

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Andrew Godley, Oliver M. Westall, eds. *Business History and Business Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996. xiii + 258 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-4144-0.

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This volume of essays originated from a business history conference developed by faculty from the University of Reading (UK) and Lancaster University (UK). Presentations were made at Reading on November 14, 1992. It is not clear if the current essays—called chapters—are in their conference formats. All writers have excellent credentials for their areas of expertise in business, economics, history and/or sociology, and their essays often feature combinations of two or more academic areas.

In their introduction to the book, Godley and Westall consider how business culture—combinations of ideas, activities, behaviors, etc.—impacted upon strategy, conduct, and the organization of individual and groups of firms. The search for common themes throughout the collection is a point of emphasis for the editors despite the fact that the essays cover such a variety of situations. High technology, Jewish immigrant entrepreneurship, the development of the British and American cotton industries, problems encountered through cultural differences by German exporters to Japan, publishing, motor car manufacturing in Britain, and banking give some indication of subject matter variations.

“British Culture and the Development of High Technology Sectors,” by Maurice Kirby of Lancaster University, is typical of the essays from this diverse collection. Kirby reviews several hypotheses, which attempt to explain the reasons for British industrial decline, especially since the end of the Second World War. Inept British governmental policy combined with a “bloated” public sector was one reason. Another was the concentration of financial interests and the Treasury on maintaining Britain’s position in the international economy.

Industrial progress was placed on the “back burner.” The British educational system received its share of the blame. The emphasis placed on the humanities and classics in the schools over science and technology was cited as another contribution towards manufacturing decline. The writer taught for a year in the 1960s at a large London public day school and was once astounded when several members of the common room were surprised that he had not taken Latin, which they considered fundamental in the test of one’s intellectual ability. In general, the legacy of the past seemed to inhibit British industry from easily accepting and implementing organizational and technological innovations.

Kirby puts big emphasis on the aircraft industry as a symbol of Britain’s manufacturing decline. After 1945, Kirby believes subsidy-supported military technology ceased to be easily transferred to commercial usage. Britain could not compete with the civilian American aircraft industry in research and development expenditures, optimal facility size, or in the recruitment, training, and effective use of personnel. It also did not possess America’s marketing strength. Unfortunately, the problems of the aircraft industry were often manifested in other high technology endeavors. The legacy of the past simply could not be surrendered. On the other hand, while teaching in England, this writer was told two or three times that the legacy of the past “was really more important than most of the new ideas, anyway.”

The authors have done a very good job but probably will not sell many books, at least in the United States. At \$80 for a 258-page book, not too many will be sold. Few scholars can afford to buy their own copy of a volume

of essays in which only one or two essays will pertain to their special field of interest. The emphasis on library electronics and Internet availability combined with declining budgets does not bode well for the future of books such as this. Add to these problems a declining interest in history as a subject matter by college students, and you get small sales. There does not appear to be a turn-around

scheduled in the near future.

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