

for New York's other skyscraper



THURSDAY'S BOOK

Empire: A Tale of Obsession, Betrayal and the Battle for an American Icon

By Mitchell Pacelle, John Wiley & Sons, 336 pp., \$43.50

BY MICHAEL LEGAULT

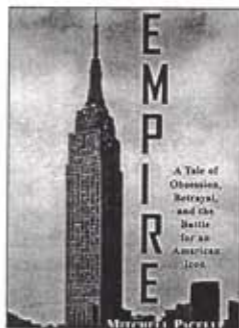
I recently took a vow to avoid using the phrase "since Sept. 11." In reviewing Mitchell Pacelle's intriguing tale about the struggle for ownership of the Empire State Building, I can hardly keep this promise.

The reason, of course, is that since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, our perception of tall buildings, both as symbols and commercial enterprises, has irrevocably changed. The economic risks of developing and owning tall buildings, always large, have been magnified. Though still inspiring, the sight of a skyscraper now leads us to reflect on forces that wish to annihilate progress in the name of murky, anti-human causes.

Sheathed in Indiana limestone, topped by a glinting chrome-nickel shaft once envisioned as a mooring mast for passenger-carrying zeppelins, the 1,050-foot Empire State Building has never been just another skyscraper. When completed in 1931, less than two years after the stock market crashed, it was an act of one-upmanship, besting the recently built Chrysler Building by a mere two feet, to take the crown as the world's tallest building. As Mr. Pacelle reports, it soon became "a nearly universal totem of New York," a beacon drawing the city's thrill seekers, lonely and nearly famous.

This was only partly accidental. The owners, Pierre DuPont and John Raskob, had recruited Alfred E. Smith, a former New York state governor, bent on salvaging his career, to publicize the building and fill it with tenants. The building became the setting for many corny publicity stunts, dramatic suicides and King Kong's final stand, acquiring the transcendental status of pop-cultural icon. While other buildings usurped the title of tallest, the edifice held tight to its mythic aura, luring a million visitors a year to its 86th-floor observation deck. The destruction of the World Trade Center has, if anything, cemented its status as a monument to the culture the terrorists were bent on destroying. Since the attacks, lineups of tourists at the building have been longer than ever.

Yet, as Mr. Pacelle details, for all its elegance and symbolism, the Empire State Building has for most of its life been a dog of an investment. In the '30s and '40s, despite Al Smith's frenetic promotional efforts, tenants shunned the building. In 1943, with most of the floors between 42 and 80 still vacant, Raskob and DuPont tried to sell the building to the



federal government for US\$38-million, US\$4-million less than they had paid to build it. "The government didn't bite, nor did anyone else," Mr. Pacelle reports.

It wasn't until the post-war economic boom of the 1950s, when occupancy never dropped below 98%, that the building began to fulfill its potential as a revenue source. Upon Raskob's death in 1951, Henry Crown, a Chicago building materials tycoon, out-muscled two New York real estate magnates, Harry Helmsley and Lawrence Wein, and bought the building for US\$51.5-million. Ten years later, Crown was ready to sell and Helmsley and Wein were back in the picture. Rich though they were, the two could not ante up the US\$65-million Crown was asking. Undeterred, they cooked up a byzantine deal, the main element of which still haunts the building's investment value: a rock-solid 114-year lease to Helmsley and Wein.

Mr. Pacelle, a writer for *The Wall Street Journal*, employs engaging prose, crafty style and meticulous research to chart the dizzying, often vindictive manoeuvring for control of the building up to the present. The book's main strength is its elemental character sketches, which pull no punches and smoothly draw the reader into the narrative. There is the tainted, ageing Japanese investor Hideki Yokoi, who, through a front company set up by his calculating daughter, Kiiko, and her Gordon Gecko-like husband, secretly buys the building in 1991. There is the great white trophy hunter himself, Donald Trump, who schemes to buy the building back when Yokoi and Kiiko are consumed by squabbling and legal problems. There is the foul-mouthed hotelier Leona Helmsley, who inherited her husband's share of the lease upon his death. It is especially against Ms. Helmsley, whose very being irritates Mr. Trump at an existential level, that a monumental, costly legal effort is launched to break the lease.

The Empire State Building is strikingly like the pearl in Steinbeck's famous short story by that name: a bauble with the power to taint character and stir up trouble. In contrast to the short story, few in Mr. Pacelle's account reveal any belief that the bauble is not worth owning.

Financial Post

Michael LeGault is the editor of *Canadian Plastics Magazine*.

Canada
yeast:

G

ho
w

B

MON:
Canada
er and
and sc
terday
marke
in fisc
constr
Half
of mor
from
specia
home
just-in
and lur
"New
held up
Ameri
record
some s
in 200
the cor
said a