

FOREWORD

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Nine years ago a small group of historians and economists met on the campus of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois to explore their common interests in the discipline which, for lack of a more precise term, is known as business history. In the ensuing years this group, supplemented by a growing audience, has met annually in February despite the hazards of weather and other commitments.

The Business History Conference, the name adopted by the group, has no claim to being the first, for several sporadic efforts preceded its first meeting. The Conference has, however, maintained continuity by annual meetings and the issuance of a semi-annual Business History Conference Letter. Annual meetings have been held at such universities as Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Marquette, Purdue, Illinois and most recently at Michigan State. Although the focal point for annual meetings has been the Middle West, the Conference Letter has a wider distribution and goes regularly to 275 addressees in the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia.

Business history as a discipline has matured in the nine years spanned by the Business History Conference. Although there is no unanimity of agreement upon a definition nor upon precisely what should be included in a university-level course, the broad outlines of the field have become sharpened and certain identifiable frontier contours have been delineated. Business history is concerned with the business firm and its leadership, operating in an industry within an economy, all within the context of a given civilization. Business history is to economic history as micro-economics is to macro-economics. It should represent a synthesis of the professional disciplines of history, economics and business administration. Further, the focus upon the firm should emphasize the historical development of policy-making, management and control, for without such focus the impact of any study of the firm would be vitiated by a mass of antiquarian facts which would have little meaning to anyone.

In addition to scholarly participants in past conferences on business history it has been the policy of the Conference to include

businessmen in the programs. More and more, thoughtful businessmen are coming to recognize the value of a historically grounded comparative point of view toward the business firm and its environment. More and more, scholars are coming to appreciate the presence of such perceptive business leaders and to benefit from their interest and insight into business history. Men like James C. Worthy, sometime Vice-President of Sears, Roebuck and Company and sometime Assistant Secretary of Commerce have articulated their concern for business history. Worthy has said:

American businessmen as a group display remarkably little sense of history -- at least so far as business is concerned. This is a curious fact because, with respect to other aspects of their past, the American people, including businessmen, have a well developed historical sense. However, the failure of businessmen to appreciate -- indeed even to be aware of -- the history of their own institution is potentially dangerous, because no leadership group can survive for long without the sure touch and sense of direction that comes from awareness and knowledge of his own history. What is needed is not preoccupation with the past but a better understanding of how the present evolved out of the past and how the future is in a process of evolving out of the present. The businessman needs a more acute sense of where business is going, and he cannot have that in proper degree without knowing where it has been. Herein lies a particularly critical failure of the schools of business, because the study and teaching of "business" history as distinct from "economic" and "social" history is a comparatively recent and still highly restricted development.¹

As a result of the coalescent interest of businessmen and scholars, the last ten years have seen a rather substantial increase in the number of worthy volumes dealing with the historical development of the business firm. Books like those dealing with Standard Oil of New Jersey and Indiana, Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company, Bucyrus-Erie, and excellent studies of small firms like the Bodine Electric Company or the Smith and Griggs Manufacturing Company attest to this boom in business history. Scholars like Ralph and Muriel Hidy, George S. Gibb, Henrietta Larson, Harold F. Williamson, Thomas C. Cochran, Howard Bennett and Theodore F. Marburg have contributed substantially to the growing stature of the profession.

Further, there has been an increasing interest in the universities and new courses in business history have been regularly taking their place beside more traditional disciplines.

It is in the context of these developments that Michigan State University invited the Business History Conference to hold its 1962 meeting on its campus at the Kellogg Center. Upon a base of excellent physical facilities the Michigan State Faculty Committee erected a program of significance entitled "America as a Business Civilization." This unified theme served to bring together historians, economists, and faculty from the business school disciplines such as marketing and management. Although each session was autonomous it did bear importantly upon the general theme and indicated clearly the progress that is being made in historical research into one of the major institutions in American history, namely: business and its relation to American civilization. Further, the Bureau of Business and Economic Research of Michigan State University's Graduate School of Business Administration has generously accepted the responsibility for publishing the Proceedings of the Conference. For an excellent program in an exceptional environment and for the assumption of responsibility for publication, Michigan State University has placed the Business History Conference ever in its debt.

Finally, it should again be noted here that business as an institution has been too long neglected by academicians as a vital force in American history and as a proper object of meaningful research by historians, economists, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists and social psychologists. The emerging social science research programs give evidence of some redress in this imbalance although they are following a trail blazed by the business historian. It is the conviction of this writer, yet shared by his professional colleagues, that the writing and study of business history will help produce even better businessmen and at the same time improve substantially public understanding of the contributions made by businessmen and the market place, in the past and the present, to the greatness we refer to as American Civilization. As Alfred North Whitehead has noted, "A great society is a society in which its men of business think greatly of their functions."²

1. James C. Worthy, "Education for Business Leadership." Journal of Business, XXVIII (January 1955), 78-79.
2. Alfred North Whitehead, Adventure of Ideas (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933), p. 124.

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