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## The Business History Conference: An Introduction

**W**ITH one exception, the papers that follow were delivered at the 14th annual meeting of the Business History Conference, held at the University of Western Ontario in London on March 3-4, 1967. This was the first time that the Conference had assembled in Canada, and it did so in honor of the nation's Centennial of Confederation. The turn-out was gratifying: some 90 persons attended the various sessions representing, among them, some 25 colleges and universities on both sides of the border, and half a dozen business concerns. Luckily the weather was favorable, and the schedule was so arranged that there was ample opportunity for informal conversation and shop-talk.

Naturally enough, special attention was devoted to Canadian affairs. At the banquet on Friday night, presided over by Western's Vice-President Ross B. Willis, W. Earle McLaughlin, Chairman and President of the Royal Bank of Canada, delivered a forthright and informed address on the timely topic of Canadian economic independence; what he had to say was widely reported on television, radio, and in the press from one end of Canada to the other. His remarks, included herein, reflect a hard core of business thinking that may well influence the course of Canadian-American economic relations for some time to come.

The sessions held on Saturday morning, with John J. Madden of Guelph as moderator, were devoted to the approaches to business history in Canada as viewed by a historian, Fred H. Armstrong of Western; by an economist, John H. Dales of Toronto, and by a writer, William Kilbourn of York. All three papers were thought-provoking and gave rise to lively discussion. My guess is that Armstrong's brilliant survey of Canadian historical literature bearing upon business history will long stand as a bibliographical landmark. Dales, with noteworthy courage, undertook to illuminate the tenuous but potentially significant points of liaison between business history and economic theory, and presented a strong plea—backed by persuasive evidence—for broadening and strengthening these ties. Kilbourn, colorful as always, highlighted the opportunities that business historians have of making their work come alive if only they will immerse themselves in, and report without inhibition, the bits and pieces of human history out of which formal history is, in truth, composed.

The opening theme of the Saturday afternoon sessions, presided over by Hugh G. H. Aitken of Amherst, was the special problems of company historians. This theme, by the way, had been eloquently urged upon Ralph Hidy of Harvard

and myself by Arthur H. Cole who felt strongly that we should pass along to our confreres—particularly younger ones just starting out—some of the first-hand experiences we had encountered in trying to write company histories. Accordingly I sought to synthesize the findings of our profession concerning company-scholar relations up to now, added some concrete examples from my experiences with the Burlington histories, and concluded with some recommendations for the possible improvement of such relations. Ralph Hidy followed with a brilliant summary of his long and varied experiences in dealing with the masses of raw material involved in any company history, and in assembling and directing staffs of associates and research assistants Harold F. Williamson of Northwestern brought the afternoon sessions to a close with a perceptive analysis of the place of business history in the spectrum of History - Economic History - Economics. Unfortunately, because of travel plans, Arthur H. Cole of Harvard could not remain for the sprightly discussion that followed these papers, but he kindly consented to send along some of his observations; they are included herewith, and, as might be expected, provide keen insights into the topics under discussion.

As has become customary at gatherings of the Conference, we gave an opportunity to graduate students to give brief precis of their work in progress, and as usual the fare was varied and stimulating to the large number of conferees who turned out for the session on Friday afternoon. Under the chairmanship of Don Avery of Western, Gabor S. Borit of Boston University gave a fascinating account of Abraham Lincoln's early—and changing—views on the matter of taxation. He was followed by Donald J. Elliott of the University of Montana who illustrated the links between commercial banks and economic growth by citing a novel quantitative study he is making of the Ninth Federal Reserve District. Herbert C. Goltz of Western next compared and contrasted the ideals of Charles Elliott Perkins as expressed in his early love letters with the actual accomplishments of the man when, twenty years later, he was in charge of the Burlington. Finally, Ian MacPherson, also of Western, summarized a hitherto-untapped subject, the operations of an American land-grant railway in the United Kingdom in the early 1870's.

This concludes a summary of the varied substantive fare presented to the Conference and reprinted here. But the opportunities for lively give-and-take were by no means limited to the formal sessions. After the informal coffee hour on Friday afternoon during registration, President and Mrs. G. Edward Hall of Western entertained at their home all members of the Conference at a delightful cocktail party. And following the banquet at the Hotel London that evening, the hall was transformed into a lounge where conferees could and did linger long to refresh themselves and talk over matters of mutual interest.

Coffee hours both morning and afternoon on Saturday generated more shop talk, while after luncheon many took the guided tours about the campus. Our proceedings wound up with a supper Saturday evening during which, in his inimitably informal manner, our Secretary Ross M. Robertson of Indiana conducted in record time the once-a-year 'business meeting' of the Conference.

On behalf of the Conference and for myself, I want to express appreciation to the University of Western Ontario for its hospitality to the conferees, and for making possible the publication of these proceedings. Special thanks too go to Ross Robertson for his patient and constant co-operation in planning the meeting, and, here on the campus, to Dean Robert N. Shervill of Middlesex College, to Victor C. Smith who served as assistant convenor, and to Ross Virtue, George Bullas, Cameron McDonald, Walter Borosa, Mrs. Elsie Witherden, and a host of others who worked out and efficiently implemented the myriad details associated with the meetings. I venture to hope that someday the Business History Conference will see fit to resume its deliberations on Canadian soil.