

## *Book Reviews*

**Bronfman Dynasty: The Rothschilds of the New World.** PETER C. NEWMAN.  
Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, ©1978. 318 p. ill. ISBN 0 7710 6758 5 bd \$17.95

**A Canadian Millionaire: The Life and Times of Sir Joseph Flavelle, Bart., 1858-1939.** MICHAEL BLISS. Toronto: Macmillan, 1978. xii, 562 p. ill. ISBN 0 7705 1657 2 bd. \$19.95.

The recent biographies of the Bronfman family and of Joseph Flavelle are two studies of Canadian entrepreneurs aimed at a non-specialized audience. The books, the first written by a journalist, the second by an academic, stand poles apart. Peter Newman's study of the Bronfmans is a mediocre example of the journalistic tradition of popular Canadian history, while Michael Bliss' biography of Flavelle is superb, to be savoured for its scope and the maturity of its scholarship.

*Bronfman Dynasty* contains the flaws which academics love to hurl at their journalist colleagues: it is superficially researched and two-dimensional. In his attempt to reach a wide market, Newman has subordinated the complexities of the Bronfman corporate empire to a concentration on family eccentricities and colourful incident. To be fair, it must be admitted that the Bronfmans present major problems for any biographer. Whatever the obvious fascination of this incredibly affluent and secretive family, the origins of its wealth are dubious and the family is not eager for publicity. Newman did not have access to the family's papers or corporate records for his study. In default of such sources, he based his book almost exclusively on interviews with the present generation of the family, their retinues and their critics — or so Newman tells us. His only footnotes are rambling biographies of secondary figures in his text or digressions on incidents which often wander far from the main point and irritate more than they inform. A study based largely on individual reminiscences runs a serious risk of error or misrepresentation when dealing with a family as determinedly private as the Bronfmans. One suspects that Newman could have fleshed out his interviews with a careful analysis of other available documentation, but failed to do so. Indeed, he himself admits that he was forced to correct a number of errors concerning Samuel Bronfman, the founder of the dynasty, in the galleys of his book — some of a "substantial nature" — at the instance of a member of the family.

Even as they stand, Newman's chapters on Samuel Bronfman are bright strings of anecdotes unencumbered by much analysis. One of his employees, impressed by his virtuosity, likened Samuel Bronfman's manipulation of marketing techniques to "an artist producing his chef-d'oeuvre". Bronfman's sense of dedication, this employee claimed, coupled with his drive for perfection "characterized his work, explained his tensions and frustrations... (and) also explained his successes." If that is so, little of

Bronfman's genius or drive emerges in the sketch which Newman has given us. The impression left is that to be a captain of industry requires only a retentive mind, a dirty mouth and the physical stamina to throw prolonged tantrums.

Newman often seems to be straining for effect in his writing. He compares the Bronfman family's chief lawyer, Leo Kobler, to "... one of those plastic creatures that permanently inhabit the glass souvenir paperweights sold to honey-mooning couples at Niagara Falls. You shake the bottle; the artificial snowflakes swirl about; but the frigid figure inside glares out through his protective shell untouched and untouchable, unaware of the changing seasons." Edgar Bronfman, chief of the family's American operations is characterized exotically as being "as furtive as a leopard in the tall summer grass." The writer strains valiantly if awkwardly, to put life into his characters. If the truth be told, the Bronfmans as individuals are not a very interesting lot. The patriarch, Samuel, although possessed of a strong character and insatiable ambition, was narrowly obsessed with business; the wider political and social spheres interested him only in so far as they provided the means to enhance his personal or corporate status. Sam's heirs, his sons and nephews, are for the most part gray corporation men, while his daughters are predictable children of the rich, marrying into further wealth and status or immersing themselves in the aesthetic pursuits made possible by the family fortune. There is nothing in this family's tradition of the strong commitment to public service or the striving for moral perfection that makes a family like the Rockefellers so interesting or, within the Canadian context, that characterized Joseph Flavelle.

The weakest element of Newman's approach to the Bronfmans is his almost exclusive concentration upon them as individuals. The most fascinating aspect of the Bronfman dynasty is not the family but the complex corporate structures they have spawned. Seagram, the corner stone of the Bronfman empire, has 15,200 employees and annual sales of close to three billion dollars. It owns almost six hundred brands of liquor and wine, including Barton and Guestier wines, Myer's Rum, Wolfschmidt Vodka, Mumm's Champagne, Bersano wines, Burnett's Gin and Captain Morgan Rum. Close to a million and a half bottles of Bronfman liquors are consumed every day. Seagram owns outright Texas Pacific Oil Company, the fifth largest U.S. independent. Through Cemp Investments and Edper Investments, the Bronfman holdings at various times have included sizeable shares in, among others, Bell Telephone, Curtis Publishing, Paramount Pictures, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Montreal's largest television station, three radio stations, the Montreal Forum, the Canadiens hockey team, and the firms that manufacture Mack trucks, Kodiak boots, Hush Puppies and Bauer skates. Cemp constructed the Toronto Dominion Centre and owns Cadillac Fairview, which in turn controls thirty-five Canadian shopping centres and a galaxy of other rental properties. The Bronfmans built all this from one modest bar, which they expanded to a chain of hotels and bars. On this base, they constructed their massively profitable rum-running operations during the American prohibition and ultimately the modern corporate giant which spans the globe. Control of their operations has never left the family; they and they alone constitute the top echelon of their businesses' management.

Newman does not attempt to explain the emergence or functioning of these massive enterprises. The seventy pages he devotes to the early years of the family through its rum-running years are fun — his style matches the racy subject matter, but the ten pages he allocates to the crucial period of the expansion of the Bronfman interests from 1933 to the mid-1950's is grossly inadequate; nor does he attempt to explain the evolution of the business from then to the present. Anyone who has questions about the economic context which allowed the Bronfmans to prosper, about the features of their corporations which have allowed them to outstrip their rivals, about the capitalization, promotional strategies or management structures of the Bronfman enterprises, will find their questions unanswered. At best, *Bronfman Dynasty* is a book about the Bronfmans without their businesses and as such, it is unsatisfying.

The most immediately apparent difference between the Bronfman and the Flavelle biographies is the extent of the available resources for writing the latter biography. Flavelle left behind him papers totalling in the order of 250,000 pages of correspondence. From such exceptional source material, Bliss, with patience and industry, has been able to piece together an extraordinarily complete portrait of Flavelle and his times. Indeed, it is remarkable how seldom Bliss has had to move outside the Flavelle papers for his references. This is not to suggest that the author's approach has been narrow; unlike Newman, Bliss places his subject carefully within his economic and social context. Bliss examines Flavelle's career in food processing, investment and management of a whole spectrum of Canadian companies and financial institutions, from the Canadian Bank of Commerce and the Canadian Life Assurance Company to the Robert Simpson Company and CCM, while at the same time delineating the underlying dynamics of Flavelle's success. He brings out clearly the fascinating relationship between Flavelle's Methodism and his entrepreneurialism, Methodism providing the ideology, the discipline, the basic management style and, indeed, within the structure of its congregations and class meetings, the contacts which powered Flavelle's rise.

Bliss moves beyond Flavelle's entrepreneurialism to look at his strong commitment to his church, his personal involvement in philanthropy (Bliss calculates that at the peak of his donations in the 1920's, Flavelle contributed at least one million dollars to charity, about sixty to eighty per cent of his income), his public service in university and hospital reform in Toronto, and his wartime chairmanship of the Imperial Munitions Board, the largest industrial organization to exist in Canada up to that time. Detailed research and lucid explanations are the hallmarks of Bliss' style. He never touches upon an aspect of Flavelle's career without explaining its larger import. His discussion of Flavelle's relationship to the pork-packing industry, for instance, begins with a study of the lowly hog itself and the processing of its meat, works through the development of Toronto as a processing and shipment centre for the industry and the nature of the competition within the city, the development of the British market and the Flavelle strategy for selling in it. Rather than bogging down in tedious detail, the study suggests the fascinating complexities with which Flavelle contended to make his fortune and, unlike the Bronfman biography, makes extremely clear the place of Flavelle within his industry and the precise reasons for his success. Indeed, the whole book is a series of insights into aspects of Canadian social life and economic development. The study, however, remains an integrated whole. The personality of Flavelle always dominates and characterization flows easily and smoothly throughout the narrative.

Bliss has the advantage over Newman of dealing with an individual of far broader scope than any of the Bronfmans. His approach to his subject is also more complex. Newman gives his audience the sort of stereotype of the wealthy that they expect: he emphasizes the rascality of the first generation of the Bronfmans and the incredible privilege of second and third generations of the family. Bliss is more in sympathy with his subject, but also maintains a certain distance from him. Bliss often balances attraction and distance by stressing the contradictions within Flavelle's situation. Flavelle was a firm and often tedious proponent of the efficacy of individual effort, but, as Bliss makes clear, his own success depended as much upon a certain conjuncture of economic circumstances as upon his own skills. Flavelle discovered for himself the contradiction in capitalism that discipline and self-denial were requisite for success, but that success brought wealth and ease, a state, as Bliss points out, for which the Protestant ethic had ill prepared him. Bliss more than Newman is subtle enough to savour these discrepancies; he is also much more iconoclastic than Newman. He refuses to fit Flavelle into the robber baron mould. Flavelle has been accused of profiteering both during the First World War and after; charges Bliss convincingly refutes, while balancing denials with an emphasis on the contradictions within the concept of Christian capitalism, since the profit-maximizing drive of capitalism operated independently of moral considerations.

The question remains whether Bliss' book can be considered popular biography or, indeed, whether good entrepreneurial history can be written as popular biography. Bliss, in the tradition of Creighton, Lower and W.L. Morton, writes for an educated rather than a mass audience. Still, whatever the complexities of his subject matter, he eschews jargon and sociological models which would make his book less appealing to a general audience. With a central figure who dominates his account, Bliss can maintain human interest without sacrificing discussion of weighty issues and broad trends. It may not be possible to marry completely popular and academic history, but Bliss comes as close as it is likely to be possible.

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**Lost Toronto.** WILLIAM DENDY. Toronto, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978. xv, 206 p. ill. map. ISBN 0 19 540294 4 bd. \$19.50.

**Regina Before Yesterday.** Edited and introduced by J. WILLIAM BRENNAN. Regina: City of Regina, ©1978. 228 p. ill. (Regina's 75th Anniversary Management Board's Historical Committee) \$15.00 pa.

Historic photographs provide a dramatic and instant indication of the differences between our contemporary world and the world we have lost. Viewed in isolation, they tend to conjure a world that was warmer, nicer, more human: most of us have an easily triggered nostalgia. In books that are heavily visual therefore, the accompanying text is critically important if we are to gain a balanced view of that past world, particularly for volumes on visual urban history at a time when contemporary urban society is often regarded as less than ideal.

Two recent books on Canadian cities show the strengths and weaknesses of an emphasis on visual evidence. William Dendy's marvellous compilation of archival photographs that purport to show *Lost Toronto* implicitly looks back longingly on an earlier and richer landscape, while *Regina before Yesterday*, tends to look back as a measure of how far the community had come since the pioneer days. On casual inspection, both volumes trigger the appropriate emotions of regret and celebration and there are some excellent images that make both attractive additions to most libraries. The written texts, however, are unbalanced.

Dendy's *Lost Toronto* concentrates on almost one hundred buildings that occupied a small area of central Toronto and are organized in a sequence in which one might come across them while out walking. For each lost building, there is a matching descriptive compilation of who owned, built, and designed the structure; information concerning important events in Toronto or Ontario history connected with the site or building; an architectural historical analysis of style; and a concluding comment on when the building was lost and for what reason.

Many of these impressive early buildings were lost by fire or commercial redevelopment at the turn of the century; another set have disappeared in the last two decades, and to these, Dendy chooses to comment on the aesthetic quality of the replacement use through a small contemporary photograph. Many of these replacements are parking lots, or comparatively sterile high rise structures. As a plea for conservation of the city's past, such poignant visual contrasts could be very effective propaganda. Yet Dendy's 'propaganda' can only be effective if a reader is concerned with the meaning of these structures as aesthetic rather than functional units. Dendy does not seem to connect the parking lots with the bank towers that surround them, bank towers that are the late twentieth century