

going on in the basement of your home? Does your mother visit you in prison? Nevertheless, it has done what a good mystery should do—leave one hankering for more.

Besides being a good read, the book made me much more aware of the scientific and technical aspects of document creation and authentication. Yet interestingly, what kept the manuscript librarians from buying the Oath in the first place, despite the preliminary scientific testing, was provenance. Physically, the Oath was almost perfect; what it lacked was a credible genealogy.

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**Quick to the Frontier: Canada's Royal Bank.** DUNCAN MCDOWALL. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993. 478 p, illus. ISBN 0-7710-5504-8.

In the spring of 1984, historians interested in the role of business in Canadian history met for the first time. At the conference, Duncan McDowall challenged the business and academic communities to overcome their prejudices against the writing of official corporate histories. In the decade since then, few have responded to that challenge. Few Canadian businesses have sought to record their histories, and fewer still have thought to have corporate histories produced by academic historians. At the same time, few academics, even among the small number who might list business history as one of their interests, have focused on writing the history of particular firms, whether commissioned or not.

Perhaps what is needed to stimulate more interest is a Canadian model of what a good corporate history would look like. With *Quick to the Frontier*, the Royal Bank of Canada and Duncan McDowall have provided that model. The Royal Bank provided McDowall with access, resources, and assistance, allowing him to make the best use of what appears to be a rich archival collection. A quick look at McDowall's footnotes reveals how the bank's archivists directed him to executive letterbooks, minutebooks, and various subject files, dating from the 1860s to the 1990s. The bank supported the creation of two databases that will provide the organization, as well as future historians, with a valuable guide to the *Royal Bank Magazine* and the *Monetary Times*. In addition, bank officials directed McDowall to former employees, whose interviews helped ensure that the bank's story would be about people.

In return for preserving and managing its own historical records, for commissioning **and** actively supporting an academic historian, what did the Royal Bank get? Quite simply, the best Canadian corporate history yet written. Duncan McDowall's background as a trained historian is evident throughout the book. The development of the bank is situated in the appropriate historical context; the reader is given a clear sense of the social and economic world beyond the bank's walls. Although McDowall has an eye for interesting stories, he selects only those anecdotes that help illuminate the nature of the bank and its developing corporate culture. Less relevant "human interest" stories are included in vignettes, and therefore do not disrupt the flow of the main history. As a historian, McDowall also knows what other sources to consult when the bank's records are silent. Perhaps most signifi-

cantly, without ignoring the decisions and policies made at the top of the organization, McDowall is aware that other interesting questions can be addressed in a corporate history. He explores such issues as the relationship between the bank and the Canadian state, the “work culture” of bank employees, the feminization of the workforce, and the impact of new technologies on the organization of the central and branch offices. To borrow the phrase McDowall uses to describe the Royal Bank, *Quick to the Frontier* is “progressive conservative,” preserving the main elements of a traditional corporate history, while exploring some new ground.

With a writing style that is clear and appealing, McDowall outlines the history of the Royal Bank from its origins in the transatlantic economy of Victorian Halifax to its struggles in the global economy of late twentieth-century Canada. In the finest chapters of the book, McDowall examines the history of the bank from the 1880s to the Depression from a number of different perspectives. He explores the national expansion through the opening of branch banks and strategic mergers, the move from Halifax to Montreal, the involvement of the bank in international finance, and the work culture of banking clerks. The latter analysis is crucial to understanding the overall corporate culture of the bank, since bank executives emerged from the work culture of the “bank boys.” This chapter should be read by all those interested in the development of work and class in industrializing Canada. McDowall seems to have had more difficulty identifying broader themes for the period following 1930, so that much of the rest of the book follows the bank by decade. While the unique challenges of the Depression and World War II may invite separate treatment, I found the coverage of the postwar period less satisfying, and more traditional in its emphasis on the executive suite. Such issues as competitive and expansion strategies, work culture, and international banking, while touched upon in the final chapters, do not receive the sustained analysis they do in the first half of the book.

The point of departure for the entire book is McDowall’s contention that the corporate culture of the Royal Bank emphasized boldness and embraced “progressive ways,” at least in comparison to other Canadian banks. Such an emphasis on innovation may disconcert those who praise or criticize Canadian banks for their conservatism. McDowall does not deny that the bank could be conservative; he shows how the bank’s officials had difficulty responding to the needs of western farmers early in the century, or to the growing desire of women in the organization to be something more than “Mary” during the 1960s and 1970s. Nor does he ignore those times when the bank acted with questionable boldness; he shows how Herbert Holt’s use of bank loans to support his other investments in the late 1920s almost wrecked the company, and outlines, albeit somewhat briefly, some of the problems created by third world and oil boom loans in the 1980s. For the most part, however, *Quick to the Frontier* celebrates the achievements of the bank rather than dwelling on its failures. It is to be hoped that the positive tone, which is achieved without sacrificing quality or turning the book into hagiography, will encourage other corporations to preserve their past, through the wise use of archivists and academic historians.

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