

Business and Public Management in the U.K., 1900–2003. *By Duncan McTavish.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005. viii + 274 pp. Figures, tables, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$99.95. ISBN: 0-754-64335-2.

Reviewed by Robert Millward

Although this book conveys a considerable amount of very useful information, its target audience is something of a puzzle. On the one hand, its case studies of shipbuilding, education, hospitals, and film manufacturing in Glasgow supply the elements of a research monograph. On the other hand, it offers a survey of the development of management practices and structures in both the (private) business sector and the public sector in Great Britain over the course of the twentieth century. The material is set out in orderly fashion, offering many guideposts and well-designed charts of management trees, making it a useful text for classes in management studies.

A strong distinction is made between internal management developments and “externalization,” which the author, Duncan McTavish, defines here as the extent to which management engages with outside influences and agencies, such as central government reports, outside stakeholders, and market transactions, rather than relying on internal hierarchies to resolve problems. He presents his main thesis in four chapters that cover the private business sector from 1900 and the public sector from 1945 to 2003. This is a huge subject area, but it is possible, though not without effort, to see the main lines of argument. There are good references to a wide range of the literature, and, in this context, the book will serve as a source for scholars who wish to pursue particular themes.

Chapter two, which takes up internal management developments, considers the changes in the private sector that were triggered by new organizational structures, such as the M-form, and by the development of management control through workplace regulation, human-relations policies, and management training. The topic of externalization, discussed in chapter three, is divided into two parts: a business dimension, which includes holding companies as flexible institutions, joint ventures, and the separation of operations into different legal entities; and a societal dimension, including early philanthropy, “quangos” (quasi-nongovernmental organizations), the

effects of government regulation, and the growth of employer organizations, like the Federation of British Industry. McTavish claims that the decisive developments of public-sector management came about after 1945. Thus chapter seven covers the period up to the 1970s and is divided into two sections: one dealing with internal management issues, such as the early emphasis on financial controls rather than on management practices; and the second focusing on the effects of externalization, such as the patchy impact of government reports. The 1970s, and especially the 1980s, produced big changes for the public sector in the form of outsourcing, performance pay, community partners, and increasing professional autonomy. These changes are discussed in chapter eight under three subsections: local government, the civil service, and the National Health Service.

The material in the case studies fleshes out these issues, but the arguments cover a large set of topics. There are plenty of previews and summaries along the way, but, paradoxically, they are too plentiful, whereas the substantive issues are often only tersely summarized, leaving many concepts unexplored and sometimes unclear.

The book begins with an introduction, followed by a section on the private sector, which in turn is preceded by an “overview.” Then we arrive at chapter one, entitled “Introduction and Context.” Finally, in chapter two we reach the first substantive coverage, which starts with a “synopsis,” followed by a brief introduction; the conclusion of the chapter itself includes a summary of the argument. This format is repeated throughout the book. Such a barrage of syntheses may be useful in teaching, but I found it mildly frustrating. I would have preferred to see more space devoted to elucidating the concepts and arguments introduced in the text. As it stands, the four core chapters cover only sixty-five pages, which are filled with dense arguments despite the book’s apparent purpose of being comprehensible to nonspecialists. Many of the concepts and issues would have benefited from more explanation and further clarification: “normative integration” (p. 36), “strategic and matrix structures” (p. 45), “next steps” (p. 146), “best value,” and “Rayner efficiency studies” (p. 151) are but a few examples.

The mixed focus may be due to the book’s origins as a Ph.D. thesis at Glasgow University—hence the case studies of Glasgow business institutions—before metamorphosing into a textbook on the development of management practices and

business structures in Britain. Notwithstanding my reservations, the plentiful, informative material guarantees that this book will remain a useful source for historians of twentieth-century British management.

Robert Millward is emeritus professor of economic history at the University of Manchester, U.K. He has published extensively on the history and economics of the public sector. His articles on industrial policy, nationalization, and public health have appeared in journals such as Business History and Economic History Review. His latest book is Private and Public Enterprise in Europe: Energy, Telecommunications and Transport, c.1830–1990 (2005).