

The Railway King of Canada: Sir William Mackenzie, 1849-1923, by R. B. Fleming. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991. xxi, 340 pp. Illus. \$29.95 cloth.

R. B. Fleming presents us with a sympathetic portrait of one of the alleged robber barons of Canada, financier-promoter Sir William Mackenzie. Declaring that "biography enriches history," the author places [Mackenzie's] "life itself [at] the focal point" of his study (pp. xix, xxi). This approach allows Fleming to catalogue Mackenzie's myriad interests. But the organization impedes the author's analysis of Mackenzie's business strategy and his management of a series of firms besides the Canadian Northern Railway. The extant sources hinder his attempt to illuminate the character of the man who made the business decisions.

Complementing T. D. Regehr's work, Fleming demonstrates that Mackenzie's business interests extended far beyond the railway company most closely associated with his name. Before the promoter began to assemble the components of the Canadian Northern, he had already made a substantial fortune contracting for the Canadian Pacific Railway. During the 1890s he acquired street railway concerns in Toronto, Winnipeg, Montreal, and Birmingham, England. With the Canadian Northern under way, Mackenzie gained control of *La Presse*, promoted utilities which would become Brazilian Traction, and created a hydro-electric company in Ontario which competed for several years with the Ontario Hydro Commission. Indeed, the German newspaper accolade of Mackenzie as the "Railway King of Canada" diminished his activities.

Although Fleming does not rehearse the origins and expansion of the Canadian Northern, Mackenzie's most important venture in western Canada, he presents some new material about his subject's actions in British Columbia. We learn more about Mackenzie's role in an abortive plan to build a railway line behind the contested American Panhandle from Telegraph Creek to the Yukon during the late 1890s. The author clarifies the familial and business ties between the Northern Construction Company and Mackenzie and partner Donald Mann. He also reveals how Mackenzie was able to monopolize the west coast whaling industry through Canadian Northern Pacific Fisheries. But the book contains little on the larger acquisitions of Canadian Western Lumber and Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir), and nothing on Canadian Fish and Cold Storage which built what was described as the largest fish packing plant in North America at Prince Rupert.

Fleming reiterates Mackenzie's "chief role" as "company representative in investment houses and Parliament" (p. 71). To illustrate how Mackenzie bargained with supplicants, the author draws on the memoirs of Martin Nordegg. He suggests the promoter's skill in dealing with those to whom he was beholden in an account of Mackenzie's actions to shore up Borden's government in 1917, even after the prime minister had nationalized the Canadian Northern. Unfortunately, he does not explain how the financier "juggled," to borrow Canadian Northern superintendent D. B. Hanna's metaphor, funds from one concern to the next to extend his holdings. Describing the transcontinental railway system as "the most speculative of all Mackenzie's investments" (p. 81), Fleming recognizes that the "enormous principal of its bonds" had "small chance of being repaid, war or no war" (p. 188). Why, then, did Mackenzie sell "profitable stocks" from his other concerns "in a futile attempt to keep the Canadian Northern afloat" (p. xx)? Does entrepreneurial vision mean much if "vision is often dependent for its success on luck or coincidence" (p. 61)? If, as a trade journal maintained, Mackenzie's genius lay more in his "amazing ability to raise capital" (p. 245), this reader would welcome an extended examination of British investor appraisals of his projects as well as his strategy.

Fleming's attempts to defend Mackenzie's management actions is rather less successful. Lock-step chronological chapters require that the author cut back and forth between Mackenzie's efforts to run each firm. Thus, it becomes difficult to discern the promoter's motives and goals and evaluate his decisions in these concerns which Fleming contends were "admirable successes" (pp. xix-xx) with the exception of the Canadian Northern. Such an evaluation is also impeded by the author's reluctance to offer some financial data series for the respective firms. A case in point is his discussion of Mackenzie's direction of the Toronto Railway Company from 1891 to 1921. Here he seeks to overturn the interpretation of Christopher Armstrong and H. V. Nelles that Mackenzie was milking the trolley company for profit. To support his contention that Mackenzie had made the Toronto system "among the best in North America" (p. 173), Fleming cites a 1910 report on Toronto transport by two New York consultants, but does not present or discuss the data which led the investigators to such a sunny conclusion.

To find the man behind the manager is perhaps most difficult. The absence of Mackenzie personal papers and the apparent dearth of business correspondence outside the Canadian Northern holdings make puzzling Fleming's decision to focus on "personalities and interpersonal relation-

ships" (p. xix). Diligent collection of press accounts and reminiscences leads Fleming to suggest what probably were important elements in Mackenzie's personality such as a tendency to suppress harsh memories and a disinclination to attend to detail. But rarely does the author use these observations to explain specific actions. Much of the personal description is drawn from what appears to be society columnists of the day. It tells us more about the image of the Railway King than about the individual.

This last comment suggests an alternative organization. An explicit life-legend dichotomy, similar to that which Maury Klein employed in his study of American robber baron Jay Gould, might allow one to argue more acutely that the historical record contradicts some of the notorious elements of Mackenzie's image. But this wish for another book should not detract from the scholarly one which the author has written. Fleming's portrait gives us a Mackenzie more complex than the one we had before.

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Alex Lord's British Columbia Recollections of a Rural School Inspector, 1915-1936, edited by John Calam. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991. xii, 192 pp. Illus. \$39.95 cloth; \$15.95 paper.

This is an exciting time in British Columbia rural educational history. Over the past few years, educational historians have turned their attention to the nature of rural schools as focal points in uncovering a host of previously neglected yet important issues. The understanding of rural education and the importance of gender becomes more precise as through the eyes of the often frightened, young, inexperienced female teacher, historians are able to study pedagogical efficiency and student retardation, the condition of school buildings and equipment, curriculum, teacher transiency, and teacher/pupil/parent interaction. At once, the rural community is open to inspection: wide discrepancies are revealed among communities in politics, industry, ethnicity, customs, religion, and climate and terrain. Far from the urban-based Department of Education bureaucracy in Victoria, local participants struggle through daily activities particular to their social and physical environment.

On a number of levels, *Alex Lord's British Columbia* contributes quite nicely to this ongoing study. To complement the teacher's perspective of local communities, Calam has allowed for a view from a "man in the field," a regional school inspector charged with supervising a number of