Image Worlds: Corporate Identities at General Electric.
By David E. Nye.


Professor Nye's work is a welcome relief from the numbing genre of corporate history that chronicles events and persons. Instead, this is a topical history of General Electric that treats the period from 1890 to 1930. In a non-judgmental fashion, the author explores the ways in which the company sought to present itself to a variety of related but distinct constituencies: engineers, workers, managers, and consumers. The author claims that these categories are not his creation, but were discernible in G.E.'s collection of more than one million photographs. These photographs were utilized in the company's employee and public relations efforts and differ from one another in both subject matter and the photographic techniques employed. The photographs themselves were used in the various company publications that were, in turn, aimed at specific groups.

These publications sought to persuade rather than inform. For the plant workers, General Electric provided the Works News, which according to Nye, "... was corporate ideology, a managerial dream about life in the factory" (p. 88). The Works News fought perceived socialist influences, urged Americanization of the foreign-born, promoted the company union, and, in general, sought to foster a team spirit. Although the Works News differed from other company publications — G.E. published the General Electric Review for engineers and the Monogram for managers — its general objectives were the same, to increase company profits. All of these publications, as well as corporate advertising, represented an investment on which G.E. expected a return.

While this book gives a fairly good treatment of employee relations, it requires some strengthening in its description of General Electric's attempt to reach the consumer. Certainly one could expect at least some discussion of the development and usage of the G.E. trademark and the various slogans directed at the general public. (In the 1920s, for instance, the slogan used was "G.E., the initials of a friend.") He does, however, do this for advertising of Mazda lamps, but light bulbs are the only publicly-consumed product line discussed.

Frequently the author states the obvious. We learn that G.E. advertising in farm journals always dealt with rural subjects and that nineteenth-century "Feminists, radicals, blacks, Indians, and the new
Southern European immigrants did not have a voice in . . . periodicals,” such as Atlantic Monthly, Harper’s Magazine, and so forth (pp. 117-18). The book also suffers from a number of factual errors. The author claims that G.E. “pioneered” radio broadcasting (p. 26) while making no mention of its Pittsburgh-based rival, Westinghouse Electric, or of its first station, KDKA.

Still, the book is not without value. It contributes significantly to our understanding of the efforts of one company to project a variety of different, sometimes contradictory, impressions of itself. This was done in an age when such efforts were largely novel and sometimes ineffectual. That such efforts became standard practice in American industry is a measure of their early successes.

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Early in her work, Ms. Philip dramatically states “. . . Fulton excited controversy. The perplexing contradictions of his character were, however, a source as well as a manifestation of his creative genius” (p. 2). This is the main thread of this excellent volume — the innumerable controversies into which Fulton thrust himself or in which he found himself involved and the almost unending contradictions that marked this “extraordinarily variegated life.”

Born in Lancaster County in 1765, Fulton nevertheless spent almost one-half of his life abroad. Apprenticed as a silversmith, he was more interested in miniature painting and hairworking. He was not personally threatened by the Revolution but aware of the war’s impact. He sought ways to reduce the effects of all war, and, therefore, he was more devoted to his submarine than to his steamboat. He knew the advantages that could come by having friends in high places, yet he disagreed, argued, and often “fell out” with these powerful colleagues. He married into the New York Livingston family and fathered four children, yet he was more comfortable with Joel and Ruth Barlow