

ON A CLEAR DAY
YOU CAN SEE GENERAL MOTORS
J. Patrick Wright / Wright Enterprises / \$12.95

Brock Yates

You of course recall Detroit. It is a large, dingy city in southern Michigan noted for the manufacturing of automobiles, epic race riots, and a long list of cultural titans headed by Diana Ross and the Supremes. Within the perimeters of its monochromatic, working-class neighborhoods and sprawling assembly plants lie the headquarters of the General Motors Corporation, which qualifies, by any number of financial measurements, as the largest private industrial concern in the world. The building itself is a 1920sexpression of the bold and the baroque: a stony leviathan jutting above the flat landscape in a proper Midwestern expression of restrained pomposity. In the automobile business, the 14th floor of the GM building is synonymous with raw

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power. Here sit, in presumed splendor, the clear-eyed, Machiavellian tycoons who pull the levers that control the largest, most complex, most socially influential concentration of free enterprise known to man. The goings-on within these hushed corridors and paneled suites are a source of fascination for outsiders. How far do the tentacles of this mega-corp extend? What manner of latter-day Morgan and Gould are the Chairman, the President, and their proconsul elite of Group Vice Presidents? How unfold the intrigues, the diabolical internecine warfare, the cabals and alliances necessary to ascent to the supreme position, that of Chairman of the Board?

For years, such questions have gnawed at GM-watchers, who imagine that behind the gray stone walls rage massive battles for power befitting the Kremlin or the Vatican. But not so, says a one-time insider named John Zachary DeLorean. Rather, the 14th floor of the General Motors

Building is populated by dullards and poltroons whose lives are propelled only by urges to shuffle trivia-laden volumes of paper and to preserve the orderly, moss-laden bureaucracy which brought them to power. According to DeLorean, GM's major-domos sometimes sleep during long briefing sessions, indelicately snoring at key moments while others yawn. They are secretive and paranoid about government intervention and maintain an elephant-like fear of the ravages of the consumerist mice. They like short haircuts, white shirts, and dull suits. They mumble about "team play" a great deal. To a man they seem to have a boredom threshold that would shame a musk ox.

DeLorean's opinions are recorded in a rather confusingly authored book titled *On a Clear Day You Can See General Motors*, by business journalist J. Patrick Wright. DeLorean declined to have the book printed under his by-line for fear that it might impede his efforts to manufacture an automobile under his own name. After some wrangling, Wright decided to go ahead with the project without DeLorean's imprimatur. To his credit, Wright mortgaged everything to publish the book himself and turned it into a solid best-seller.

For many years, John Z. DeLorean was the *Wunderkind* of GM, a man who appeared (thanks, in part, to his own carefully managed image-building) to be equal parts Leonardo da Vinci, Albert Schweitzer, Henry Ford, and Cary Grant, at least to the automoguls who bed down in the posh, but parochial, Detroit suburb of Bloomfield Hills. DeLorean was part of the winning team that boosted the Pontiac Division of GM from a manufacturer of fusty, maiden-aunt's vehicles to the racy glories of "Wide Tracks" and "Tigers." He then took over as general manager of the flagship division, Chevrolet, which was in a sales doldrum and entangled in serious organizational rats' nests. Within a few years he had the business booming again and seemed as surely destined for leadership in GM as Edward, Prince of Wales, was destined for the English throne.

Alas, both worthies were waylaid on their ways to glory. Childe Edward was downed by Cupid's arrow and the lusts of Mrs. Simpson. DeLorean, or so he claims, was cut off at the knees by a consortium of yahoo Rotarians who feared that his managerial brilliance, coupled with his glittering social conscience, might

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FORTUNE'S CHILD
Lewis Lapham / Doubleday / \$14.95

Mitchell S. Ross

The front of the jacket to this book refers to *Fortune's Child* as "a portrait of the United States as spendthrift heir." This describes the book's point of view pretty well, and it is not hard to see how Lewis Lapham arrived at it. He was grandly educated at Hotchkiss and Yale, even tasting the scholarly desserts served at Cambridge University in England. His family is apparently wealthy: Lapham's views on the oil market first took form at meetings of the

Mitchell S. Ross is the author of The Literary Politicians. His most recent book is An Invitation to Our Times, published by Doubleday.

clan. An arrested development led to newspaper work instead of employment by the CIA, favored by so many of his Yale contemporaries. It was a fateful choice. For two decades Lapham labored in comparative obscurity as a reporter for the *San Francisco Examiner*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, and *Harper's*.

Then, in the mid-1970s, he ascended to the editor's position at *Harper's*, and shortly thereafter it became disconcertingly clear that the modest reporter had all along been operating a one-man spy service. Around the same time Philip Agee started spilling the beans on his

fellow operatives, Lapham began to write *Harper's*' Easy Chair column with a similar—and, let us add, more sensible—purpose. He is now the nation's foremost policeman of the privileged. Whenever Lapham's by-line appears, his old schoolmates run for cover.

Class consciousness like Lapham's is an uncommon thing these days, and *Fortune's Child*, which for the most part is a collection of "Easy Chairs," is an odd specimen of it. On the one hand, Lapham is imprisoned by none of the traditional ideologies; on the other, he is without striking prejudices of his own. Prejudice is, after all, the chief tool of the personal essayist. It can come packaged in virtually any form. Lapham's predecessor in the Easy Chair, Bernard DeVoto, for example, made himself familiar through his indignant conservatism. Others begin with a confession of personal frailties, a recital of enthusiasms, or a grunt at specific objects of scorn. Lapham's essays, in contrast, have more of the odor of Sunday sermons about them. They are diffusely opinionated. They embody some of the same qualities I

have always disliked in Ralph Waldo Emerson.

There are times when I wonder about him. Is he leveling with us when he writes, "I left California because I didn't have the moral fortitude to contend with the polymorphousness of the place. . . . I needed the company of other men who had roused themselves from sleep and who had set forth on the adventure of civilization"? Was it really like that: young Lapham gazing sadly out over Nob Hill, with a cry of "Eastward, Ho!" rising out of the depths of his soul? And, if so, does this not qualify him as one of the "American bedouins" he characterizes in another essay as wandering "in search of the soul's oasis"? "The holy city of absolute truth shines in the eternal sunlight beyond the next range of abstractions. In New York or Los Angeles, as well as in Houston or Cheyenne, men exchange travelers' tales about their journeys into Freud or Zen. They confuse metaphysics with geography, and they speak of their newfound philosophies as if they were places on the map." Is there not a connection to be made here, one which would involve more personal writing but ultimately contribute to a deeper resonance?

In brief, Lapham seems rather unsure of his own sensibility. Some of his pronouncements are very odd, such as this one: "The greatness of man expresses itself in the force of mind, in Bach's music or Shakespeare's plays, in the art of da Vinci, the physics of Newton, or the theories of Marx." The theories of Marx? How did they get in there? Great because successful? Lapham formulates theories where idle observations will do. Because there are so many bad parents on the East Side of Manhattan, where he lives, it occurs to him that "American society bears a grudge against the future. . . . By denying the reality of its children, the society expresses its rage against change." This is bosh.

I am in danger of quibbling too much, however. Lapham is reliably learned and eloquent, and he strikes many a telling blow. He is also, it so happens, a fine reporter. There is an astringent excellence to his journal of a failed Broadway musical and to his account of a visit to an Indian ashram favored by the Beatles and Mia Farrow in the late sixties. There is sound reporting on the Army and the "energy debacle." And, even when he gets carried away with the themes and variations he plays on his typewriter, Lapham is bound to make several penetrating points.



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