

Shock and dismay! Another bad book about grain elevators has been published!

Under the heading “Acknowledgements,” David W. Tarbet, the author of *Grain Dust Dreams* (SUNY Press, 2015), says,

I have depended on others who have written about Buffalo and its elevators. Reyner Banham’s *A Concrete Atlantis* (1986) is the classic book on the architecture of Buffalo elevators. It has inspired others to think and write about the subject, including William J. Brown in his book *American Colossus: The Grain Elevator, 1843 to 1943* (2009) and all of the contributors to *Reconsidering Concrete Atlantis: Buffalo Grain Elevators*, edited by Lynda H. Schneekloth (2006). Francis Kowsky has written about, and lectured on, the history of grain elevators in Buffalo. I thank “Frank” Kowsky, Lynda Schneekloth, Rick Smith, Jim Watkins, and all of the others who took time to talk to me about the Buffalo elevators. I should also acknowledge Timothy Bohlen’s book *Against the Grain* (2012) for teaching me about ‘scoopers’ and the people of Buffalo’s First Ward.

In case anyone is interested, Mr. Tarbet never contacted either William J. Brown or Colossal Books, the publisher of *American Colossus: The Grain Elevator*. No matter. One would think from the statements above that the author of *Grain Dust Dreams* made no use of the contents of that book, which was, it appears, simply one of those “inspired” by Reyner Banham’s book. This impression is confirmed by chapter 8 of Tarbet’s book, which either mentions or contains interviews with prominent authorities in the field: William Clarkson, Reyner Banham, Rick Smith, Jim Watkins and Lynda Schneekloth. William J. Brown is not mentioned.

But when one reads the book itself, one finds that Mr. Tarbet – whose book includes neither footnotes nor a bibliography – has in fact made extensive and completely unacknowledged use of Mr. Brown’s book. For example, *American Colossus* is certainly the source of Mr. Tarbet’s assertion that “In 1847, grain elevators were built in Toledo, Ohio, and Brooklyn, New York” (compare pp. 9-10 in *Grain Dust Dreams* and p. 121 in *American Colossus*). This failure to properly cite Mr. Brown’s work is compounded by the fact that Mr. Tarbet fails to mention that these pioneering grain elevators were in fact “floaters” (boats that had grain elevators installed upon them), nor that floaters were crucial to the functioning and development of the grain trade all through the 19th century. But in comparison to the deprivation of a scholar of proper credit for his work, the deprivation of one’s readers of the beauty and mystery of the subject at hand – Mr. Tarbet also fails to inform his readers that, after the 1880s, many elevators in Buffalo had “loose legs” (*buildings on wheels!*) – is a much more serious matter.

A truly impoverished work, riddled with factual errors, misunderstandings, and self-contradictions, and completely uncritical of the ideas relayed to its author by various “official” sources (politicians, academics and businessmen), *Grain Dust Dreams*, for example, claims that in 1828 “every bushel of bulk grain” was shipped “one barrel at a time” and that the “manual method of unloading grain” was “barrel by barrel,” when the facts are that only *flour* was shipped in barrels; grain was shipped in sealed burlap sacks; and “bulk grain” wasn’t shipped

until *after* grain elevators had been built in the 1840s, because only they could accommodate – they were in fact built to accommodate – grain shipped in bulk.

Grain Dust Dreams (GDD) also minimizes the role of the engineer, designer and grain-elevator builder Robert Dunbar, whose “engineering talent” was somehow “recognized” by Joseph Dart, the ostensible creator of the pioneering Dart Elevator (p. 8). According to Mr. Tarbet, it was Dart who “engaged” Dunbar in “his [Dart’s] elevator-building project” (*ibid*). But before entering the grain business, *which he left in the 1850s*, Joseph Dart was a hat salesman. Before meeting Dart, Robert Dunbar had already built flourmills and elevators in Black Rock, New York (not mentioned by Mr. Tarbet; cf. *American Colossus*, pp. 109-110), and, afterwards, Dunbar went on to design and built grain elevators (including the miraculous “loose legs” mentioned above) for the rest of his life.

GDD insists on saying like things like “the elevator [built in 1891 by the Canadian Pacific railway] looked very much like Dart’s elevator in Buffalo” (p. 15) and “Dart’s elevator functioned like a terminal elevator but looked like a larger version of a country elevator” (p. 19), when, in point of fact, there are *no* contemporary images of the Dart Elevator in the 1840s, only “reconstructions” and “artists’ renderings” of what it *might* have looked like.

GDD insists that a terminal elevator in Thunder Bay “wasn’t built to hold grain, but to send it on” (p. 18), which is such a stupid remark that even its author contradicts it several times: “if you have to store large amounts of grain,” there are “rows of concrete bins” (p. 28); “usually, the stored grain will be held in its bin until the time comes to ship it” (p. 41); and “Whitebox is a commodities futures company that buys and holds grain for future sale when the markets are right” (p. 79). Yes, indeed: this is why the Dart Elevator’s official name was the Dart Transshipping and Storage Warehouse. But “transshipping” is a word that doesn’t appear anywhere in Mr. Tarbet’s book, nor does an explanation of how grain futures work.

GDD insists (way too strenuously) that the Grand Trunk Pacific Elevator built between 1908 and 1910 in Thunder Bay was “the apotheosis of concrete elevator building” (p. 22), “a fully realized model for all elevators in the future” (p. 23) and “the finished form of the modern concrete elevator and the model of all elevators to come” (p. 25). But scholars – *real* scholars, I mean: people like Robert M. Frame III – have shown that the years between 1906 and 1912 represented a period in which reinforced concrete was mastered, and the years 1912 to 1928 a period in which this building material was widely accepted. While the Grand Trunk Pacific Elevator was indeed a significant elevator, it certainly didn’t end or exhaust the on-going experimentation with reinforced concrete as a building material in elevator construction, nor was it the “model” for “all” the elevators built between 1912 and 1928, because, on the one hand, elevators are *not* designed and built according to reproducible “models” but very particular needs and circumstances in which “models” are useless and, on the other hand, an elevator built during the period of widespread acceptance (the Marine A in Buffalo, for example, built in 1925) would make a better example of the “apotheosis” of grain elevators built out of concrete.

But Mr. Tarbet isn’t very interested in the Marine A. He tells us that Beth Tauke, “the associate dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of Buffalo and an enthusiast for the preservation of the Buffalo grain elevators,” “knows Marine A well and has brought her students and enthusiasts to the elevator many times,” but relays *none* of the information presumably relayed by Dean Tauke to her students and fellow enthusiasts. We don’t find out who designed it, who built it, when it was built, why it was built, or how long it operated. Mr. Tarbet states that its “walls were dotted with graffiti images and slogans by urban adventurers who had visited after the elevator had been abandoned” (p. 86), without saying

anything specific about those “images and slogans” or without imagining that some of those “images” (for example: the very accurate and colorful chalk drawing of the Standard Elevator, built in 1928 across the creek from the Marine A) might have been created by the people who worked there while the elevator was still in operation.

Tired of this list of embarrassments? I am, too. And so, let me conclude this “review” with something Mr. Tarbet says: “It is easy to do a roll call of elevators that have disappeared from the landscapes of Buffalo and Thunder Bay” (p. 75). Yes, *it is easy to find* a list of all the elevators ever built in Buffalo (those that have disappeared, as well as those that still stand), but not in *Grain Dust Dreams*, which contains no such list. But there’s one in *American Colossus* (pp. 412-416) and nowhere else.

William J. Brown
6 August 2015

P.S. Contacted via Facebook, Mr. Tarbet was sent the following message:

We have been sent a copy of your book *Grain Dust Dreams*. We note that, though you rather offhandedly mention our title, William J. Brown, *American Colossus: the Grain Elevator 1843-1943* (Colossal Books, 2009), your book is full of items that you obviously took from it – they appear nowhere else in the literature. The reference to Wilhelm Worringer, for example. We just can’t understand why you would do such a thing, or why your editors and publishers would allow you to do it, which suggests that you did this research yourself, instead of finding it in a book that you mention but don’t properly credit.

His response was as follows.

William Brown’s book *American Colossus* is a fine book and I recommend it to serious students of grain elevators. *Grain Dust Dreams* may seem like elevator-light beside it. It is a trade book without footnotes. Perhaps because it is published by a university press you imagined it was more academic. It isn’t and wasn’t meant to be. Brown’s book is included in my acknowledgments and I hope others will find their way to it from there. I wish the book continued success.

Not satisfied with this, we told him,

These are fine sentiments, and I as the book’s publisher certainly thank you for them, but I don’t believe that they answer the objections being raised. Your book is certainly a work of nonfiction, and it mostly relates historical facts and events. The absence of both footnotes and a bibliography in such a work is a real puzzle, especially in a book from SUNY Press. (Last time I checked, SUNY referred to a university system.). In the absence of these basic features of scholarly research and plausible historical exposition, greater attention is brought to bear on the acknowledgements, which in point of fact only mentions Brown’s book as one of two “inspired” by Reyner Banham but not as one of the works you personally consulted for ideas and facts. The Worringer mention as it turns out is not the best

example of you passing Brown's work off as your own: the best example is your reference to the elevators built in 1847 in Toledo and Brooklyn, which are facts that appear nowhere else in the literature than Brown's book. Your acknowledgements refer to people "who took time to talk to me about the Buffalo elevators." But the absence of Brown from this group of people was YOUR doing, not his. You never tried to contact him.

At that point, for some strange reason, Mr. Tarbet stopped responding and, in fact, broke off the connection.