

Comment on Recent Dissertations in Business History

William R. Childs
Ohio State University

Twelve individuals (three women and nine men) offered submissions for the Dissertation Session. One, alas, was written in German, a language which I cannot read. Matthias Kipping wrote his abstract in English, however, and I thought the topic was significant; BHC President Ed Perkins agreed, and placed Kipping in another session. His paper, "Competing for Dollars and Technology: The United States and the Modernization of the French and German Steel Industries after World War II" may be found elsewhere in this volume.

Of the dissertations submitted, three focused on industry-specific studies; seven investigated business-government topics; and two employed economic theory to understand historical choices made. Six submissions analyzed U.S. topics: One focused on a specific industry, one studied frontier women, and four encompassed business-government relations (two on trade policy, one on antitrust, and another on government entrepreneurship). The non-U.S. topics included studies of one United Kingdom industry, Canadian private insurance, and three on business-government relations (in Weimar Germany, postwar Europe, and Taiwan's computer industry). Finally, one dissertation compared the emergence of computer firms in the UK with those in the U.S.

Those featured in the Dissertation Session best fit the criteria I established before looking at all of the submissions: How significant to the particular field was the dissertation? What was the degree of difficulty involved in doing the dissertation? How broad and deep was the research? How well was the study organized and how clear was the writing? And, finally, how strong was the sense of history, that is, of change and continuity over time?

The submitted dissertations and the four featured ones reveal a rather varied sense of what subjects and methodologies constitute business and economic history. They reflect many, if not all, of the themes highlighted in the addresses of the last half dozen presidents of the Business History Conference. It is in this vein of diversity--in topics chosen, sources consulted, methodologies employed, and in audiences served--that I shall comment briefly on each of the four featured dissertations.

The two dissertations on U.S. topics represent a linking of business-economic history methodologies with cultural or American Studies approaches, a trend implicitly promoted in the last two Presidential Addresses [4, 5]. In "The Creation of the American Book Trade: Philadelphia Publishing in the New Republic, 1790-1830," Rosiland Remer builds two bridges: One

connects economic and business history to the established historiography of the book in America. The other describes and analyzes the transition from the era of specialized American colonial printing to the emergence by the mid-nineteenth century of a new industry, that of national publishing.

Remer makes good use of a variety of sources, including account books, diaries, personal and business correspondence, and newspapers. Her analytical narrative furnishes us with numerous contributions. She points out that Benjamin Franklin's colonial publishing pursuits were unique, but were later copied by publishers during the early national period. Prohibited during the colonial era from becoming publishers, printers during the 1790s expanded into newspapers and pamphlets. By 1800 they were abandoning this politically-oriented work and turning instead to publishing books. Remer shows how they made some progress in attaining their goal of establishing a national book trade. The evidence she provides of how the nascent publishers conducted business during the early industrial revolution complements what we know about other industries, such as the cotton trade. The publishers used mainly a single entry bookkeeping system and they tended to keep printers in business, even though those printers were often very much in debt.

The spread of book selling westward after 1800 reflected similar patterns of competition in the urban areas, where the publishers first flourished. In both urban and rural markets, the publishers created a cooperative exchange system to support one another in the very competitive business. She explains clearly how they ultimately fell short of establishing a national industry in the face of constrained economic conditions (lack of cash, unsteady credit) and cultural biases among the customers (westerners desired western, not eastern, books). While Remer could have delineated a bit more clearly the generational changes from printer-to-publisher, she nonetheless explains how the expanding market allowed publishers to abandon the craft of printing, which itself became tied to the fortunes of the publishers.

In an engaging fashion, Remer illustrates how economic and business historians must consider cultural values and vice versa--how cultural historians must comprehend economic and business realities to understand fully cultural contours. A wide variety of scholars in economics, business, and early national culture will find interest in her revised manuscript.

In "Mr. Kaiser Goes to Washington: Saga of a Government Entrepreneur," Steve Adams transfers the utility of economic theories of entrepreneurship from the realm of economic markets to that of a changing political economy. He uses the standard sources of the political historian: personal papers of key participants; congressional hearings; trade journals; and records of government agencies, all located at depositories stretching from Washington, D.C. to California. Adams tackles aspects of Kaiser's career that Mark S. Foster did not [3] and exposes some interesting transformations in Washington-industry relations.

In noting that Henry Kaiser moved from local and state contracts to federal contracts, Adams argues that Kaiser's was not a planned career, but rather one that reacted to changes in the political economy. At the same time he indicates that there was a logical relationship between vertical integration, changing political economic fortunes, and entrepreneurial opportunities. For

scholars of the New Deal era, Adams' most significant contribution is to resurrect the notion that New Deal antitrust policy advocates did not retreat before the onslaught of wartime mobilization, but rather insisted on using the opportunity to foster new competition in oligopolistic industries (steel, magnesium). His dissertation also serves scholars interested in the development of the American West. It adds to recent works that have illuminated the paradox in which the cultural values of rugged individualism persist in the West despite evidence that Washington-planned and -financed economic policies furnished the major boost toward modern industrialism in that region. Henry Kaiser and his lieutenants in Washington did not shape Federal policy as much as they took advantage of offers from New Deal officials. When the political arena became more competitive after the war, Kaiser and his Washington lawyers were less successful in gaining Federal assistance.

Adams offers numerous themes for historians of modern America and business-government relations to ponder. To make a really solid contribution, Adams in his revisions might smooth-out the chronological/thematic presentation and, along the way, insert more of the man Henry Kaiser.

The last two dissertations embody approaches highlighted in the Presidential Addresses from 1988 to 1991 [10; 1; 7; 6]. In "The Rise and Fall of Fraternal Methods of Social Insurance," J. C. Herbert Emery reflects Lazonick's demand that economists focus on change over time [6, pp. 1-2, 9-10]. He also implicitly draws attention to the connection McCraw highlighted between ideas, policies, and outcomes [7, pp. 3-4].

Emery tackles a straight-forward historical problem and comes up with results that question conventional wisdom about the origins of the Canadian welfare state: Is the idea that the Canadian welfare system came about because of failures in the private sector a correct one or a myth? More specifically, why did Canadian workers stop insuring themselves and turn to the employers and government? One thing that makes this dissertation stand out (besides its clarity in explaining the mathematics utilized) is its apolitical methodology that brings forth fodder for pro-welfare state and pro-private sector advocates! Emery studied the accounts of numerous lodges of the Oddfellows in British Columbia. From these primary sources of the private insurance sector, Emery shows that the private club insurance for sickness and injury was, contrary to assumptions, basically a fiscally sound proposition from the late nineteenth century until the Great Depression. He then carefully indicates that it was the effects of the Depression, especially the decline in paying members and the failure to sign-up new members, that undermined private health insurance, not any inherent fiscal deficiency.

Emery's work is a model of how economic history can build from economic analyses not only to characterize change over time, but also to speak to larger issues. His evidence challenges central assumptions about how insurance "should" operate. His work should be supported with more research, especially on the eastern Canadian provinces. And while he does allude to studies of private insurance in the U.S., he could continue that line of enquiry most profitably. Scholars interested in the connections between ideas, policies, and outcomes in the history of private and welfare state insurance will profit from reading Emery's findings.

The most ambitious of the four featured dissertations was Anthony Gandy's "The Entry of Established Electronics Companies into the Early Computer Industry in the UK and USA." Gandy's work reflects the thoughts of Mira Wilkins and Wayne Broehl on the utility of firm studies and attention to comparative topics [10; 1]. Gandy investigates why it was that firms one would expect to be players in the early generations of computers--diversified electronics firms with access to technical expertise and financial sources--in fact lost out to more singularly focused business machine firms. He tackles a big topic, refers to numerous themes, and suggests some interesting conclusions, but he too often leaves the reader awash in a sea of minutia about particular computer projects and does not always flesh-out the implied themes. Gandy took advantage of a key primary source: the court records of the IBM antitrust case. Business historians have underused court records, sources which can be mined profitably not only by students of business-government relations, but also by historians of firms and industries, and especially of small businesses [8].

Gandy's work interacts within the tradition established by Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., supporting most directly Chandler's recent emphasis on the importance of investment in production, marketing, and management as necessary determinants in the successful development of first-mover status [2]. It also touches upon, but does not really develop, other themes. His case studies imply that some significance lies in the "corporate culture" in which strategic decisions were made and the interaction of that culture with contingent forces over time, but he could do more with this. Indeed, historians have yet to develop a strong methodological approach to understanding how "corporate culture" really affects the managerial choices of strategies and structures [9, pp. 300-06]. And Gandy includes some interesting business-government comparisons. He implies that while the U.S. government did indeed support the developments of computers (through military contracts), this support was more successful than the more direct approach of subsidies awarded in the UK. While not a major focus of this dissertation, this topic bears further research. Finally, Gandy's comparative approach, while revealing at times, needs revisions that clarify (1) the relationship of the UK firms to the USA market and (2) the overlapping relationships among the UK firms.

In conclusion, the four featured dissertations reflect a wide range of topics, sources, methodologies, and audiences served. Along with the others submitted, they indicate that business-economic history continues to thrive as it moves outward from its older strengths (firm and industry development, entrepreneurship, comparative, business-government) to broaden its methodologies to include attention to cultural and economic analyses. In so doing, the work of these younger scholars lends hope that business and economic history will not only continue to get better in its own right, but also draw more attention from scholars of social, cultural, and political history.

References

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4. Louis Galambos, "What Makes Us Think We Can Put Business Back Into American History," Presidential Address, *Business and Economic History* Second Series, 21 (1992), 1-11.
5. K. Austin Kerr, "Connections," Presidential Address, *Business and Economic History*, Second Series, 22 (Fall 1993), 1-6.
6. William Lazonick, "Business History and Economics," Presidential Address, *Business and Economic History*, Second Series, 20 (1991), 1-13.
7. Thomas K. McCraw, "Ideas, Policies, and Outcomes in Business History," Presidential Address, *Business and Economic History*, Second Series, 19 (1990), 1-9.
8. Roger M. Olien and Diana Davids Olien, *Easy Money: Oil Promoters and Investors in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill, NC and London, 1990).
9. Michael Rowlinson and John Hassard, "The Invention of Corporate Culture: A History of the Histories of Cadbury," *Human Relations* 46 (1993), 99-326.
10. Mira Wilkins, "Business History as a Discipline," Presidential Address, *Business and Economic History*, Second Series, 17 (1988), 1-7.