

*Eye on the Future: Business People in Calgary and the Bow Valley, 1870–1900.* By Henry C. Klassen. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002. xxxvii + 458 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, maps, photographs, tables. Paper, \$(Can) 29.95. ISBN 1-552-38086-5.

Reviewed by H. V. Nelles

As the articles and reviews in these pages regularly reveal, business history is delivered to us through many different forms: biographies, histories of the firm, studies of entrepreneurship, sectoral and industrial studies, histories of organizational change, analyses of strategy, histories of technology, and international comparisons, to name only the most common. In *Eye on the Future*, Henry Klassen adopts a different approach: that of a comprehensive regional perspective. His goal is to capture the total history of all business broadly defined within a recognizable geographic space, from the beginning of settlement in about 1870 to the maturity of the first phase of development around 1900. Thus he is concerned with the business challenges faced by both transcontinental railroaders and Chinese restaurateurs; his frame of analysis includes big ranchers, department-store managers and clerks, as well as saddle makers, real-estate developers, booksellers, photographers, milliners, lawyers, boardinghouse keepers, private as well as branch bankers, and—for once—farmers considered as business people. It is without question an astonishing ambition, one that can only be nurtured and realized within a tightly controlled span of space and time.

Klassen, recently retired from a distinguished teaching career at the University of Calgary, could be considered the dean of business historians of western Canada. Over the years, his carefully constructed essays dealing with individual entrepreneurs or companies, all based upon a painstaking reading of primary sources, have appeared in journals of western history and collected conference proceedings. Lately he has been on something of a publishing tear. In 1999 he published *A Business History of Alberta*, in which he explored the major topics of the subject within a provincial frame of reference mainly over the course of the twentieth century. His biography of the mid-nineteenth-century Montreal politician-businessman, Luther Holton, which he had been nurturing for

some time, appeared two years later. And now, within the space of a year, comes this synoptic investigation of the development of the entire business system during the late nineteenth century in the southern Alberta business corridor that grew up in the valley of the Bow River. These hefty books, appearing within a few years of one another, represent the culmination of a life's work.

Each chapter of *Eye on the Future* explores a particular kind of business that characterized the different subperiods of the thirty years under examination, such as exploration, open-range ranching, general stores, teamsters and railroads, the municipal corporation and its relation to business people, the transformation of financial services, the development of multilayered ranching and farming communities, urban business, department stores and mass marketing, the special place of women in business, the service industry, and small business. Klassen's view of these changing business activities has been built up from a careful reading of an enormous number of primary sources in archives and personal collections across the continent, account books, ledgers, business correspondence, deeds, land titles, contracts, bankruptcy proceedings, wills, lawsuits, and newspaper reports. Klassen has read and absorbed every document that exists on his subject, and—ever the diligent researcher—his patient inquiries of small communities has turned up a wealth of new material, especially documents dealing with agriculture and small business.

The great strengths of Klassen's approach are its inclusive view, the detailed human face he is able to put on business, and his ability to see the opportunities and the challenges of business from within the enterprise. Klassen is particularly effective in bringing previously overlooked businesspeople, like women, into his field of vision. His comprehensive and cross-referenced perspective makes it possible for him to see very clearly the networks of personal relations and local credit upon which business depended. The weakness of this sweeping, inclusive vision is that it is sometimes difficult to see how all the pieces fit together into a dynamic system. It could be said, with a fair degree of certainty, that Henry Klassen knows all the businesspeople in his region over thirty years by name, as well as who they married, who their relatives were, and who either loaned or owed them money. Sociologists, economists, and historians not given to this kind of archival sorting and sifting will be pillaging these pages for a generation in search

of support for their more easily drawn abstractions. Henry Klassen, in his gentle and modest way, is satisfied to present a thoroughly documented, generous, and humane picture of the toil, triumphs, and frequent failures of men and women who come across in these pages as his friends and neighbors.

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