

person he had allowed himself to become lost in the corporate haze. He had created the studio; then the studio, with his complicity, created him, making him, he fully understood, as much a commodity as a man—the very sort of diffident, genial, plainspoken, unprepossessing, and childishly enthusiastic character who would have produced Walt Disney movies. Essentially, he had become his own paracosm. Though he actually possessed all of those qualities, they were now simplified, like his signature, into an image and brand. He told one prospective employee that the studio was in the business of selling the name “Walt Disney.” To another associate he commented, “I’m not Walt Disney anymore. Walt Disney is a thing. It’s grown to become a whole different meaning than just one man.”

Though Disney was anything but a dark prince, neither was he exactly the affable illusion that had subsumed him. For all his outward sociability, associates found him deeply private, complex, often moody, and finally opaque. No one seemed to know him. “He was a difficult man to understand,” said Ben Sharpsteen, who worked for him in various capacities from the late 1920s on. “He never made his motives clear.... When I added up thirty years of employment, I found I understood him less at the end.” Bill Peet, another longtime studio hand, wrote, “I do believe I knew Walt about as well as any employee could know him,” then added, “even though he was never the same two days in a row.” “I’ve always said that if you get forty people in a room together,” Walt’s nephew Roy E. Disney told an interviewer, “and ask each one of them to write down who Walt was, you’d get forty different Walts.”

This book is an attempt to penetrate the image and decipher the mystery of Walt Disney—to understand the psychological, cultural, economic, and social forces that acted upon him and led to his art and his empire. And because Disney was so deeply embedded in the American psyche and scene, understanding him may also enable one to understand the power of popular culture in shaping the national consciousness, the force of possibility and perfectionism as American ideals, the ongoing interplay between commerce and art, and the evolution of the American imagination in the twentieth century. In short, to understand Walt Disney, one of the most emblematic of Americans, is to understand much about the country in which he lived and

which he so profoundly affected.