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Wheels for the World: Henry Ford, His Company, and a Century
of Progress (review)

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Technology and Culture, Volume 45, Number 4, October 2004, pp. 856-857
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2004.0179>



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Wheels for the World: Henry Ford, His Company, and a Century of Progress.

By Douglas Brinkley. New York: Viking, 2003. Pp. xxii+858. \$34.95.

OCTOBER
2004
VOL. 45

The Ford Motor Company marked its centennial in 2003, and this book was the company's contribution to marking that milestone in the scholarly literature. Douglas Brinkley's book draws on research in the archives of the Benson Ford Research Center and Ford's corporate archives, and on numerous interviews with current and former executives and employees. Its contribution to the vast Ford literature is its scope: it is a one-volume biography, social history, and business history. The organizing argument is that the Ford Motor Company in its one hundred years identified and fulfilled three corporate missions. The first, reflected in the title, was to put the world on wheels. The second was to modernize itself and the automobile market. And last was to become the world's finest builder of automobiles.

Henry Ford was the visionary. While the moving assembly line, the five-dollar day, and, later, the company's brutish labor relations are all covered, Brinkley identifies other Ford qualities, including his knack for finding the right men for the right jobs (such as Harold Wills, James Couzens, Charles Sorensen, and William Knudsen); his emphasis on perfecting the product before perfecting the production; and his interest in the welfare of his employees. Unfortunately for the company, all three of these qualities were in short supply in its founder after 1920. Brinkley effectively highlights the same themes as they recurred in the later history of Ford Motor. Edsel Ford also had a knack for finding good business talent (such as Ernest Kanzler), as well as the sense to diversify the Ford product line. But Edsel was constantly undermined by his father and his cronies and the atmosphere of fear they created in the company. By 1945, Ford Motor was a decrepit shell of its former self.

Here the second story begins, with the ascension of Henry Ford II, who found his corporate mission in modernizing the company, developing new products, and improving relationships with organized labor. In recounting the dramatic turnaround that Henry II engineered, Brinkley credits his knack for finding the right men for the job and giving them the freedom to do it well. Among these were many executives from General Motors, the "whiz kids," including Arjay Miller and Robert McNamara, and other dedicated designers and marketers, such as Lee Iacocca. But as Ford Motor redefined itself and its product in performance, a youth market, and racing, it was also acquiring an institutional momentum that made it very reluctant to change as the automobile market underwent dramatic shifts in the 1970s. Fuel-efficient imports, environmental regulations, and safety demands drove consumers away from American automobiles. Ford Motor was in financial ruins by 1980.

Here begins the third chapter of Ford's Century of Progress. Brinkley

notes that Henry II's most important decisions were probably hiring Ernest Breech in 1946 to rebuild the company and selecting Philip Caldwell and Donald Peterson to head the company after he retired in 1980. Caldwell and Peterson found their corporate mission in a thorough commitment to quality, as embodied in the Ford truck line and the Taurus/Sable. They revived personal commitments to pride in one's work at all levels of the corporation, a pride that had not existed to such a degree since men came to Highland Park and Dearborn to work, not at Ford Motor, but for Henry Ford.

The book's most significant shortcomings concern its pace and length. The text plods through the first two decades year by year. Much of this material is covered in other Ford biographies. The pace picks up when Brinkley nears the end of the Model T era in the mid-1920s. He makes refreshing use of secondary sources and commentaries from Stephen Ambrose and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., from Henry Miller and Berry Gordy, figures not encountered in standard automotive history literature. Brinkley continues the reassessment of the Ford myth begun with Allan Nevins and Frank Hill and continued by David Hounshell, locating Ford's genius not in automobile design, production, and marketing but in assembling an expert team of engineers, designers, and production men and then inspiring them to create his vision of modern mass production. It has been, as Brinkley demonstrates, a genius that has served Ford Motor for a century.

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Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Landscape.

By Catherine Gudis. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. Pp. 333. \$90/\$22.

In recent years gifted scholars, including Jackson Lears and Pamela Laird, have vastly expanded historical knowledge of American advertising, and there are numerous books on marketing products outdoors. When first opening *Buyways*, I did not expect to learn much new. But this inspired book was a revelation, packed with fresh information and penetrating analysis.

Catherine Gudis analyzes outdoor advertising from the Civil War to the present. In the nineteenth century, "bill posting" was chaotic, totally unregulated, and marked by incessant conflicts in which workers regularly tore down and replaced rivals' posters before the paste was dry. Gudis recounts that overenthusiastic advertisers even slapped posters on corpses of dead horses while they were still warm! Late-nineteenth-century cities were slathered with paper billboards featuring written text.

With the advent of the auto, and with Americans moving faster, advertisers began attracting consumers with visual symbols and logos more than with text. Although there were early opponents of outdoor advertising, the