PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Business History and Beyond

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As several of my predecessors have noted, the after-dinner speaker at the Business History Conference faces a difficult task. I agree with Bill Becker's observation last year that an after-dinner speech is an "unnatural act." The speaker is expected to be entertaining and witty, while at the same time expounding profound thoughts – all this to an audience well-sated on excellent food and drink. Moreover, by the tradition of our conference the speaker is expected to be at least partly autobiographical in his or her remarks.

Well, Samuel Johnson once remarked that "brevity is the soul of wit." So, I guess that I can at least be witty by promising to keep my observations to no more than about twenty-five minutes in length. What makes a presentation such as this one partly palatable to the speaker is that there is no set format; the speaker may discuss just about anything. And, so I shall. I would like to talk about my work in business history and make a few suggestions about the future of the field, but I also plan to look beyond business history.

Let me start at the beginning. There is a long and short version about how I became a business historian. I shall mercifully give you the short one. In 1972, I was finishing my doctorate in history at the University of California, Berkeley in an already tight job market. It was at that point that K. Austin Kerr, heading a search committee at Ohio State, telephoned me, told me that his history department had an opening in something called business history, and asked if I wanted to be considered for the position. It was then that I realized that I was a business historian! Graduate students, please take note of the roles accidents play in shaping careers.

Of course, there was more to the matter. I had come of age in a time of tremendous questioning of American values and culture, the 1960s and early 1970s. I thought, perhaps naively, that studying history might help me understand better what the United States was all about. While I had not thought of myself as a business historian – few scholars did then – I did believe that in a business-dominated nation it made sense to study business institutions and their connections to the rest of society. I had the good fortune to study with scholars who had similar ideas: Richard Abrams, Gunther Barth, Sheldon

BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC HISTORY, Volume Twenty-six, no. 2, Winter 1997.
 ISSN 0894-6825.

Rothblatt and Sidney Pollard. My dissertation (later my first book) examined interactions between political and business changes in California in an earlier period of ferment, the Progressive era.

At Berkeley, I was exposed to the work of Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., especially to his *Strategy and Structure*. The book was mesmerizing, for it seemed to explain so much about the development America's business system. Yet, the work also seemed to have limitations. My second book – a history of Wakefield Seafoods, a small company that pioneered in the development of the Alaskan king crab industry after World War II – represented my first attempt to move into new areas in business history. And, I have, as some of you know, gone on to do additional work in the history of small business, as have several of my graduate students. (I would add parenthetically that the topic of small business has come home to me in a personal way this year – as my daughter is starting her own small firm in Cleveland, a niche-market bookstore that should be able to coexist with the megastores.)

Of all of the books I have written, my study of Wakefield Seafoods remains my favorite. Unraveling the Wakefield story opened my eyes to the importance of personality, emotion, company culture, and luck in history. It was with my study of Wakefield Seafoods that I achieved the hallowed state, at least until recently in American academia, of tenure. I still remember one of my senior colleagues asking me during my interview for tenure – jokingly, I hoped – why I was not entitling my book "Claws," and why I was not serving crab meat and white wine to my inquisitors.

Most recently, work with Austin on the history of BFGoodrich has reinforced my belief that company histories remain a fruitful way to approach business history and, indeed, American history. After all, as Louis Galambos pointed out twenty-some years ago, Americans live in a highly organized society. Few organizations are of more importance than business firms. Through them people act out economic and social expectations, and through them they interact with others. Of course, the situation is complex: just as people influence the shape of institutions, the nature of institutions sets parameters for the actions of people. One of the more valuable things that business and economic historians can do is to probe the relationships between people and the institutions within which they operate. Austin and I ended up organizing our history of BFGoodrich around the administration of the firm's CEOs, recognizing the need to deal with power relationships in history, the necessity of looking at interactions between individuals and institutions.

At the same time, I think that business historians need to consider seriously the context of business – that is, business in its social, political, and cultural settings, for business decisions are not made in a vacuum. This consideration has been stressed for me most cogently in the work I have tried to do in comparative business history. Having the opportunity to travel, live, and work in countries beyond the United States – particularly Japan – has especially led me to try to see business developments in new ways.

Consider one mundane example. When living in Hiroshima with my family in 1985-86, I wanted to have a regular supply of beer. So, I went to the

local beer store, introduced myself to the owner (and shared green tea with him), and made arrangements for his store to supply my tenth-floor apartment with beer. Within two hours, his son made the first delivery of a case of Asahi beer. Thereafter, I had simply to telephone him when my supply ran low: he picked up the old bottles and delivered a new case as needed. The service was great, but the cost was high, at least double the cost of beer in the United States! To me this illustrated the pros and cons of Japan's multi-layered distribution system. To an American business person, this situation could be seen as an obstacle or as an opportunity. In fact, my son is currently working in Tokyo for Gallup Japan and is, among other things, advising Bud Japan on how to crack the Japanese beer market, a challenging task indeed.

As I hope you can gather from my remarks so far, I have found my teaching and writing in business history to be rewarding most of the time. But, what of the future? What of the field of business history? Herein lies a paradox. On the one hand, business history is very much alive and is moving in exciting new directions. Yet, on the other hand, at the same time our field is in trouble.

First the good news. The meeting on the future of business history held at the Hagley Museum last April is indicative of the vigor many of us feel is coursing through the veins of business history. The program of this year's Business History Conference and the program of the Economic and Business Historical Society's meeting last April also demonstrate the wide variety of the topics with which business historians are currently dealing. Japan's annual Fuji Conference – alas, the last such conference will be held next January – has also been very important in diffusing new ideas and approaches. The one last January looked, for example, at the development of small and medium-size firms in different nations. And, of course, many new business history organizations have been formed in Europe over the past decade or so. As a group, then, business and economic historians are doing many valuable and exciting things.

However – and here the other shoe falls – there is bad news, too. Business history is still not fully accepted in the academy. Too often, the work of business and economic historians is ignored. (Chandler's work might be the exception here.) Most of us continue to find it difficult to secure places on the programs of the Organization of American Historians (OAH) and the American Historical Association. Too often we remain in our academic ghettos. We are largely unable to place our graduate students in positions in business and economic history, for new positions do not exist and replacement positions are not filled. We have not – to use Austin's term of three years ago – "connected" with the rest of academia. Nor is this situation, apparently, limited to the United States. An article by Robin Pearson in the April, 1997 *Business History* concludes that "Business historians...appear to be largely talking to each other, and to an extent to other historians" (p. 1). In other words, few scholars beyond those working in business history, much less the general public, are aware of our research findings.

Should we try to connect? Yes. It is not enough to develop our own organizations and engage in dialogues with each other. What we have to say is

important and needs to reach a larger audience. I have, unfortunately, no notion of an easy way to do this. We need, I think, simply to keep chipping away at those who disregard our work. There are some positive signs. At the 1997 meeting of the OAH Lou Galambos moderated a session on "Global Perspectives on Modern Business." Another session at the same meeting looked at "Explaining Uneven Economic Development in the United States" and featured papers by David Hounshell, Naomi Lamoreaux, and others. And, the fall 1996 edition of the *OAH Magazine*, which is aimed at high-school history teachers, was devoted to business history, with a lead-off article by Bill Becker.

Now, I want to make a transition to a new, but related, topic. Let me move beyond business history to examine an event of some fifty some years ago, an event which has shaped some of my recent thinking about history. This conference in Glasgow is our first trans-Atlantic meeting, and the subject which I wish to explore is a trans-Atlantic topic. In a sense, it began when I was in London in 1995. I was in town giving a talk at Terry Gourvish's kind invitation at the London School of Economics. By chance, this occurred during the week in May when the fiftieth anniversary of V-E Day was being celebrated. With my wife, I went to the grounds outside of Buckingham Palace for the celebration, a very emotional outpouring of World War II songs, sung by some 200,000 people on hand.

The celebration struck home with me. I was at the time editing for publication the World War II diary of James A. Dunn. A Columbus resident for most of his life, Dunn was a sailor on board the USS *Mason* (Destroyer Escort 529), which protected convoys of troop ships and merchant vessels traveling to Europe and North Africa. What makes the *Mason* unique is that she was the only ocean-going warship in the U.S. navy to employ African-Americans in positions other than messmate and cook: she was the navy's equivalent of the better known Tuskegee airmen. I have a personal interest in this story, for my father was captain of the *Mason*. In the few minutes remaining to me tonight, I would like to tell you a bit about who Dunn was, discuss what his diary reveals about the life of an African American in what was then a nearly all-white navy, say a few words about how Dunn's diary came to be published, and make some connections to business history.

Born in 1913 in West Virginia, Dunn moved to Columbus in 1926, where he received most of his secondary schooling. He then went on to attend West Virginia State College, an African American school located in Charleston, West Virginia for several years. Drafted in 1942, Dunn went into the navy. After excluding African Americans from its ranks in the 1920s and 1930s (except as stewards and cooks), the navy began accepting them for general service in June, 1942. As Dunn was training, the *Mason* was being built. Commissioned in March, 1944, she was one of hundreds of destroyer escorts mass produced to protect convoys of men and supplies on their way to the allies at the fighting fronts. Dunn kept a day-to-day, first-hand account of his life at sea in two volumes given him by his wife Jane, chronicling the *Mason*'s wartime activities from the first convoy in June, 1944 to the final return to the United States a year later.

The diary is important for what it tells us about race relations in the 1940s. Consider the entry for July 25, 1944, which Dunn wrote at the end of the first convoy to Europe, with the *Mason* docking in Belfast in Northern Ireland. "About five of us went out on liberty today and had a nice time. Everyone treats you very nice. Color doesn't mean a thing to them. In fact they like all of the colored soldiers and sailors far better than the white. Quite a few of the colored soldiers have married girls over here. The white sailors and soldiers from the states have tried to poison the minds of the Irish people against the Negro but they found out that they had lied and now the people won't hardly speak to a white sailor. All of the Colored soldiers have moved into France for the invasion, and the people hated to see them leave. The Negro is treated better any place but the United States" (Mansel Blackford, ed., *On Board the USS Mason: The World War II Diary of James A. Dunn*, Columbus, 1996, p. 24).

Dunn's diary is also valuable for what it says about the daily lives and thoughts of men, black and white, at sea. In a later interview with me, Dunn described his life on the *Mason* as one of months of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror. His diary records card and dice games, clandestine drinking parties, and Bible discussion groups that helped pass the time.

Submarines provided some of the high terror for Dunn and the other crew members on the *Mason*, and his diary records attacks the ship made, including ramming what was thought to be a sub on the surface. Far more dangerous than submarines, however, were the storms of the North Atlantic. On one convoy in particular, Convoy N.Y. 119 in the fall of 1944, the *Mason* and her charges ran into hurricane-strength winds, with seas running to fifty feet. The *Mason* and the other escorts were taking small army tugboats, barges, and oilers to England to support the allied landings in Europe – small craft that had no business being at sea. Listen to Dunn's account for one day of that convoy, October 19, 1944:

"We took our group of ships into England yesterday evening safe and sound... The weather is still very bad and a terrific storm is coming up. Around about six o'clock we received word from the Commodore to come back out to sea to help escort the other ships in... We had to keep going. It didn't look as though we were going to make it but with the help of the Lord we made it safely. We have never been in a storm as rough as that one. It has calmed down a little now and we are searching for lost ships and survivors. We should reach Plymouth, England this evening or in the morning. We have decided not to go back until we find some of the other ships. We sighted three of the army tugs and gave them their directions to Falmouth England. We also got a dispatch from one of our DEs that they were down to bread and water. They are trying to make it into Plymouth, England. But we have orders to keep searching for some of the barges that came over with us" (Blackford, *On Board*, pp. 47-48).

With that storm in mind, let me turn, now, to how Dunn's diary came to be published. That it has been published is, to me, little short of amazing, for it required the convergence of many different events.

My father died in 1988 and my mother in late 1992. So, in early 1993 I was preparing their house in Seattle for sale. In doing so I came across a carton full of the letters my father wrote home during World War II and other items relating to the *Mason*. Just a few weeks later, I received a phone call in my office at Ohio State from a Mary Pat Kelly, a freelance writer and film-maker in New York City. She was writing a book and making a PBS special about the *Mason*. She wondered if I had any information she could use. I sent her copies of all of my father's letters.

I also sent Mary Pat a special report I found in the old carton of my father's papers. Prepared by the Commodore of Convoy N.Y. 119, the one that encountered the terrible storm in the fall of 1944, the report singled out the officers and men of the *Mason* for special praise and recommended that they all receive letters of commendation for their heroism. But, for fifty years nothing had happened. The Commodore's report was lost in the navy's records. Mary Pat, however, was able to use the report I sent her to win recognition for the men of the *Mason*. President Clinton interceded, and all the surviving men who could be located were awarded letters of commendation by Secretary of the Navy John Dalton at a special ceremony in Washington, DC, on February 16, 1995. History can make a difference!

Dunn, however, was not at that ceremony; for not all the surviving crew members could be found. Instead, he read about the ceremony in a newspaper article published in the *Columbus Dispatch*. He then called me at Ohio State. We got together several times at his house in Columbus, and he told me about his life on the *Mason*. During one of our talks he mentioned his diary, and the rest, as we say, is history. Sadly, Dunn did not live to see the publication of his diary, for he passed away in January, 1996. But, he did receive his letter of commendation and he was reunited with his fellow crew members at a ship's reunion in the spring of 1995.

Editing Dunn's diary, and getting to know Dunn and the other surviving crew members of the *Mason*, brought home to me the absolute necessity of including people in history. And, of course, I was working at the same time with Austin on the final draft of the Goodrich book. As I said earlier, this work too emphasized for me the importance of human agency: what top executives decided set Goodrich's course. I think that we all need to remember that history is a story and that people make that story. To me, the human element should loom large in any account of how and why things have happened the way they did. This may sound trite, but perhaps we sometimes lose sight of this point. Stressing it a bit more may enable us to connect with others more fully, in the ways Harold Livesay has in his valuable works.

Let me close tonight with a few words of thanks. First, to my colleagues at Ohio State: Austin Kerr for recommending that I be hired (academic jobs are wonderful things!) and then for becoming a valued mentor and friend; Bill Childs for his constant support and friendship over the past decade or so; and David Stebenne, who has recently joined our department. Of course, I would like to thank all of you. As Ed Perkins observed two years ago, we now have a number of viable organizations in business and economic history, which

certainly have been of great value to me in my career. And, lastly, I would like to thank those we sometimes overlook, our publishers. Several have stood out for publishing in business history, even when it has not been popular or profitable to do so: the University of North Carolina Press so ably represented over the years by Lewis Bateman, Cambridge University Press with Frank Smith, and my own Ohio State University Press with Charlotte Dihoff and earlier Alex Holzman.