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John McDonald. *A Ghost's Memoir, The Making of Alfred P. Sloan's "My Years with General Motors"*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2002. Xvii +202 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-13410-1.



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Alfred P. Sloan's *My Years with General Motors* is one of the classics of twentieth century business history, but as John McDonald emphasizes it almost never came to press. McDonald, an editor for *Fortune* magazine and author of books on business, game theory and fly-fishing, "ghostwrote" the Sloan memoir, and this posthumous work details the ten years it took for him to bring the project to fruition. While McDonald's recollections of working with Sloan are interesting, the real worth of this book lies in his telling of the "David vs. Goliath" struggles he faced in overcoming the objections General Motors had towards publication. Although not required reading, *A Ghost's Memoir* is an interesting glimpse into the travails of writing contemporary business history.

Unlike the extensive memoir it ultimately became, *My Years with General Motors* was originally intended to be an article written by Sloan for *Fortune* magazine reflecting his views about modern business. In 1949, Sloan expressed to McDonald, whom he had met in 1948, an interest in writing an article on the effectiveness of big business using General Motors as an example; McDonald was to provide editorial assistance. Four years passed, though, before Sloan had a draft ready for review. Unfortunately, the manuscript was both vague and unwieldy, and McDonald realized it would be impossible to condense it for the magazine. Instead, they decided that the

draft could be used as the basis for a more extensive account of Sloan's tenure at GM.

Between 1954 and 1958, McDonald, Sloan and his assistant Catherine Stevens worked together to create "the industrial history he [Sloan] and his company had made." (p. 13). Because this was to be a historically accurate account of GM, more than forty years of company documents would need to be examined, and to assist in this McDonald hired the young business historian, Alfred D. Chandler. Significantly, while GM was aware of the Sloan project, and several executives provided the authors with interviews and documents, no one at the automobile giant seemed particularly interested in it. By early 1959 the two-volume work was ready for publication.

On March 4, 1959 Sloan called McDonald to say that General Motors did not want the book published because its lawyers feared it would "destroy the company" (p. 1). Given GM's lack of interest in the project, the move to suppress the Sloan book shocked McDonald, who had taken an extended leave of absence from *Fortune* to write it and faced financial and professional setbacks if it did not get published. GM continued to suppress the book until 1962 when McDonald took the highly unusual action of suing the then largest company in America for its release. After two years of negotiations the company

dropped its opposition, and *My Years with General Motors* went to press.

According to McDonald, the main reason GM suppressed the Sloan memoir was because GM's lawyers were concerned that the book would assist the Justice Department in an investigation of the company for anti-trust violations. Their specific objection was the detailing of the 1921 Product Policy drafted by Sloan. Even though the policy specified, "a monopoly is not planned," the lawyers feared the government would still interpret the document as monopolistic since Sloan wanted GM to "cover the market for all grades of automobiles" (p. 48). This plan, which ultimately took the form of GM producing five basic car lines (Chevrolet, Pontiac, Oldsmobile, Buick and Cadillac), each of which was targeted to a different consumer segment, proved critical in helping GM overtake Ford and eventually dominate the industry. As it turned out, these fears proved to be exaggerated. Even though the Justice Department did charge other GM subsidiaries for anti-trust violations, at no time did it file or contemplate filing a suit against the company for monopoly of the automobile industry.

Interestingly, McDonald's book most likely would never been written if *My Years with General Motors* had not been re-released in 1990. Peter F. Drucker wrote a new introduction for this edition, and in it he stated that Sloan's book was written "primarily to rebut - or at least counterbalance - a book that Sloan thought to be pernicious: my [Drucker's] book on General Motors, *Concept of the Corporation*" published in 1946 (p. xiv). This misstatement, combined with other "ghastly factual mistakes" (p. xv) in the new introduction compelled McDonald to set the record straight. The resulting work is a detailed and personal account of one writer's legal struggles with a corporate giant.

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