

PREFACE A SECOND-CENTURY MAN

The name *Charles Stewart Mott* is today most widely recognizable when used in connection with the word *Foundation*. Established by the General Motors mogul in 1926, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation celebrated its ninetieth anniversary in 2016. During those nine decades, the foundation has made grants in excess of \$3 billion, both in Mott's adopted hometown of Flint, Michigan, and around the world. As noted in its mission statement, the foundation's grantmaking supports Mott's "vision of a world in which every person was in partnership with the rest of the human race, and where each individual's quality of life is connected to the well-being of the community—locally and globally."

Over the years, the impact of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation has been nothing short of profound. This fact alone merits our remembering and learning more about the man behind its genesis. But the existence of the foundation is only one reason the life of Mott—entrepreneur, industrialist, banker, mayor, and sometimes even cowboy—is worth knowing about and studying today.

Charles Stewart Mott (known as C.S. to his many friends and colleagues) was born ten years after the death of Abraham Lincoln and one year before the 1876 centennial of the founding of the United States. Thus, some have referred to C.S.—who lived to age ninety-seven and died just a few years shy of the bicentennial—as a second-century man. In that second century, the United States came to dominate world politics and economics to an extent that could never have been imagined in the 1870s, no matter how verbose the jingoist rhetoric of the time. As for C.S., he not only lived through the most dramatic technological shift and period of economic growth that had yet been known, but he actively participated in and contributed to these events in very immediate ways as a major innovator and leader at General Motors, as a public official in Flint, and as a philanthropist who in many ways reinvented the nonprofit model.

Mott's association with GM embraced a full sixty-five years (1908–1973), including sixty years on the board of directors, during which time the automobile went from being an expensive and rare object of curiosity to a staple appendage in the driveway of the typical American household, a revolution that in turn sparked other revolutions in a boom economy, which, though it paused for the Great Depression, thundered on thereafter. Amid this firmament, C.S. and his colleagues—who variously included such entrepreneurial and management titans as Alfred P. Sloan Jr., Pierre du Pont,



Nonagenarian C. S. Mott votes Republican while sitting on a garbage can in a Flint, Michigan, school gymnasium. November 7, 1972. Ruth Mott Foundation.

Walter Chrysler, Charles Kettering, and Billy Durant—served a vitally important role as change agents, just as their innovative, disruptive descendants Bill Gates and Steve Jobs would do two generations later.

In a 1922 essay, C.S. argued, correctly, that the advent of steamships, then railroads, and finally (and especially) the automobile had literally “forced” the economy to grow and advance at a steadily increasing rate. “Civilization,” he wrote, had “expanded in directions undreamed of” with the ascendance of the automobile. With cars and trucks came vastly improved roads and the ability to transport goods and commodities at speeds (and with economies) previously unknown. C.S. pointed out that with the rise of gasoline-powered vehicles, vast regions had been “made available for dwelling, for

manufacture, and for agriculture that might have remained for decades isolated from communities which they could serve and by which they could be served.” This progress, he said, was natural, organic, and inevitable.

C.S. noted that in 1896, there were few cars in the entire country, but by 1916, more than 3.5 million autos and trucks prowled the landscape from California to Maine. National registrations in 1921 totaled more than 9.2 million. C.S. further noted that the value of car and truck production in 1920 had been more than \$2 billion and that individual dealerships of various brands totaled 178,000 across the land. Progress was not only ensured but could not be avoided.² Concurrently, the auto industry and its unions played a major role in defining and nurturing a new economic class of citizen: the middle class.

As has previously been suggested, the early auto industry in which C.S. played so active a role as an entrepreneur and industrialist would be mimicked many decades later by the next great tech revolution and the next great upheaval to the economic landscape: the rise of personal computers and all other manner of small-platform computing. Both industries in their larval phase consisted of competing technologies vying for dominance. For example, steam-powered cars versus internal-combustion engines and IBM PCs versus a range of other desktop alternatives. Both industries radically (and permanently) transformed how the vast majority of people lived and worked. And both industries were characterized by steady improvements in technological possibilities which in turn forced—and continue to force—regular upgrades

to products. The annual redefinition of each automobile company's offerings has long been a part of our culture; so, too, has been the release of increasingly efficient and economical hardware and software in rapid succession.

As economist Nathan Edmonson has observed:

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The early automobile industry grew because of a number of prototype inventions, such as the otto-cycle engine, the hydraulic press, and others. Although there were some auto sales to businesses, the expansion of the industry depended largely on the expanding consumer market. This was aided by falling costs of producing autos that resulted from mass-production methods. . . . Like autos, personal computers benefited from a mass consumer market and this underwrote a massive decline in the cost of computing power.³

But C.S. was more than a pioneering industrialist and more than a philanthropist. As a public official, elected three times as mayor of Flint, he played a central role in modernizing and expanding the city's infrastructure and institutions. Via projects initiated by C.S. and those experts in urban planning and civil engineering with whom he chose to surround himself, Flint was transformed from a town capable of efficiently accommodating a population of roughly thirteen thousand in the first decade of the twentieth century to a modern metropolis capable of hosting an industrial middle class of more than one hundred thousand (mostly autoworkers and their families). Flint, mirroring its era, became a city defined by well-mapped streets, excellent schools, first-rate medical institutions, good housing, and every other essential element of a modern community.⁴

On the personal level, C.S.'s story is both heroic and poignant. C.S. knew emotional hardship. His father died on the young man's twenty-fourth birthday. C.S. was twice made a widower, both times quite suddenly. A grandson died while still a toddler. But after each emotional blow, he picked himself up and carried on. He did, by many accounts, have a prickly side. While sensitive to the emotions and needs of others, he could nevertheless be contrary on occasion. His mind was sharp, his tolerance for fools virtually nonexistent. He could sometimes be abrupt, aloof, and remote (even with family). While routinely giving away millions to his foundation and other charities, he remained personally frugal in many ways: turning off unnecessary lights, working pencils down to their nubs, and always using both sides of a sheet of paper. His estate in Flint—Applewood—served double purpose as a working farm, albeit one with a tennis court, a swimming pool, and a private bowling alley in the basement of the main house.

What we have here is a complex, brilliant, often contradictory, and ultimately fascinating man. A man whose life—both as a record of himself and as a reflection of his times—makes for a good and important story. One well worth knowing.

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