



Excellence

by Patrick Wright

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Bryan Carsberg of Oftel smiles up in soft brown light as he dangles in the mirror on a green office wall. Michael Meyer of Emess Lighting is dissected by the blinds that cut across him and then reassembled from outside - his shirtsleeved figure looming like a target in the formulaic eye of some Hollywood assassin. As for London and Scottish Marine Oil's Chris Greentree, all that remains of him is a severed head shining above the water as the sun goes down over drilling rigs beached by the receding North Sea tide.

The magazine *Management Today* has developed a distinctive style of portrait photography in recent years. Here is a constant stream of successful business figures, but here also is a problematic redundancy of appearance: how can one promote the entrepreneurial spirit as a revivifying force by running endless mugshots of the man in a grey flannel suit? So the photographers go to work, decentering the figure, absorbing it into its own reflection, dismembering and scattering it about the place. Unlikely angles proliferate as the background is picked over for relieving features which can be drawn into the newly vacant centre of the image: anything from the fluted pillars and wrought-iron gates of some nearby classical architecture to the futuristic technology of the working environment.

Keen to escape the predictable routines of business appearance, these photographs certainly don't withdraw into a romantic focus on personal character. It is no part of their intention to seek out the distinguishing signs of wisdom, skill or experience in the unique lines of any individual's face. Altogether lighter in approach, they treat their subjects as provisional appearances which can be animated and defined from outside -reassembled as part of the situation in which their significance is to be found. This is a portraiture of prospect and position rather than of indwelling personality, and it accepts the loss of traditional subjectivity without the slightest trace of melancholy.

The business imagination has been coming into its own in other ways as well. Management Studies may still be considered disreputable in some quarters of the university, but it is no longer that makeshift department of Nissen huts kept off the well-tended preserves of the traditional academic disciplines. The liberal academy's green-belt areas are now well on the way to being broken up and redeveloped. The architecture of the 'self-financing' management institute is encroaching steadily, and even the stretches of parkland that remain seem to be infested with moles. The business schools have been covering the ground with Malcolm Bradbury, Martin Wiener and Correlli Barnett. Their audit of the nation is complete. Confirming old suspicions about the degeneracy of the sociology department, it has also brought out a newer truth about English culture and its responsibility for the decline of the industrial spirit. Doubtless the westward flight of professors will continue as the Social Sciences and Humanities are incorporated into the new curriculum: a series of two-day courses in market research and letter-writing skills.

If management has been conquering the university in recent years, it has also found its own uses for that old totem of liberal culture known as the book. Books on management aren't just pouring out: they are also becoming more confident. Gone are the studious attempts to constitute management as a properly boring academic subject, or to justify recommendations and prescriptions in terms borrowed from more respectable disciplines. The leading 'management thinkers' are no longer trying to bring the movement of enterprise under a rational description which might identify professional management with stable administrative functions of planning, resource allocation and control. Far from trying to take the guesswork out of the corporate game, the tendency now is to celebrate it. Unlike the welfare capitalists who tried to gentrify the jungle, the more recent books urge us to face it as it is.



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The leading management books of the Eighties have been American, and 'excellence' is their creed. Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman Junior's *In Search of Excellence* appeared in 1982 and it quickly established itself as the best-selling management book ever. Here was an unambiguous riposte to the Japanese economic miracle, that Pearl Harbour of the Carter era. Excellence didn't need to be imported from across the Pacific. Drawing on their experience as consultants with McKinsey and Company, Peters and Waterman Junior insisted that it was a native quality of American enterprise.

Peters and Waterman Junior certainly display the trappings of their own worldly success, but as authors they have old-fashioned sweat on their temples. Delivered in a style that combines hucksterism with the forceful sincerity of the big tent, their book puts across a Message of the large evangelical kind. Beneath the spirit-crushing rules of the administered corporation, there are people trying to fight their way through. Indeed, if American corporations fail, this is probably because they have smothered the creativity of their own people.

This is not another semi-therapeutic attempt to manage the unconscious impulses of Organisation Man, that time-serving drone who - discovered by William Whyte in the Fifties - came fully fitted with the miserable wife, brattish children and off-the-peg infidelities of a Joseph Heller novel that was yet to be written. The creed of excellence has a sun-bleached Californian feel, but it is also tuned into the spiritual tradition of 'Let my people go.' Excellence replaces the measured outputs of the coerced and managed workforce with the unpredictable creativity of small risk-taking teams to which 'rulism' and corporate planning mean only death. The advocate of Excellence sighs with relief as the regulated work-place - factory, cotton-field or centralised office - is consigned to the scrapheap of history. In place of this brutal and dehumanised scenario comes a cult of diversification, limited decentralisation and self-management. The drone used to be managed into reluctant productivity with the sticks and carrots of behaviourism. Excellence turns away from this and starts with the reborn figure of the 'tuned-on' American worker - fired by the 'high' of his situation as he rides Toffler's third wave towards the post-industrial shore.

The excellent company knows that the pace of 'change' - one of management thinking's catch-all reifications - is escalating, and also that constant innovation is the prerequisite of success. Knowing that the people most likely to break new ground are the ones who would be coded 'weird' and 'delinquent' under the rational model, it gives oddballs their head and accepts false starts as essential to development. The excellent company looks after its potential 'champions', but it has no more time for the imported welfare bureaucracy of the Personnel Department (which turned the American citizen into Organisation Man in the first place) than it does for the laborious machinery of trade-unionism.

If excellence is all about modernisation it is also about getting back to the real essence of the capitalist process. With the defeat of welfarist ideologies the distance between success and failure has been restored: once more, there is a wide open range for the cowboys, campfires and makeshift settlements of the entrepreneurial revival. Thanks to new technology, the spirit of enterprise is also being freed from the worst imbecilities of the factory system. Excellence is a New Age utopia which offers its own recovery of history. When the 21st century breaks there may still be cowboys everywhere, but we will also be seeing the market restored to the purity of Adam Smith's description, excavated and cleansed of encrustation after a hundred and fifty years in the industrial bureaucratic swamp.

In Search of Excellence was an immediate million-seller, and its success unleashed a flurry of like-minded books. Tom Peters teamed up with Nancy Austin to restate the main arguments in *A Passion For Excellence* - a second-try book which set out to be a little more practical in its recommendations and which also tried to counter the macho-zen bias of the first book by speaking to the burgeoning field of women's development in management. Claiming real 'hands-on' experience, Craig Hickman and Michael Silva published *Creating excellence*, a book which was pleased to go beyond business school proscriptions



and to concentrate on the pragmatics of vision and culture – vital resources which need deliberate management within organisations.

Gifford Pinchot III's *Intrapreneuring* extended the case for flexible temporary structures and competitive entrepreneurialism *within* consolidated organisations. By allowing employees to form teams and make competitive bids internally, large companies would harness creativity, reward internal initiative and reap the full benefit of their human resources. Like all the best yields of the new management thinking, this is a development from which no one stands to lose - what Pinchot III calls a Win/Win situation.

Other books have heralded particular companies as exemplars of excellence. In *The IBMWay* Buck Rodgers argues that IBM is at the top because it sticks doggedly to its core values, fostering initiative and autonomy within the clear parameters of its organisational culture. IBM held onto its founding principles even in the Sixties, when, as Rodgers recalls, many companies became as 'undisciplined' as college campuses. As an excellent organisation, IBM understands marketing as 'the process used by an organisation to relate creatively and productively to the environment in which it sells its products and services'. The external 'forces of change' to which the well-marketed organisation responds will include the activities of competitors and preferences of consumers, but they will also extend to social developments like the civil rights movement, the arrival of women in the work-force, and legal challenges like the anti-trust suit brought against IBM in 1968 and not thrown out until 1981. The excellent organisation fights external regulation, but its internal practice also proves it unnecessary. As a former vice-President of marketing, Rodgers would have readers see his company more as a common-wealth than a multinational corporation: 'there are no titles on any doors or desks, no bath-rooms designed for "executive use only", no reserved parking spaces, no executive dining-room. All in all it's a very democratic environment where everyone is treated with the same respect. Even IBM's equal opportunity policy and affirmative action programs go far beyond government guidelines. In fact, the company's minority population equals or exceeds the minority mix of the US population.'

Then last year McKinsey and Company struck again. This time the book was called *Innovation* and written by a director named Richard Foster. With 'change' all around them, successful companies need to know more about innovation and the problem of limits. Here, then, is the story of the S-curve, the theory of the Attacker's Advantage, and a necessary correction of Peters and Waterman Junior's insistence that excellent companies 'stick to the knitting' (resisting diversification of the sort that accountants might like and staying with what they do best). Return on development is high in the early stages of a successful innovation, but as every such initiative gets closer to its limit, development becomes more arduous, less fruitful and desperately expensive. Foster quotes the case of a vast seven-masted cargo ship called the *Thomas Lawson*, which sank off the Scilly Isles in 1907. Built by the Fall River Ship and Engine Building Company in a final and desperate attempt to resist the rise of the steamship, the *Thomas Lawson* was fast and had huge storage capacity. It was also fatally unwieldy. Unless they take steps to understand and manage the S-curve, successful enterprises will inevitably become susceptible to attack -knitting themselves into oblivion as their market is carved up by small competitors rising up the early slope of *their* S-curves. How are positions to be held, given the fatal logic of the S-curve? Consistent with other advocates of excellence, Poster suggests that the 'attacker's advantage' should be brought into large enterprises. Brand management will ensure that competition is fostered between the different products of a single company, while continuous research into limits and alternatives is also essential.

These books are entirely immodest about their own contribution to knowledge. Each asserts itself as a pathbreaker, and some even quote Thomas Kuhn to show how revolutionary they really are. *In Search of Excellence* heralds itself as nothing less than a paradigm shift, while *Innovation* claims to be another. In this self-conscious parody of scientific progress every succeeding management thinker who gets a book out becomes a Galileo or Einstein. While its claims to stand as a new paradigm are certainly open to question, there can be little doubt that 'excellence' is hell-bent on the destruction of an older, more familiar one. As Tom Peters and Nancy Austin write in *A Passion for Excellence* 'if we were allowed to be business czar's our first act would be to remove the word 'commodity' from the language of commerce. We despise it more than any other word in the business vocabulary'. This comment is made against the



lamentable tendency of banks to calculate the moving and irreducible spirit of enterprise only in the general economic terms of its existence.

With the banks being treated as if they were Marxists, it is not surprising that the new management thinking should also use an ingenious disappearing trick to deal with the claims of the Keynesian state and its attempted planning of economic activity. This scenario - built on an idea of social totality which confronts private economic activity with its broader social responsibilities - is simply vaporised. History vanishes, with its implied effects and causes, as the more mystical notion of 'Change' steps in to replace it.

The new entrepreneur is a survivalist surrounded by 'change' - an external force which comes at him with the irresistible power of the Megatrend. Innocent of history but bravely resistant to Future Shock, he proves to be a magnificent surfer as he rides the waves of New Age time. The third wave (Kondratiev rather than Toffler) is already receding. The fourth one is based on electronics and cresting at this very moment. The fifth, gathering on the horizon, has already found its shape around new developments in biotechnology and computer science.

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Excellence may involve the technological reinstatement of a purified capitalism, but it also has the cultural aim of reviving capitalism as a dynamic imaginative force. This explains how the new management thinking can flaunt itself as 'knowledge' while also remaining immune to the falsification of its grandiose claims. While it professes to engineer one paradigm shift after another, it does so for the benefit of the lay imagination to which its appeal is addressed.

Management thinking is superior to merely rational science in that it brings the lifeworld along with it. It entails no break with everyday experience; there is no question of having to 'save the appearances' after meaning and scientific truth have been taken off into a realm of their own. Indeed, these paradigm shifts and sudden outbreaks of new knowledge are precisely designed to ground the utopia of excellence in the frustrated aspirations of people who are all too familiar with the conventional work process. It is here that the advocates of excellence base their call for a decisive break with the grey documentation of Organisation Man and the dull realities of 'the rational model'. The characteristically excellent entrepreneurial advance works the same handy connection between everyday perception and technical innovation. Brushing burrs from his trousers and dog one day, George Mestral was intrigued by their mechanism. Later he invented Velcro, the non-zip fastener. Excellence works in the everyday world, diversifying consumer life-styles as it goes.

It is in this appeal to the lay imagination that management thinking has found the formal potentialities of the book most useful, and here again there is a sense of conquest about recent developments. The traditional academic disciplines may still publish in their declining fashion, but what pathetic books they usually produce: quibbling and obscure, scared of the bold conception, racked with deconstructive fever and sceptical even of their own most modest truth claims. With the traditional assets of the book being sold short by the occultists and clerks, there is clearly room for a takeover bid. In the new management books at least, there can still be an Author with significant experience to tell and a mind made up. There will be a confident world view, practical Guidance and the unambiguous Word of Truth writ clear. There will be Morality, Adventure, Speculation, Judgment, Outcome and Reward.

Stories of personal and organisational triumph abound, but narrative is put to other uses too. Kenneth Blanchard's best-selling 'One Minute Manager' series combines the barely worded zen fable with the idiom of the children's story. Other books use narrative to bring large-scale history back into the depleted scene. Robert Lacey's *Ford* traces the trials of enterprise, dynasty and corporate bureaucracy through the American 20th century. Peter Newman's *Company of Adventurers*, a history of the early Hudson's Bay Company, traces the spirit of enterprise back to the origin of the Canadian nation itself.

Historical narrative restores adventure to the routinised world of the modern corporation. As Newman reveals, the problems of 'excellence' have been there from the start. The conflict between stifling administrative control and the spirit of innovation was fought out in grand terms - a struggle between ignorant controllers in imperial London and the emergent Canadian nation.

Prominent among management thinking's textual ploys is the maxim. This may be presented as an axiom with a proper basis in research, but it is also full of a shrewder kind of sense. Tailor-made for the flipchart and overhead projector, management maxims are teachable and memorable. The eight basics of 'excellence' ('Hands-on, value driven', 'Sticks to the knitting' etc) are all very well, but these advocates of 'Management by Walking Around' (MBWA) are topped by Norman Augustine, a former President of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, who has come up with 52, one for each week of the year. Augustine's Laws uses its axioms to mock bureaucratic routine, state regulation of economic activity, administratively defined corporate policy and spurious expertise. Law Number XXXI: 'The optimum committee has no members.' Law Number MLVII: 'Two thirds of the Earth's surface is covered with water. The other third is covered with auditors from headquarters.' Here is the free enterprise system using its own 'pratfalls and foibles' to show the superiority of commonsense acuity and ambition. The new entrepreneur knows that many traps are set for the man of action. The maxim is the home truth with which he cuts through all this mystification and recalls his real priorities.

If the maxim forms one of management thinking's most characteristic textual strategies, the quotation is another. The pages of these books tend to be scattered with bright phrases gathered from the high plains of cultural tradition. Quotation of this sort is not just a sign of deference to superior culture: indeed, it can be more like a claim to succession. Management thinking styles itself the proper outcome and true inheritor of past civilisation. Wisdom is brought down to the one-liner, the well-turned phrase which is full of simplifying insight and offers what management thinkers like to call a 'blinding glimpse of the obvious'. The smart man of success may still be despised as a barbarian in some quarters, but in his own camp he is placed on a level with the great philosophers and artists of old. His anecdotes are woven together with the brighter sayings of Shakespeare, Lao Tsu and Goethe.

While the cramped old world of social responsibilities and historical cause and effect is replaced by the play of 'change' and the Megatrend at one end of Excellence's conceptual field, a narrativised and bizarrely innocent rendering of the human individual stands at the other. Known variously as 'the winner', 'risk-taker' or 'champion', this numinous figure has recently been designated 'the peak performer' in a detailed study by Charles Garfield, a former world-class weight-lifter who went on to receive a doctorate in clinical psychology.

Leaving the rats to his behaviourist colleagues, Dr Garfield went out to take a close look at people who have cultivated 'what the German writer Goethe called "the genius, power and magic" in ourselves.' These are the 'everyday heroes', the people who 'translate missions into results' and who form 'the basic unit of excellence in every organisation'. Peak performers are realists, but they are fired by the unwavering belief that 'in the final analysis, I will make it'.

Where traditional management thinking tries to help corporations get better productivity out of Organisation Man by 'tacking on skills to the same old person', the peak performer is interested in complete personal transformation. For him, there is no question of merely going through the motions or of surrendering personal identity for a corporate one. The peak performer glows with his or her achievement. Fully engaged and finding realisation through action, peak performers are the stars of the routinised world which they re-enchant. Like the exceptional cancer patients who survive against all the odds (and Garfield has written a book about these peak-performing individuals too), they are people whose achievements prove that 'the primary locus of control for a peak performance is not external but internal.' Peak performance can't be reduced to its social circumstance: it's about liberating resources that are 'locked up within'.

The external world - of dubious ontological status, as we know - becomes a fortuitous trigger mechanism. Garfield's peak performers tell of being 'jump started' by watching people they admire.



Others have been to a place where Wordsworth is sung to a Country and Western tune, and speak of 'sweet spots in time' that have offered them 'a glimpse of themselves as capable of "a great deal more than I previously thought possible"'.

Garfield found his theme in the late Sixties when he joined a team that was putting together the Lunar Extension Module for the Apollo 11 mission. He saw people 'waking up' and reaching new heights of achievement as they shared in the great patriotic adventure that would put Neil Armstrong on the moon. Convinced that a person doesn't have to be an astronaut to reach for the sky, Garfield set out to show that the 'improvements in performance' to be seen in the LEM project can 'occur in everyday life'. His roster of peak performers includes many of the USA's best-known culture heroes: corporate barons and new entrepreneurs like Victor Kiam, Lee Iacocca, Donald Burr of People Express, Steven Jobs and Stephen Wozniak of Apple Computers, Stuart Brand of the Whole Earth Catalogue. Record-breaking athletes like Roger Bannister find their way onto the roll of honour, as does Salieri in the film *Amadeus*: a peak performer deflected from his mission by hopeless envy of Mozart's inimitable achievement (there are heights, as Garfield admits, which really can't be scaled by everyone).

Many of Garfield's peak performers are full of outward individuality, but he is not deterred by this. Searching for their common features, he blasts off on his own voyage through inner space. He lets all external factors fall back to the ground within seconds of lift-off. Peak performers, after all, triumph over mediocre circumstances. They compete with themselves rather than others, knowing that their personal capacities don't have to be expressed as power over other people.

Yet at the very place where particular qualities and motivations might be expected, there turns out to be nothing unique. Indeed, a curious reduction takes place. The peak performer is distinguished by the fact that he is just like everyone else: 'you and me,' as Garfield puts it, 'only one step away.' Like the body-builder or athlete, he can be superhuman in the making of a new record, but he must also remain only human if the achievement is really to come across: nothing more individualised than blood, flesh and bone. Given this conception of the human condition, the peak performer may certainly be a participant in his own species, but his individuality will be severely reduced as the connection is defined. Dr Garfield claims the peak performer as the helmsman of the evolutionary process, but the connection is wholly internalised. The peak performer's self-realisation owes nothing essential to social contact: he may commune with his species while lacking anything but the most rudimentary world in which to have a social existence.

The peak performer, of course, knows how to 'get on' with people. He can drink young white wine with the best of them in Palo Alto. But if he stands as the epitome of personal success, Garfield's peak performer still lacks gravity. His relationship to society is instrumental at best. Freed from the ethical and political measures of traditional humanist culture, the peak performer seems also to be deprived of significant individuality. At the end of Garfield's analysis, he is characterised by nothing more than 'skills' which have been embraced as the very essence of selfhood. As evolution limbers up for another great leap forward, we discover that the leading human psyche consists of nothing more than a bag of tricks: 'skills' that can be formulated as flipchart maxims, and in which anyone can be trained by Dr Garfield himself (address and phone number supplied).

The new management thinking often states its allegiance to 'people' rather than principles, but its humanism is essentially light. The peak performer goes with the flow; he doesn't pretend to be a rock in anybody's idea of a stream. He incorporates 'change' and opportunity. Jim Gray, an engineer, recognised the moment when it came. If he was to reach the peak, he would have to abandon that long-haired ex-sailor with Vietnam patches on his sleeves, leaving him to die in the snow: 'He could no longer be the same old Jim Gray.' This is what Garfield calls 'self-management: an interesting variation on a long-standing political idea, to be sure. If it once involved the members of a political body making their own decisions, self-management is now about handling yourself to your own best advantage. According to Garfield, it is also 'an idea whose time, in the 1980s in the United States, has come'.

Garfield sees the successful entrepreneur as the exemplar of American democracy, but there is another side to this superhuman figure. Refusing all social definition of his personality and character, the peak

performer is at least as likely to be a psychotic megalomaniac as an exemplar of the civic ideal. As Robert Lacey shows, Henry Ford had his own way of reading Emerson's Transcendentalism. He knew what it meant to say that 'a man contains all that is needful to his government within himself.' He also recognised himself as belonging to that 'class of men' who are so 'eminently endowed with insight and virtue' as to be unanimously saluted as divine. Ford was no mere mortal to find his meaning among humanity alone: his self-image demanded explanation of a more esoteric kind. The Ford Motor Company could set up a Sociological Department to look after the workers, but it took a theory of reincarnation and metempsychosis to account for the super-human ego of the Boss himself. A man of destiny rather than society (or merely human family), Ford combined his mysticism with an interest in historical preservation: the birth-place of his most recent incarnation, but also Greenfield Village, the 250-acre fairy-land which Ford built beside his test track at Dearborn - an early theme park in which History was purged of European Bunk and reimagined according to the nostalgic lights of an 'old soul' whose time had also come.

Since 1984, when Lee Iacocca published *Iacocca: An Autobiography* and confirmed his position as a culture hero, many American entrepreneurs have been contributing their own books on the theme of 'I did it my way'. Most of these autobiographies are co-written by named individuals who are taken on as narrative engineers rather than mere ghost-writers; their job is to design and maintain the textual machinery that will keep the monstrous 'I' of the autobiography intact. As stories of success which work within the light humanist psychology of the new business imagination, these books form something of a new genre: one that might have certain things in common with the old *bildungsroman*, were it not for the characteristic emptiness of the newly provisional self. The *bildungsroman* may be full of learning and deep personal development, but there is little to resemble this in the new business autobiographies.

What they offer is a personalised story of accumulation - dramas of position and power rather than of organic development. In these narratives, the trick is to bring off some kind of reconciliation between the superhuman status and position of the successful entrepreneur and his 'only human' attributes as a regular Joe. To find a sustainable individuality in that reconciliation would be an achievement indeed. Victor Kiam's *Going for it!* is more ambitious than many such books. He wants true rites of passage to punctuate the journey which takes him from an adolescence spent studying French at the Sorbonne on the GI Bill (hanging out with poets and artists, going to Sartre's lectures, listening to Sidney Bechet at the Vieux Colombier) to adulthood: through Harvard Business School and the Fifties, those years of pride which Kiam spent hawking Playtex girdles through the American heartlands, to mature achievement as 'the man who bought the company' (Remington) because he liked the razor.

Warren Avis of the car rental empire is less fortunate in his autobiographical narrative. *Take a chance to be first* tries to make a case for the special nature of this ordinary Joe. Avis styles himself a real gunslinger (nothing less than 'the fastest gun in the west') and sprinkles his autobiography with tips on 'the basic secrets of hitting the bull's-eye'. As befits a man who uses his Acknowledgements page to announce how much his co-writer has learned from working with him, Avis finds everything fitting into place as he looks back over the years. Indeed, there is no part of Avis's remembered life that doesn't glow in the light of his subsequent glory. Cock-ups are redeemed by success ('Learn from your mistakes!'), and the most trivial of experiences show special powers at work:

Even when walking through the park, I try to be observant about the things around me. I might be figuring how to make the park more beautiful. Or in strolling down Fifth Avenue in New York City, I may be musing about how to improve the congested traffic. Even while relaxing out on a farm, I may be considering a different way to arrange the fences or shrubs to get more productivity or beauty out of the land.

'Be yourself' is the message. If the remembered self of these autobiographies tends to be undifferentiated - a great big babylike thing - it is also forever young. The new man of success has little patience with the old humanist idea that age confers wisdom: for him, age is far more likely to be a humiliating and meaningless biological fact. As Avis says in a candid aside, 'I often have trouble acknowledging my age because I feel younger than I really am . . . it took me nearly ten years to face up to the fact that I had passed the fifty-year milestone.'

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Excellence has become a popular creed in British management circles. Many of the leading American books have found an eager readership here and a parallel series of native publications has also been quick to emerge. *In Search of Excellence* was cloned by Clutterbuck and Goldsmith (he of that bastion of class warfare known as the Institute of Directors) in *The Winning Streak*, and by Ronnie Lessem in *The Roots of Excellence*. Old entrepreneurs like Marcus Sieff and Charles Forte have published autobiographies of an altogether more organic kind than their US counterparts, while Richard Branson's gleaming smile has joined Terence Conran and the sadly undifferentiated figure of the entrepreneurial woman in the new iconography of British success. The houseboat in Little Venice, the woolly jumper, and the concern for causes such as littered streets and addicted young rock stars shows that there is a British way of hitting the jackpot. But here the entrepreneur still has to negotiate an uneasy settlement with the vast condescension of posterity if he is really to make his way in from the margins of cultured society.

Meanwhile the talismanic notion of 'excellence' has embarked on a meteoric career in other spheres. Its trail is clearly visible in the public sector (from the NHS to the schools and universities) where 'excellence' is standing in for the increasingly unstable idea that common standards should be maintained across a whole range of institutional provision. As the generalised standard crumbles, the exceptionalist centre of 'excellence' is born. In the universities and polytechnics the message seems clear: if you want to escape the knife, get designated 'excellent' by any means possible. And since the criteria of excellence often come down to nothing more than financial expediency, it is not surprising that new rites of self-designation and cargo-cult behaviour should be emerging within the anthropology of academic life. Rather than waiting for the UGC's assessment, the smart department will hastily develop courses with some connection to 'management' and the prospect of 'self-financing' students and research. It will then issue a glossy brochure with the word 'excellence' printed in large letters all over it and hope for the best.

The rise of 'excellence' has prompted some debunking ripostes. The prophets of entrepreneurial excellence are not distinguished by any abiding sense of history, and it has remained for others to point out how often yesterday's 'excellent' companies have turned out to be frankly mediocre if not entirely bankrupt today. As for the individual entrepreneur, there has been ample reason to wonder whether this recently ennobled saviour of society isn't actually something rather different: a self-important maniac, to be sure, but also an incompetent who absorbs vast quantities of public funding before collapsing, a drug running thug, an inside-dealing cheat or just a routine crook.

But if excellence has a 'downside' which should be exposed to view, this does not mean that the disdainful sneer forms a sufficient response. The light humanism of management success is frequently and easily derided in the name of a deeper, more authentic humanism. Just as the entrepreneur's co-written autobiography seems to invite superior comparison with the *bildungsroman*, the city whizz-kid is easily held up against more substantial figures (the altruist, the artist, the teacher and scholar) and found distinctly wanting - his personal fortune a gross travesty of genuine value. There may be easy sport and consolation here but a response of this kind actually misplaces its critical energies, rehearsing a powerful cultural snobbery but missing the point.

The rise of excellence has two aspects which demand more serious consideration. The first is evident in the appropriation of excellence beyond the business world. *In Search of Excellence* is presently being recommended by the Local Government Training Board and even the Audit Commission. But while its influence has been felt in such unlikely quarters as the probation service and the social services department, this is not a process of simple colonisation.

In their public sector appropriation, the maxims of excellence have come to mean something remarkably different from New Age capitalism. In this context the maxim 'Stay close to the customer' has nothing at all to do with hucksterism. Instead, it means revaluing the user of services and also the staff - stuck at the bottom of bureaucratic pyramids - who work at the point of contact with the public. Similarly, 'bias for action' loses its swagger, working instead as a critique of the organisational culture



which has made so many local authorities chronically unresponsive to the changing patterns of local politics and need. John Stewart, Professor at Birmingham University's largely 'self-financing' Institute of Local Government Studies, may draw rather too neat a picture of 'the new management of local government' but his book of this name leaves no doubt that 'excellence' can be put to altogether more enlightened use than anti-managerial prejudice suggests. Far from being poisoned at the American well, Stewart has come back to insist that the new management is a galvanising and critical process which sets out explicitly to overcome what he identifies as 'the countervailing tendencies of the bureaucratic mode.'

If the positive meanings that can be found within the creed of excellence demand a subtlety of response that goes far beyond disdain and denial, there are also more contextual reasons for considering its emergence in at least partly respectful terms. As Paul Thibaud has recently argued, the current 'triumph of the entrepreneur' is directly related to the crisis of the Keynesian state and its attempts at the social management of the economy. Excellence may indeed involve the 're-cannibalisation of society by the economy', but its rise is also predicated on the visible failure of the welfare state's own utopia: the providential state through which the primacy of society over economy was to be established, the pastoral theory of action according to which the economy could be purged of violence and harnessed as the guarantor of a universal 'right to work'. Excellence has crude ideological dimensions, but these underlying problems are fundamental and demanding.

Thibaud suggests that the redistributive endeavour must now become less product-based, focusing more on chances for action, on broadening people's access to economic activity. As for the contest between light humanism and the heavier varieties, I come down on the side of a reformed version of lightness. It is surely clear that we need more capable management, not less. But if the capacities essential to initiative - both economic and social - should certainly not be judged contemptuously against traditional ideas of genius and the noble personality, they should also be freed from this ludicrous and superstitious cult of the winner.

Instead, they should be defined and developed - in reality rather than rhetoric - at the level of citizenship: as publicly available forms of competence rather than as the canny trickery of private success. It is ironic, given what has been happening in British Higher Education, that both Peters and Waterman in *In Search of Excellence* and Charles Garfield in *Peak Performers* suggest - if only in passing - that an education in the Humanities or Liberal Arts may form a more appropriate background for tomorrow's managers than the business schools with their more rigid MBAs.

The point can be made rather differently. As a means of effective action, management is a central social issue: far too important to be left to the business schools, as they are at present orientated, or to the snake-oil merchants gathering under the sign of Excellence. It should be appropriated and reconnected with the better traditions of citizenship. One might hope that the humanities were capable of contributing a history: one that showed the great wealth of organisational skill (informal, voluntary and often 'leisure'-based as it may have been) which has existed in the very places where the employment statistics now only indicate a desert. One thing is for certain. The reintegration of economic and social or ethical priorities - a process which cannot be a simple reversion to the Keynesian formula - is less likely to be achieved if those who customarily speak for the humanities confine their response to superior disdain and defensive denials of responsibility.

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