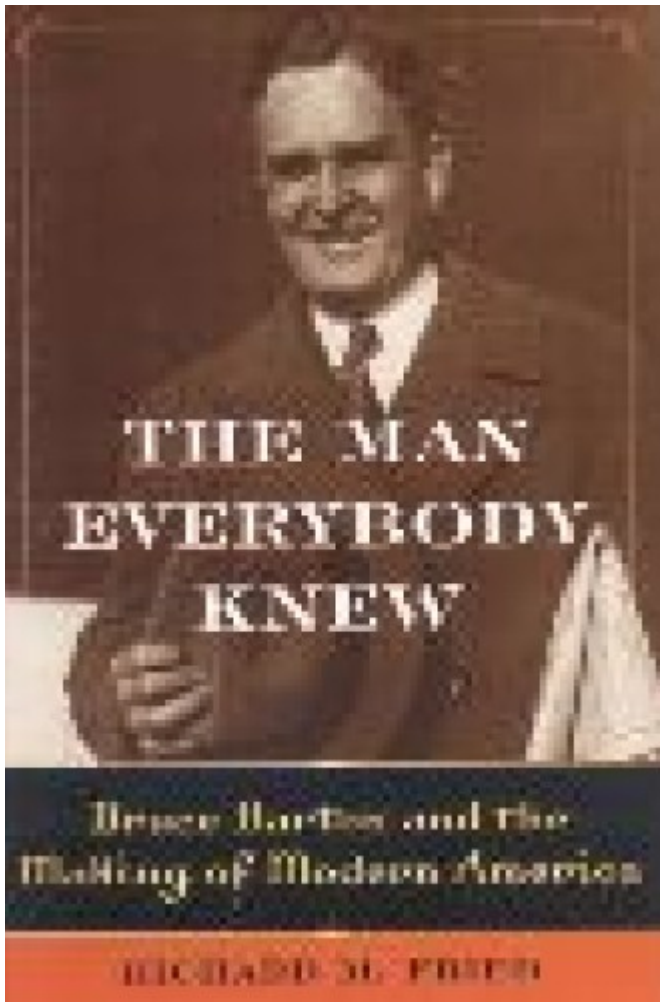


The Man Everybody Knew

reviewed by [Quentin J. Schultze](#) in the [August 21, 2007](#) issue

In Review



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

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Most people know Bruce Fairchild Barton as the author of the 1925 best seller *The Man Nobody Knows*, which portrays Jesus as a first-rate executive who knew he was destined for greatness. H. L. Mencken once quipped that such popular entrepreneurial religion turned John the Baptist into the first Kiwanian.

But Barton was far more important and influential than his status as a one-hit wonder would suggest. Richard M. Fried, professor of history at the University of Illinois–Chicago and author of *Men Against McCarthy* and *Nightmare in Red*, shows that Barton was a key figure in the spiritualization of American industry that continues to this day. This well-researched and insightful biography of Barton, set within the context of American cultural history, rightly considers Barton’s life as a parable about the relationship between corporate business ideology and popular mainline Protestant thought, especially the Social Gospel, during the first half of the 20th century.

Born in 1886 and raised in Oak Park, Illinois, Barton was a preacher’s kid during a largely Protestant era when parvenus and publicists were gaining social status. His father was a popular Congregational minister who knew some of the players in Chicago’s progressive movement.

Barton seemed restless from his young adult years forward. After graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Amherst College in 1907 and working in railroad construction in Montana for a few years during tough economic times, he chose to make his name in the business world. In 1914 the preacher’s son, steeped in the King James Bible, wrote *A Young Man’s Jesus*, a precursor to *Nobody*. Fried explains that this largely unsuccessful book was Barton’s first major attempt to “reclaim Jesus for many young strivers of his own age.” According to Barton, he wrote the book at least partly because many business-minded religious seekers were turned off by the institutional church, which viewed Christ as “a tired, unhappy martyred Jesus who lived without a real laugh and looked forward to dying in a sort of fanatical eagerness.”

Barton was on a mission to reinterpret Jesus and promote him anew for the sake of success-oriented male strivers who wanted much more out of God than a wimpy savior. Otherwise the rising class of brisk young business boosters might give up entirely on church and faith. Barton would tell them how to prosper by reclaiming the unknown truth about Jesus the leader-entrepreneur.

Fried avoids simplistic psychological explanations for Barton's newfound faith in an entrepreneurial God, but the story does suggest that Barton and other energetic young entrepreneurs needed a gospel that could help them deal with two concerns. First, businessmen faced the vicissitudes of an economy in which winners rose and declined precipitously; they needed to continue having faith in themselves, not merely in a distant God. Second, businessmen often encountered an austere mind-set in congregations that awarded little social prestige to young men's financial achievements. Men like Barton sought to tear off the ego-restricting, success-stifling shackles of personal piety.

At the end of World War I Barton cofounded the New York City advertising agency Barton, Durstine and Osborn (which FDR later satirized in a comment about Republicans Martin, Barton and Fish). The partners had learned the art of publicity by working on war-related publicity projects. When it later added partner George Batton, the agency became the well-known BBDO, with Barton serving as its public face. BBDO helped to make GM and GE well-known initials and Madison Avenue a public icon.

During the period between the wars Barton probably did as much as anyone in the publicity business to enhance the profession's image, which had long been tainted by purveyors of patent medicine and creators of carnival ads. Still, journalists loved to poke fun at him and the company. One reporter said that Barton had "the finesse of a Richelieu with the cunning of a Benjamin Franklin with the persuasiveness of a Daniel Webster with the fighting sincerity of a St. Paul."

Barton might not have been such a successful voice for business if he had not penned *Nobody*, which ran first as a serial in the *Companion*. The book's popularity was buoyed periodically by revivals of public interest in the great executive-God. Barton became a household name by arguing that the executive Jesus rose from humble Nazareth, chose a first-rate staff of disciples, advertised the faith through winning parables, and founded modern business methods. Fried suggests that Barton's Jesus was particularly appealing because it "offered a way to hold a faith to those distracted or unsettled by the cannonading between fundamentalists and modernists."

Barton re-created his ethos periodically. He claimed in 1952 to be a Quaker, although he rarely attended any services, even those at the Presbyterian church on whose board he served. Alistair Cooke dubbed him the Moses of Advertising, a cute

phrase that belies Barton's love of speaking on behalf of causes and clients. Barton needed no Aaron. Fried suggests that Barton was a liberal Protestant even though his work ethic was puritanical, but his fine book leaves the reader wondering what the enormously likable, winsomely persuasive and generous Barton really believed.

He served as a confidant to President Herbert Hoover, as a two-time member of Congress from New York (1937-1941) and as an unsuccessful senatorial candidate in 1940. Barton somehow moved between extreme religious and ideological partisanship on the one hand and poll-based propagandizing on the other. He was his own voice, not just a rhetorical puppet of political organizations, free-market business or liberal faith. Barton first won his seat in Congress by positioning himself as an independent beholden to no one. Although Republicans claimed that his victory was a repudiation of the New Deal, the ad-man-turned-politician took some liberal positions, such as support for a minimum wage and for a limit on working hours.

And for all his quasi-eschatological speech about advertising's role in guaranteeing American economic progress, over time Barton found more meaning in the settled past than in an uncertain future. In 1944 of all times he said, "I have no desire to live in the future. I have had such a good time in the past, I am going to keep on living in the past." Presumably he held on to such gratitude as he moved toward the end of his life, which came in 1967 as a result of bronchial pneumonia.

One eulogy called Barton "the man everybody knew"—a label that Fried borrowed for his book's title. History has largely forgotten BBDO, which was eventually engulfed in the global Omnicom communications conglomerate. The last edition of *Nobody*, published in 1956, toned down the religious and business rhetoric. Jesus the executive became Jesus the leader, and Jesus the advertiser became Jesus the communicator. But Americans all know Barton, because in many ways he was us. He was a principled, pragmatic, idealistic individual who believed in the capacity of human beings to improve their lot in life—and to do so especially through the miracle of mass communication, which turned white bread into Wonder Bread and enabled Barton's own fictional Betty Crocker to dictate the menus in Republican and Democratic kitchens for many years.