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## Book review : Brick by Brick, Martyn Nutland

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July 5, 2013 · Keith Adams · 14 Comments

### Robert Leitch reviews *Brick by Brick – The biography of the man who really made the Mini* by Martyn Nutland

In 1975, the humorist Alan Coren published a collection of his newspaper columns entitled 'Golfing for Cats'. His explanation for the title was that Coren was pouring scorn on the sort of authors who saw it as the publisher's job to promote their books, while they themselves made no effort to make their work saleable. The best selling non-fiction subjects at the time were golf, cats, and the Third Reich, the last of which was recognised by a large swastika on the cover.

Long-serving newspaper journalist Martyn Nutland has demonstrated his talent for an eye-catching headline, and emulated Coren's artifice, by sub-titling his biography of Leonard Lord 'the man who really made the Mini'. It is a shrewd move. Mini-mania rages unabated, but the lives of long-dead captains of industry, are rarely regarded as juicy publishing prospects.

The Mini-related component of the book is to be found from Page 230, and the less pragmatic Mini (and Issigonis) fans are unlikely to find it comfortable reading.

For those of us with a broader-based interest in 20<sup>th</sup> century British industrial history, the newly published book is a document of considerable worth, the distillation of 25 years of thorough and tenacious research.

For the record, Leonard Percy Lord was born in Coventry in 1896, in respectable but far from affluent circumstances. Able and ambitious, he gravitated towards the discipline now known as Production Engineering. His achievements at Morris's Engines Branch in Birmingham came to the attention of William Morris, and by April 1933 he was appointed 'Governing Director' of Morris Motors Limited. In August 1936, Lord left Morris, in circumstances which continue to divide historians' opinions.

In February 1938, Lord joined Morris's arch-rival Austin in a role which effectively meant he would take over the ageing Herbert Austin's duties. It was at this time that Lord was claimed to have made the combative statement, 'I'm going to take that place (Cowley) apart brick by bloody brick'. Through the turbulent post-war years and the merger of The Austin Motor Company and Morris Motors to form The British Motor Corporation, Lord maintained his place at the top of the corporate ladder until his retirement in 1961, when he exchanged his position as Managing Director of BMC for the honorary title of vice-president.

The following year he was ennobled as Baron Lambury, of Northfield in the County of Warwick. On the death of Lord Nuffield in 1963, Lord assumed the title of president of BMC, again purely honorary, until his own death in September 1967.

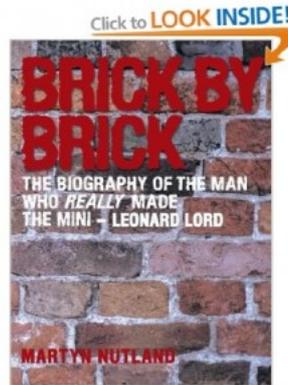
Leonard Lord probably wielded more power, for a longer time over a substantial part the British motor industry than any other individual, yet his enduring reputation is that of an unliked and unlikable man. Epithets such as 'foul-mouthed', 'ruthless', 'uncouth', pepper the published histories of his companies. Martyn Nutland set himself the dual challenge of chronicling Lord's life, and calling into question the slights upon his character, often perpetuated by those who had no first-hand experience of the man. A number of well-regarded books on the history of the companies are quoted at length, and their accounts challenged with an advocate's precision. It all makes most entertaining reading, but I'm not wholly persuaded that Lord's personality was not, to put it kindly, or possibly euphemistically, 'multi-faceted'.

The 1955 dismissal of Gerald Palmer makes disturbing reading in any published account – he was scapegoated for a quality failure at an external supplier, with an unfavourable road test of the Wolseley 6/90 in *The Autocar* providing the ammunition to deliver the *coup de grace*. Even more shocking is the account of the immediate and peremptory sacking of Austin's long-serving Chief Designer Joe Hancock, for what would in fashionable modern parlance be described as 'disrespecting' Lord, by not breaking off a short meeting with another individual immediately upon being called to his superior's office.

Neither of these incidents accord with Nutland's portrayal of Lord as a genial, sensitive, and rational man.

The historical account is wide ranging and immensely detailed. The author's rigour extends to a persistent correspondence with the Duke of Edinburgh's office about the legendary visit to Longbridge in 1955. I will give nothing away – suffice to say the hearsay accounts appear to have 'grown legs' over the years...

Nutland's strongest suit is explaining events in terms of their historical context. In assessing events



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taking place through a turbulent century, it is easy to forget how different social and political attitudes were from our own. On political and industrial relations matters Nutland is commendably pragmatic and even-handed. As regards his loyalties to the constituent companies of BMC, he is unashamedly an Austin acolyte, never passing an opportunity to pour opprobrium on Miles Thomas, Alec Issigonis, and even Lord Nuffield himself.

'Brick by Brick' is a self-published work, and this is something of a double-edged sword. There are just enough typos and mis-spellings (and two glaring errors of geography in quick succession) to detract from an otherwise very well written narrative. Another set of eyes may also have curbed the author's occasional digressions and 'tightened' the narrative.

On the other hand, the editorial process may have dampened the fervent championing of the book's subject, and the author's gleeful repudiation of other published accounts. Miles Thomas's *Out on a Wing*, and Graham Turner's *The Leyland Papers* are challenged and criticised at every opportunity, and the accuracy of a number of well-regarded later works is also questioned. It is enormously enjoyable, and reminds us that even recent history is often based on hearsay and embroidered rumour, with scurrilous fiction sometimes taking precedence over dreary facts.

Some digressions make their own case easily. Seven pages are devoted to the story of Cecil Kimber, and the origins and early years of MG. The dead hand of publisher's editing may have suggested a couple of paragraphs may have sufficed to cover the matters relevant to the irresistible rise of Leonard Lord, but I found the account to be the most touching and engrossing part of the book.

It's far easier to feel pity for Cecil Kimber, a man treated shamefully by Morris, Lord, and by life itself, than it is for Lord himself, who may have been maligned by colleagues and historians, but was ennobled by his nation and lavishly remunerated for much of his working life.

Some of the digressions are downright bizarre, particularly the two pages of speculation on the sexual proclivities of various prominent Austin, Morris and BMC figures.

At the close of the book, there is an eight page discourse on the post-Lord fate of BMC, BMH, British Leyland, and the succeeding (usually only in the sense of following on...) incarnations of the firm, right up to SAIC at Longbridge. Necessarily abbreviated, it is of questionable value, given that the basic information is available from other sources.

If the problems of the 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century resulted from the legacy of Lord, Issigonis, and Harriman, the blame should be laid firmly on the management in the 1970s and 1980s for not recognising and eradicating the malaise. Besides, is this not the decade when we can stand back and accept that the upheaval and consolidation in domestic British motor manufacturing from the 1960s onwards was not an industrial catastrophe and a source of unending national humiliation, but an – admittedly traumatic – journey to find the nation's proper place in the global automotive industry?

It may distress Martyn Nutland that his hallowed complex at Longbridge, which Leonard Lord developed into the most advanced vehicle manufacturing unit in Europe, is all but gone. Cast your eyes not too far away, however, and Jaguar and Land Rover are prospering as never before, and Cowley is turning out as many MINIs as its capacity allows, with half-French engines built in the West Midlands. I can't but imagine Lord would have been delighted at that last fact, given that his motor industry career really took off in 1922 at Hotchkiss et Cie's factory in Gosford Street, Coventry.

I have allowed myself a brief topical diversion. Martyn Nutland deserves the highest praise for researching and publishing this biography. It merits a place on the bookshelves of everyone interested in the history of Morris, Austin, BMC, and their satellites and constituents, not only for its factual content, but also for its author's regular reminders that many things previously written and presented as fact about the firms, their people, and their products are not beyond challenge.

[Available through Amazon, price £12.21 for the dead tree version, and £2.71 for a Kindle download.](#)

Author's website: [www.martynnutland.com](http://www.martynnutland.com)

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**14 Responses**

1. Andrew Elphick - July 5, 2013

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3. [Merlin Milner](#) - July 5, 2013

Book ordered. Will report back.



4. [Brian Gunn](#) - July 5, 2013

It's a brilliant read.



5. [Mike Humble](#) - July 5, 2013

Len Lord..

The man who famously was quoted as saying that BMC stood for..

"Bugger My Competitors"



6. [francis brett](#) - July 5, 2013

@4,On the strength of thati have just ordered it.



7. [The Wolseley Man](#) - July 5, 2013

I'm smarter than you lot – I've asked Mrs Wolseley Man to get it! Much cheaper!!!



8. [Shep](#) - July 6, 2013

£2.71 for the Kindle edition? Sold! 😊



9. [jonathan carling](#) - July 6, 2013

Consider it ordered!



10. [Paul](#) - July 7, 2013

The man who made Leyland? – By helping to run BMC into the ground.



11. [Paul](#) - July 7, 2013

The blame should be laid firmly at the management of the 70s and 80s. Not really fair. They where left with a legacy of underperforming cars that made hardly any profit thanks to over ambitious Engineering that had no market value and that was poorly executed. Where was the investment money needed to create a new range cars to come from? The Government made the fatel error of merging succesful BL with lame duck BMC, leaving the new BL with an albotros round its neck that sunk the whole company. Nationalisation left the Government holding the baby and they pumped in far more public money than was wise to try and keep BL afloat. The management of 70s and 80s whee left stranded with a poor range of cars and no funds to invest whilst having to grapple with a workforce formed from lazy, idle baby boomers who thought the world owed them a living and spent more time on the picket line than the assembly line.



12. [The Wolseley Man](#) - July 7, 2013

Paul, I believe you do a great injustice to your self (with either a lack of research or a very poor memory). You certainly have a very simplistic view of a very complex problem. Your berating of the cars (many of which were of BMC origin and accounted for a huge percentage of the cars on our roads and many which flew out of the showrooms for many years) plus your berating of the workforce is very insulting to the memory of many men who simply wanted to get on with the job (my father being one of them and many of my octogenarian friends who are still with us being many more).

Lazy, idle baby boomers? You really haven't a clue Paul. Apart from anything else you forgot to mention the militant unions who were running the country by fear!



13. Robert Leitch - July 19, 2013

From Martyn Nutland's website:

<http://www.martynnutland.com/latest-news.html>

"You wouldn't, of course, have been able to buy Len's biography at the BMC/Mini day at Gaydon on July 7, thanks to the mind-boggling lack of imagination and possibly knowledge of the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust's retail manager."

Another petition added to Gaydon's litany of shame...



14. Christopher Storey - July 19, 2013

Paul #11 seems to have little grasp of the reality . The advanced engineering of the 1100/1300 series resulted in its being the best selling car in Britain for quite a number of years . Of course, he's right about the Mini. What a flop ! Only 5+ million sold . Where in my view it all began to go wrong was after the merger which formed BLMC , when the arrogance of Stokes – who I regard as the biggest disaster ever to hit the British motor industry – permeated down to the dealerships and particularly the sales staff . I do as it happens know something of this because I was Finance Director of a BL agency at the time and , with great dismay, watched it happen as salesmen treated long standing customers as if they were doing them a favour , and worse still, dismissed legitimate complaints with an arrogant and contemptuous attitude . I know that strikes played a large part in the ultimate demise of BL , but the product in general was really quite good by the standards of the time even though there were some cars which despite a wonderful paper specification, and being very good indeed to drive , caused great headaches over reliability of simple bought in components – the Triumph 2.5 PI was a prime example . However, even these difficulties would have been overcome if only the customer had been treated with respect instead of disdain

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