P.T. Barnum never said 'there's a sucker born every minute,' but he believed it

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By Glenn C. Altschuler

“There are some things in my Autobiography which may honestly be objected to,” Phineas T. Barnum declared in 1855. But he asked readers — and critics who decried the book as yet another of his “humbugs” — to acknowledge that there were “some good streaks” in his life as well, “for I do not admire the doctrine of total depravity.”

In “Barnum: An American Life,” Robert Wilson, the editor of The American Scholar and author of biographies of Matthew Brady and Clarence King, agrees. The greatest showman the world had ever seen, P.T. Barnum, Mr. Wilson writes, did, indeed, acquire — and for a time relish — a reputation as a man who would do anything for a buck.

Barnum put on tour Joice Heth, an elderly former slave who claimed to be the 161-year-old former nurse of George Washington. He also exhibited in his American Museum a shriveled three-foot-long specimen (the head and torso of a monkey joined to a large fish) he called the “Feejee Mermaid.” Little wonder, then, that any time a dubious discovery was announced, someone asked, “Where’s Barnum?” He became associated with a phrase he almost certainly never spoke or wrote: “There’s a sucker born every minute.”

That said, Mr. Wilson claims that Barnum’s reputation as a huckster, interested only in separating the masses from their money without giving them anything of value in return “utterly misrepresents the man as he really was.” Mr. Wilson’s Barnum “changed himself and the business over the decades,” becoming “a steady, civic-minded” individual, “who embodied many of the best aspects of the American character,” including a commitment to patriotism, philanthropy, public service and his Universalist faith.

Mr. Wilson’s claim that Barnum changed himself, his business and his values over the decades is not entirely persuasive. The great showman, it seems to me, never abandoned hoaxes, even as he reached out to “respectable” middle-class audiences in the second half of the 19th century, with, for example, the national tour of Jenny Lind, the Swedish opera singer; the Barnum & Bailey Circus; Barnum’s lectures...
on temperance; his stints as mayor of Bridgeport, Conn., and in the state assembly; and his charitable
contributions.

As Mr. Wilson points out, Barnum came to understand that revealing the tricks of his trade — which
became “the cornerstone of his philosophy” — was actually good for business, because “the public
appears disposed to be amused even when they are conscious of being deceived.” And, it is worth
noting, in the 1860s and 1870s, Barnum exploited the controversies swirling around Charles Darwin’s
William Henry Johnson, a mildly mentally challenged 18-year-old black man, dressed in a furry ape
costume, with a shaved head, who was taught to smile foolishly, scream and speak in gibberish.

A white lecturer described William Henry Johnson’s alleged African origins and attempts to civilize
him; advertisements speculated about whether he was “the missing link.” According to Barnum, what
made it a “humbug” and not outright fraud was his decision “to leave it to the sagacious public” to
decide whether Johnson “is human or animal.”

P.T. Barnum lived a long, exciting and varied life. Contrary to the advice he gave in “The Art of Money-
Getting” — engage in only one kind of business — he ran a dry goods store, operated a lottery, published
a newspaper, owned two museums and a circus, invested in real estate, was a bestselling author, and
served as a legislator.

Barnum played a critical role in the rise of commercialized leisure in the United States. He was a
(mostly) dutiful husband and devoted dad. As Mr. Wilson emphasizes, he exhibited “unflagging energy,
wit and buoyant good humor.” And he bounced back, personally and professionally, from bankruptcy
and the ravages of five fires.

Robert Wilson takes seriously, perhaps too seriously, P.T. Barnum’s claim that his humbuggery was
harmless. “I don’t believe in duping the public,” he wrote in 1860, “but I believe in first attracting and
then pleasing them.” As was so often the case, Barnum was and wasn’t telling the truth. Gullibility and
skepticism, belief and disbelief, engagement and detachment, and not necessarily virtue or high
purpose, were the foundations of his career — and of our modern celebrity American culture.

*Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell
University.*