

Le Crédit lyonnais (1863–1986): Etudes historiques [The Crédit Lyonnais (1863–1986): Historical Studies]. Edited by Bernard Desjardins et al. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2003. 1020 pp. Tables, figures, notes, index. Paper, €43.90. ISBN 2-600-00807-1.

Reviewed by Kenneth Mouré

The development of joint-stock banks and deposit banking revolutionized French banking during Louis Napoleon's Second Empire (1852–1870). From its founding in 1863, the Crédit lyonnais has been a major force in French banking history. It rapidly came to dominate French banking and, by the turn of the century, had become the world's biggest bank; although overtaken by British banks in the early years of the twentieth century, it remained the largest French bank (excepting several years in the 1920s) until the creation of the Banque Nationale de Paris in 1966. Nationalized in 1945 and privatized in 1999, it attracted major media attention in the 1990s for its unprecedented losses and multiple financial scandals. This hefty collection of essays and interviews covers a broad swath of Crédit lyonnais history, stretching from 1863 to 1986, and offers fascinating reading for those wishing to delve into arcane details of French banking history.

The collection is intended to display the wide range of inquiry into Crédit lyonnais history in recent years, and it showcases both the variety and the vitality of current research in French banking history and the richness of the Crédit lyonnais archives. It brings together forty-one essays and interviews and is divided into five parts. The first, and longest, section, of fifteen essays covers the structure, character, and personnel of the bank: it includes a biographical sketch of founder Henri Germain, studies of major strikes in 1925 and 1974, analyses of architectural policy and regional development, and an overview of the extensive industrial and financial research departments within the bank. Subsequent sections cover the aid extended by Crédit lyonnais to domestic industry, its development as an international bank through the establishment of foreign branches ranging from London to Cairo and Constantinople, its activities in the context of the institutional and financial environment (relations with financial partners and with competitors in France and in Europe), and its response to a series of twentieth-century crises, beginning with reconstruction after the First World

War and continuing through the Great Depression, the German occupation, and the monetary and financial crises of the 1970s. Each section features a brief introduction by one of the five volume editors, and contributors include leading historians of French economic and banking history, from François Caron to Alain Plessis, with Youssef Cassis, Michel Lescure, and the indefatigable Hubert Bonin weighing in as well.

The authors have been permitted to treat their subjects in considerable detail; readers seeking detailed historical analysis of particular aspects of Crédit lyonnais history will find much to reward them. Marc Flandreau's review of the bank's extraordinary Service des Études, which evaluated risk in foreign countries to counsel clients seeking sound investments abroad, and studies of Crédit lyonnais financial aid to French railroads (François Caron) and to the automobile (Jean-Louis Loubet) and aircraft industries (Emmanuel Chadeau), are perceptive analyses that draw on the bank's archives. Also notable are essays by Youssef Cassis on the Crédit lyonnais in relation to its European competition, Hubert Bonin on competition between the Crédit lyonnais and its main French rival, the Société Générale, and a judicious evaluation of the bank's comportment during the German occupation (particularly with regard to the spoliation of Jewish clients and collaboration with the German occupation authorities) by Alain Plessis and Philippe Verheyde. Interviews with Crédit lyonnais bankers who played significant roles in developments of the last sixty years add an interesting oral history to the collection, providing intriguing insight into the changing culture within the bank.

The freedom to develop depth and detail on these subjects and the periods in which the events occurred also produces some unevenness in their treatment and sometimes undermines the quality of analysis. It is in the nature of the collection that there are gaps in coverage, often explicitly identified by the editors, and there is considerable repetition between essays, as significant events in the bank's history are recounted again and again (the editors should have avoided the repetition of identical passages that appeared in two different essays by one author on pages 617–18 and 716). The result is a collage that displays an impressive amount of detail about the bank but does not yield a consistent history. For that, readers can go back to Jacques Rivoire's brief *Le Crédit lyonnais, histoire d'une banque* (1989). But the cumulative force of this collection makes it clear that a much fuller history, drawing on the bank's archives,

should be in the works. Several major French banks have had their histories published in recent years; a comprehensive history of the Crédit lyonnais would be a landmark in French banking history. Since 1986, the terminal point of this volume's chronology, the bank has experienced spectacular growth and even more spectacular decline, amid multiple scandals. Although several essays cover periods beyond 1986, the bank's recent troubles are mentioned only in passing. The essay on the period of its liaisons with the insurance business, which nominally covers the years 1879 to 1999, says nothing of the bank's involvement in the purchase of Executive Life Insurance of California and its junk-bond portfolio. This debacle resulted in the Crédit lyonnais and its partners entering a plea of guilty to multiple charges of fraud, making false statements to U.S. bank regulators, and agreeing to a massive settlement of over \$770 million.

Finally, it should be noted that many contributors invoke the name and the scholarship of economic historian Jean Bouvier. His pioneering study of the bank's origins (*Le Crédit lyonnais de 1863 à 1882: les années de formation d'une banque de depots*, published in 1961; new edition, 1999)—based on research he conducted at a time when the bank's archives were not open to scholars (the bank did not realize Bouvier was researching a history thesis)—and his later work on French banking remain essential references in the field. The contributors to this collection include not only some of his former students, but their students as well, signaling a strong new generation of scholarship with renewed interest in French banking, financial, and monetary history.

Kenneth Mouré is professor of history at the University of California at Santa Barbara. His most recent books are The Gold Standard Illusion: France, the Bank of France and the International Gold Standard, 1914–1939 (2002), and an edited collection with Martin S. Alexander, Crisis and Renewal in France, 1918–1962 (2002). His current research is on price controls and black markets in France during and after the Second World War.