

By *William Kilbourn*

PROFESSOR AND CHAIRMAN  
HUMANITIES DIVISION  
YORK UNIVERSITY

## Business History: A Writer's Approach

MUCH recent historical writing in Canada has been free to explore specific themes in considerable depth and with a new subtlety. This emphasis on small manageable segments of the past, the study of a particular event, place, person or period of time, made it possible for the historian, if he chose, to rediscover his *métier* as an artist. He could imitate the dramatist's attempt to realize one or all of the unities of time, place and action. Each abstract thesis or general trend could be given a local habitation and a name. And here the business historian, the biographer of one social and economic entity, could come into his own. He could also, by his study of microcosms, begin correcting that penchant for One Big Single Theory which has dominated Canadian (unlike American) historical writing for the last few decades.

I suppose I am suggesting that all history, in so far as it is art, is local history, or even that great history, contrary to Fisher's dictum, *can* be made of laundry bills. Art must seek the particular, yet its celebration of the specific and the unique is not without use to history as social science. To give an extensive personal illustration, in writing *The Elements Combined*, the history of a steel company and its ancestors from 1790 to 1960, I tried by a particular selection of images to evoke, however tenuously, a sense of the development of Canadian society during that period. It was also interesting to watch the stages in economic history, from a single craftsman—entrepreneur cutting nails out of iron sheets by horsepower, to various forms of partnership, to limited company, to the merger of many companies into today's giant corporation in 1910. The corporation itself in the next 50 years also illustrates a managerial evolution through several types and structures.

Stelco's history is rather typically Canadian in that it is pretty much that of a whole industry rather than just one of many companies, but the book was not nearly detailed enough in its analysis of either entrepreneurial decision in one firm or the industry's growth in Canada to be of much fundamental value to economic historians, except, perhaps, in the teaching of their subject. It was closer to social history and in a sense to the form Richard Hofstadter has christened 'literary anthropology'. I was more interested in practising the art of history than in making a contribution to social science. This sort of concern can give history a value for the intelligent non-specialist which the monograph

or detailed scholarly history does not have, if only because he may never read or even be able to understand the latter. "Popularization", if it is such, need not take the form of mere journalism — whether of the muck-raking or puff-propaganda type, or of the overcoloured magazine "flashback" on the past. Today's business historians do have much to learn from the best journalists, like Peter Newman, for example (see his study of Canadian business tycoons *Flame of Power* and my critical article about it, 'The Very Rich', in the *Waterloo Review*, No. 5, Summer, 1960). They should emulate the journalist's and artist's strong points rather than be content to avoid their weaknesses. To press my argument to its furthest, one might even claim that the best business history yet written in Canada (or anywhere else) in our time is the great epic poet E. J. Pratt's long narrative poem on the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, *Towards the Last Spike*. It has a grandeur and a precision of language and structure that are missing from most histories, both academic and popular, and as with Francis Parkman's work, it depends on the author's painstaking research and something like a direct experience of its subject matter.

In *The Elements Combined* I tried to use some of the patterns of myth and imagery inherent in the working of a steel mill and in the fierce games of high finance, management and labour, and so bring another dimension of meaning and order to the common experience and concerns of men living in an industrial society. Certainly there was no lack of colourful stories, mostly obtained orally and checked in newspapers and company and public records. There was the aerial dogfight (without guns) and the little naval skirmish on Hamilton Bay between company and union planes and launches during the great strike of 1945, for example, when the company kept the plant running, and supplied immediate necessities by air lift. Or the story of the 29-year old Max Aitken, later Lord Beaverbrook, forcing the formidable Edwardian gentlemen of Canadian business into a merger on his own terms in 1910.

Above all there was the story of people: of the struggle of early entrepreneurs to survive, of labourers working 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, and what it felt like. One retired French Canadian superintendent who began in the largest of the Montreal plants at the age of ten in 1880 had vivid memories of everyone involved. His father before him worked at the plant and could recall the day when, as a child in 1837, he was woken up to be told that the church of St. Eustache was on fire and rebellion had broken out, and of course he told his son many things about the plant in the mid-19th century.

As a recurring theme or chorus in the book, I was able to use the imagery of the giant coke ovens and open hearths and what we as children used to call, in awe, the "blasted furnaces" which lit up the night sky of Hamilton, a pillar of fire by night and of cloud by day. Earth, air, fire, water—the four elements

of the ancient world—are the essential ingredients of steel-making. The earthy elements includes the mineral ore, the ancient vegetable coal and animal remains (the limestone formed from the bones of shellfish and molluscs). It takes four tons of air—more than the weight of the three solid materials together—to make one ton of pig iron in the blast furnace, and water is used and re-used in many ways throughout the steelmaking process. Something could be made of facts like these in descriptive passages. Here is one example of such a passage, used to evoke the steel-making process (it is not of course typical of the book, which consists chiefly of historical narrative):

Through the cavernous darkness a spring of white hot liquid flecked with gold erupts from the furnace. As it hits the ladle a fountain of sparks shoots thirty feet into the air and showers the pit below. The stream of steel rushes swiftly downwards and with the sound of fire and waterfalls splashes into the waiting cauldron.

It suggests beginnings: a river's source, the uncooled centre of the planet, the nebulous stuff of the uncreated stars. But the suggestion is deceptive. This is already a civilized liquid, its heat and mass finely controlled, its chemistry known in decimals. The white stream is of the very essence of human society as men have fashioned it in the twentieth century. Before the stream has run its course and cooled to its final form it will find its way into many shapes: fish hooks and harvesters, turbines and broadcasting towers, surgeon's knives, florists' wire, school fence, and piano strings, cables on ocean floors and a continent's length of pipeline, fire-dogs and refrigerators, cathedral ribs and rocket's skin, hobnails for loggers' boots and oil drums and the music of steel bands, lamps for miners and streets and railway engines, springs for trucks and clocks and calculators, and instruments to bridge light years and follow the dark bending of the universe.

The historian, if he is to be an artist, must approach his subject with something like a child's view of it. Pushkin said to be a great artist, you must begin by being an idiot. T. S. Eliot, in his great preface to his fellow Missourian Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, says that to know an environment well enough to use it later as an artist, you should preferably have lived in it as a child or as a worker, not as a tourist. Mark Twain knew the river both as a child and as a steamboat pilot. The industrial historian ought to have some such direct experience of his subject if at all possible.

The historian as artist should also have some feeling for the literature of the past, and an ability, not to imitate (which can produce ponderous disasters), but to create his own art with the original models embedded in his imagination.

My own models for *The Elements Combined* were chiefly, I suppose, *Moby Dick*; the opening of *Passage to India*; the *Inferno*; and some of Hawthorne's work; and one or two passages from the Old Testament. The motto came from *Howard's End*: "Only Connect." In organizing the structure of each chapter I used a scheme which started out at least as an extremely simplified adaptation of part of Joyce's plan for *Ulysses*; and McLuhan's early work, which springs from Innis's use of the fur trade as a model as much as it does from James Joyce, was also extremely helpful. Professor Jack Madden, in the discussion of these ideas, has enthusiastically (but not I trust without comic intent) suggested I write a skeleton key to *The Elements Combined*.

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The last best word on the subject of the historian as writer (and the sharpest comment on what North American historical writing most often neglects) is still that of the young Thomas Macaulay: "Our historians neglect the art of narration, the art of interesting the affections and presenting pictures to the imagination . . . . The perfect historian gives to truth those attractions which have been usurped by fiction. In his narrative a due subordination is observed: some transactions are prominent; others retire. But the scale on which he represents them is increased or diminished according to the degree in which they elucidate the condition of society and the nature of man . . . . A history which in every particular incident may be true, may, on the whole, be false." William Morton has shrewdly remarked that the first and perhaps the only major choice made by the historian as artist is the choice of his subject matter, the act of seeing the whole form and structure of his narrative, its beginning, its middle and its end. However, within the strict and difficult limits of what can be known about what actually happened, the historian does have a kind of freedom of choice not easily achieved by the novelist. He need not strain for plausibility or limit his plot to what merely might have been. He need not use elaborate devices to establish the credibility of the narrative voice. He is free, by the very nature of his art, his discipline and his subject, to explore and show forth, in all its variety and complexity and strangeness, the incredible truth.