

*J. M. Stedmond*

## THE BUSINESS EXECUTIVE IN FICTION

WHATEVER DOUBTS THEY MIGHT HAVE concerning the validity of the central character of John P. Marquand's *Sincerely, Willis Wayde* as a portrait of one of themselves, many business executives might be inclined to sympathize with Willis Wayde's feelings about novelists:

These people were constantly sneering at solid institutions, snapping at the very hand that fed them. When they wrote about business, they looked upon people who earned an honest dollar by selling products, running banks or production lines as crass materialists, devoid of ideals and social conscience. Businessmen in all these novels were ruthless and very dumb. Willis often wished that he might have a talk with some of these writers. He wished that he could show them that men who ran factories and sold the products and dickered with bankers, tax examiners, and labor-union organizers were not as dumb as a lot of novelists who always seemed to be at Palm Beach with some dumb blonde.

Even in this short passage, it is fairly evident that novelist Marquand has tongue in cheek as he writes about businessmen. Willis Wayde is hardly the ideal spokesman to present the business executive's point of view. After all, when a novelist has one of his characters criticize novelists, it is a reasonably foregone conclusion who is going to get the best of the deal.

Actually, businessmen have been fair game for novelists from the very beginning. As it happens, the modern novel and the modern businessman came into being at approximately the same time, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In a sense, they were products of the same forces. The two men generally considered to be the progenitors of the English novel, Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson, both started out as businessmen.

By and large, one can distinguish two main character types in older fictional accounts of the world of business: the Horatio Alger hero—the young man who makes good by his own efforts and achieves success and happiness; and the Scrooge-

like villain who has allowed all his finer human feelings to be warped by the ruthless struggle for material rewards. In serious novels—the ones that have lasted and are still read—it is, perhaps significantly, the dehumanizing influence of business that is most frequently portrayed.

The best-known American fictional treatments of the world of business during the earlier years of this century—such as Theodore Dreiser's *The Titan* and *The Financier*; or Frank Norris' *The Pit* and *The Octopus*; or Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*—are, as their names suggest, not very favourably disposed towards business. A little later on, Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* came to be looked upon as the prototype of the narrow, hardheaded, insensitive man of business, and F. Scott Fitzgerald provided, in *The Great Gatsby*, what seemed to many readers a damning critique of the Great American Dream of success in the Business World. By no stretch of the imagination could either of these novels be called sympathetic to the world of business.

On the other hand, it must be admitted that few of the novels mentioned reveal any very detailed knowledge of the way in which business actually works. The leading characters in these books are strongly influenced by their business activities, but it is their personal lives that are the main concern of the novelists. If one seeks more detailed and more fully documented fictional accounts of what actually was happening in the business world of the time, one must turn to some of the lesser novels which have long since sunk from sight. This raises some rather interesting points. Are good novelists by temperament hostile to businessmen? And, are good novels necessarily unreliable as documentary accounts of the social history of their time? In other words, should fiction be "true" in the sense of being historically accurate in detail?

These points are in fact inter-related. The artist, whether in words, in music, or in paint, is mainly distinguished from other mortals by a certain quality of imagination, by an ability to grasp the essence of things and convey it in terms of certain concrete symbols—in the case of the novelist, in terms of character and action. There is a definite gap between journalism and art. The first-rate reporter can give a factually accurate account of something that he has witnessed, correct to the smallest detail, but he may have no real insight into the significance of the scene or incident that he is describing. The literary artist may take the very same materials and by re-shaping them—perhaps even seeming to distort them in the process—can subtly emphasize certain aspects at the expense of others, and thus reveal the inner meaning, the significant shape, which heretofore had been hidden by the mass of undifferentiated detail.

Thus, while from one point of view it might seem that most prominent novel-

ists of the past have been biased against businessmen, by the same criterion one might say that Shakespeare was prejudiced against kings, considering his portrayal of King Lear or Macbeth or Hamlet's uncle.

Our attitudes to business, like our attitudes to any aspect of our society, are complex and ambivalent. And it is from this very ambivalence—inherent in human nature—that springs all the tensions and conflicts that provide the plot material for the novelist. For at the heart of every novel is some sort of conflict—this is what holds our interest. And it is in his portrayal of the individuals involved in this conflict, and in his method of bringing the conflict to some sort of a resolution, that the novelist reveals his stature. If his characters are stock figures, and his solution of their problems is superficial and contrived, his book may be a best-seller, but it will soon sink into the limbo reserved for mediocrity.

In the past decade, there has been a spate of business novels, and they have been phenomenally successful—best-sellers in both book and movie form. Most of these novels reflect changes that have been taking place during the past quarter-century or so in the business world: the growing dominance of the large corporation with the related rise to power of a sort of managerial élite as distinct from the tycoon of the days of Rockefeller, Morgan, and Henry Ford. What sort of impression of the modern business world does one get from a reading of these novels?

They seem to begin (as Albert Van Nostrand contends in his recent book, *The Denatured Novel*) with John P. Marquand's *Point of No Return*, which was published in 1949. It sold well, was a Book of the Month Club selection, and was eventually dramatized on Broadway. The story has to do with the contest between Charles Gray and Roger Blakesley for the vice-presidency (and thus eventually the presidency) of the Stuyvesant Bank—at least, the hero Charles Gray thinks there is a contest involved, and he and his family do their best to make the right sort of impression on the bank's president. At the climax of the story, just when Gray has decided that he has lost the battle, and just when he is suddenly filled with relief that he is at last off the treadmill and that there is no more need to apple-polish—that he is for the first time in a long time free—just then, he learns that he not only has in fact been made vice-president, but that there had been no contest. There had been no doubt in the president's mind that he was the man for the job; Blakesley had never been seriously considered. Gray is not only back on the treadmill, he had never been off it. Success—which he had just realized he did not really want—is inevitably thrust upon him. He is part of the system and there is nothing he can do about it.

The deterministic philosophy underlying this novel is thrown into sharp relief

if one compares it (as Van Nostrand does) with the business novels of a previous era. In most of these, attention is focused on a protagonist who struggles with his conscience before coming to a decision. But eventually he *decides*—the decision is not thrust upon him. He is a free agent, not controlled by a system. Charles Gray, in Marquand's novel, is not allowed the privilege of choosing for himself. In this sense, he is an "organization man."

But Charles Gray is not only a passive hero, he is a hero who does not really want material success. In contrast, a good many other American business novels seem to be mainly concerned with justifying success. Since publishing books is itself a business, it is not surprising that the popularity of Marquand's *Point of No Return* should have established something of a trend. And since Marquand, a non-businessman, had managed to write a successful novel about business, it presumably seemed logical that an actual businessman might write a more authentic—and thus potentially more profitable—novel on this same theme. Most consistently successful of these ex-business executive authors has been Cameron Hawley—first with *Executive Suite*, and later with *Cash McCall* and *The Lincoln Lords*. Hawley knows business first-hand, but he is a rather mediocre novelist. He is of course superficially competent. *Executive Suite* in particular flows along quite smoothly. But he cannot create character: even his central figures never come to life, and the secondary characters, particularly the women, are little better than shadows.

But what is even more relevant to the present discussion is that his plots are extremely contrived—full of absurd coincidences which have the effect of producing happy endings of the most spurious kind. His novels deal with potentially important themes, but he consistently avoids coming to grips with them, or, to put it another way, he does not allow his characters to grapple in any real sense with these problems.

*Executive Suite*, like *Point of No Return*, is about a contest for advancement in a company. Here the struggle is between rival claimants for the pinnacle of power itself, the presidency left vacant by the death of Avery Bullard. Bullard had been an entrepreneur of the old school—a hard driving, single-minded, almost mystical devotee of the doctrine of success unlimited. His prototype can be found in most of the other business novels. For example, the hero's description of his boss in Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* could be applied to almost any of the bosses in the others:

Why do you think Hopkins is great? Mainly, it's because he never thinks about anything but his work, day and night, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. All geniuses are like that—there's no mystery about it. The great painters,

the great composers, the great scientists, and the great businessmen—they all have the same capacity for total absorption in their work.

Inevitably, under these circumstances, personal life suffers. The boss, Hopkins, is however given a chance to speak out on his own behalf:

Somebody has to do the big jobs! . . . This world was built by men like me! To really do a job, you have to live it, body and soul! You people who just give half your mind to your work are riding on our backs!

Nevertheless, it is made fairly clear in Wilson's novel that most people are quite happy to hand over a life of this kind, despite its high financial rewards, to the "guys like Hopkins" who do not, in the words of the novel,

care any more about money than a good violinist does . . . . You could pay him in medals or in beans, you could put him in the middle of the Sahara Desert, and he'd still find some way to go on working day and night. . . .

The moral of a good many of the popular business novels seems to be that such total absorption in work is no longer either necessary or desirable. What is the point of making more money when it just goes to the government anyway? The family unit is the important thing, not the business. Actually, it is often suggested in these novels that the business organization is taking on more and more of the characteristics of the family, with the big boss as a sort of father figure on whom everyone else depends, but who, in his turn, depends on everyone else. Cameron Hawley's *Lincoln Lord* is drawn along these lines.

In his earlier *Executive Suite*, though, Hawley is a little more inclined to see the business world as a jungle in which only the fittest survive. Theoretically, the struggle for power that he portrays is between the representative of the profit motive pure and simple, Loren Shaw, and the young idealist, Don Walling, who is concerned with keeping up the quality of the goods the company manufactures. In fact, however, if one probes the rhetoric with which Walling convinces the board of directors that he is the best candidate for the president's chair, one finds that he is just as materialistic as his opponent Shaw, only rather more hypocritical. He denounces his predecessor, Avery Bullard, for having "been so busy building a great production machine that he . . . lost sight of why he was building it." But he himself promises not only newer and better furniture, but also an even bigger company, and of course bigger profits. Once elected, he immediately appoints the materialist Shaw as his executive vice-president. Naturally one does not object to the idea of a firm trying to make a profit—but one does object to the hypocritical façade which attempts to make the Tredway Furniture Corporation sound like a movement for moral rearmament.

*Executive Suite* achieved great success both as a novel and as a moving picture (making far more money for its author than *Point of No Return* made for Marquand), and its success was certainly in part due to the fact that it had a good suspenseful plot and gave what was an apparently realistic portrait of the world of big business. But perhaps an even stronger factor was its gratifying way of glorifying big business—its implied “message” that the crude money-grubber like Loren Shaw would inevitably be defeated by the young idealist Walling with his apparently high-minded espousal of the doctrines of quality and service.

This fundamental dishonesty, this failure to come to grips with the issues, also marks (and mars) Cameron Hawley’s other presentations of the world of big business. Considered as literature, they are about on the level of the “soap serial”. *Cash McCall* and *The Lincoln Lords* ostensibly deal with the problem of loyalty to the company in a world in which individual companies are constantly being merged into larger and larger groupings, and in which top executives are constantly shifting from company to company.

Cash McCall is himself a manipulator of companies, but, as he explains, “I don’t make the rules . . . I only play the game.” He is entirely too good to be true—he is the All-American-Boy grown up—as Hawley describes him, “more like a professional athlete than a businessman.” And of course he turns out to have only the highest possible motives. He is scrupulously honest. He amalgamates companies only to save them from going bankrupt. He is once more the great benevolent father figure, sadly misjudged by others, but in fact doing nothing but good with the immense profits he makes from his masterly financial manoeuvres.

Lincoln Lord, too, is a much misunderstood man; even his wife does not understand him. He is a highly mobile company president, never staying in one organization for very long. He always has good reasons for moving on, but there is the dark suspicion that possibly he just cannot face up to his responsibilities. Hawley presumably means him to represent the ideal administrator, in the modern mould.

Here is how Anderson Phelps, the old hard-headed type of businessman in this particular novel, describes this new phenomenon:

. . . company presidents were no longer judged on their ability to strike fire in the hearts of their men as they led them into battle but rather on their talent for tranquilizing everyone into a state of nonresistant conformity to some scientifically determined pattern of human behavior. And it worked. He couldn’t argue about that. He even thought he knew why—the welfare state, taxes, big government, big corporations, big

unions, the enervating fat of too much prosperity—but what he could not comprehend was what motivated these new leaders. What did they want?

Well, what Lincoln Lord apparently wants is the sweet smell of success. He seems to crave rather desperately for the admiration of the world. He is never so happy as when he is holding an audience spellbound with a speech written for him by one of his "idea-men". Throughout Cameron Hawley's novels these so-called "idea-men" are castigated if they do not fit smoothly into the organization—do not recognize their own limitations. They are portrayed as "natural boss-haters": "They could never understand that their ideas, precious as they were to them, weren't worth a tinker's dam until a stronger man picked them up and did something with them."

The new top executive as Cameron Hawley presents him, then, is a sort of legendary figure, a man of epic proportions—a Cash McCall, a Lincoln Lord. The very names have obvious overtones. But when one scrapes this glamorous surface one finds a rather tawdry figure underneath. Lincoln Lord's finest hour turns out to be the occasion on which he decides, to the accompaniment of a good deal of fanfare, that it is better to risk bankrupting his business than to endanger the lives of thousands of babies who, if their parents are not warned in time, may be fed a possibly lethal baby food manufactured by Lord's company. As in all of Cameron Hawley's novels, a good deal of specious morality is involved here.

Nevertheless the attempt is made in most of these business novels to give the impression that the hero is capable of taking a stand against the "system"—to show that he is not a mere pawn caught in the web of the organization. But in fact, the "decisions" made by these executive heroes turn out to be rather meaningless ones. Take Cleves Barwick in Howard Swiggett's *The Power and the Prize*, for example. He is the cultured sophisticated executive, equally at home in London and New York. But he jeopardizes his whole future by insisting on marrying a refugee from Central Europe who may possibly have associated with Communists in the past. He accepts her declaration of political purity and refuses to investigate further, and when given an opportunity by the board of directors to save the situation by saying, falsely, that he has tangible proof of her innocence, he refuses to do so. However, it turns out that the board had known all the time that she was trustworthy, and had been merely testing Barwick. So RIGHT triumphs—the nasty old tycoon type who had made such an issue of Barwick's marriage to an unconventional woman is pushed out as chairman of the board and succeeded by Barwick, the international business deal which Barwick was negotiating is successfully completed, and all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds.

Obviously, again, a good many questions have been begged here. Barwick is just as much a slave of his organization as is, say, Charles Gray in *Point of No Return*, but here the system turns out to be benevolent and Barwick has no qualms about accepting his tailor-made promotion. There is no suggestion that his character may have been subtly undermined by the compromises he has had to make in order to get ahead in the business world. His "stand" against the system is not really any more of a stand than that taken by Sloan Wilson's *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Wilson's hero, at the moment of truth, decides to be frank and tell the big boss that he actually does not want to follow in his footsteps—that there are things in life more important than business. But his frankness costs him nothing. The boss immediately finds a cushy position for him where he will not have to overwork. And in any event his gesture is not particularly brave since he has his wealthy grandmother's legacy to fall back on—a valuable piece of property which will net him several hundred thousand dollars when it has been subdivided. Again, this is phony defiance of the system.

Wilson has his hero make pseudo-profound comments:

. . . it seemed as though all I could see was a lot of bright young men in gray flannel suits rushing around New York in a frantic parade to nowhere. They seemed to be pursuing neither ideals nor happiness—they were pursuing a routine. For a long while I thought I was on the side lines watching that parade, and it was quite a shock to glance down and see that I too was wearing a gray flannel suit . . . .

Well, this is a pretty special suit that he is wearing, with several hundred thousand dollars tucked away in the back pocket! Speaking through one of his characters, Wilson even has the effrontery to make him say:

If you want to know what the public wants, I'll tell you: great art on the extremely rare occasions when it's available, but no phony art—they'd rather have good honest blood and thunder. The public doesn't like fakers, and neither do I . . . .

Apparently, though, the public eats up this sort of stuff—in its first year Wilson's novel went through eight printings and sold some 125,000 copies! And yet it is of course "phony" in the extreme.

Book publishing is itself a business. Books are the commodity it sells. And it is a fact that books of high quality are not big money-makers. Some of them may sell fairly well, but they do not achieve the fantastic sales of works with "mass appeal." Best-selling books, like best-selling cars, have built-in obsolescence. They are creatures of the moment. Eventually they end up on the scrap heap. Part of their appeal is that one does not have to take them seriously—even though the publisher often asserts on the dust jacket that they are designed to make you think.



Nevertheless they do frequently deal with the same problems as are treated in more substantial novels. And one can learn from them quite a lot about the problems bothering society at a particular time.

Thus a reading of business novels of the past decade—both good and bad—would reveal a concern with the problem of loyalty. Wherein does loyalty to the organization consist when the organization itself is constantly being swallowed up by a still larger organization? Where does loyalty to company cease and loyalty to society as a whole begin? What if there is a conflict between the two? And what of conflicts between loyalty to the company and loyalty to one's family?

Again, how high a price should one be willing to pay for success? And how does one justify paying that price? What does success in business really mean? Is it all a matter of profits? Or is there some less tangible reward involved? Is a man ennobled or degraded by the kind of role he has to play in order to get on in the world of business? Is there any truth in the criticism implied in the following description of a business executive?

His ease was the best thing about him. You could not tell . . . how much of his cordiality was real. There was no way of gauging the depth of his sincerity. It might very well have been true that he did have a soft spot in his heart, and that he had honestly meant what he had said about loyalty, and about being deeply sorry. On the other hand he might have had no heart at all. Authority and success had made him strangely impervious, since success had smoothed down all his rough edges, turning him into a type interchangeable with any photograph on the financial page of the *New York Times*.

That description is from Marquand's *Sincerely*, Willis Wayde, a novel which deals satirically with the modern American businessman. Marquand's picture is not a "positive" one. On the other hand, it is provocative—in the sense that it forces us to attempt to bring into sharper focus some of our basic ideas and attitudes. It seems to me that we could stand a good deal more satire than our writers are giving us at the moment.

Perhaps, as has been contended, the modern tendency to see man as victim, or man as accidental hero (rather than man as fool or man as sinner), makes satire impossible today beyond a very limited range. Just beneath the pseudo-realistic surface of a good many modern business novels lurks the idea that the individual is powerless in the grip of society. Protest is not only futile—it is in fact disloyal. What are required are "positive" attitudes—meaning a refusal to criticize *any* aspect of present-day North American life. Great literature has never been "positive" in this bland way.

The problems with which business novels deal are, when one takes a look at

them, merely versions of problems bothering our society as a whole. Where does loyalty to country end and loyalty to the world community begin? How can one avoid feeling guilty at one's affluence in a world where poverty is rife? To what extent can the individual influence the mighty forces that seem to have the whole of human society in their grip?

It would be nice to be able to answer all of these questions in a "positive" way. But it would be by no means as easy to do so as it is made to seem in some of the lesser business novels of our time.

## THE SURGEON'S HANDS

*G. K. Fischer*

Let there be no fanfares; at cordage strung taut  
 —When these hands are poised above their work—  
 Music is silent  
 And the song is shamed into oblivion;  
 When they must act in orbit of intensities,  
 Coned heat, sashed spelt command,  
 There remain only they and they strongly that are given  
 When doors are barred on doors in corridors  
 And the rhythm of their arteries alone  
 Reaches out to the target  
 Whom chance has brought today.

All throng melting in fumes and somnolence;  
 Amidst fortunes, researches, and decisions  
 The craving for primary necessities lies bare.  
 Drifting and misty the ocular spectrum and the Now converge  
 And thousand desires wilt into the flame of greatest want.  
 Then remain only they and they only that are given—  
 Against swelling tide breakers  
 When anchors rend the floor of the sea  
 Deeply to keep who rose from it  
 Safe in the breath of harmonies resounding—  
 Edges of the Will,  
 Working true prayer from knowledge,  
 From the calm of skill,  
 And from courage pregnant with future sunlight  
 And promise of hours yet to come.