

Major Problems in American Business History: Documents and Essays. *Edited by Regina Lee Blaszczyk and Philip B. Scranton*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006. xix + 521 pp. Figures, illustrations, tables. Paper, \$46.76. ISBN: 0-618-04426-4.

Reviewed by Leslie Hannah

This collection is a distinguished contribution to the publisher's Problems in American History series and offers an impressive shop window of the subject to a wider audience. Chapters are organized in broad chronological progression from the colonial period to the present, and major overlapping themes are highlighted within each time period. A typical chapter format is a compilation of seven contemporary documents, juxtaposed with two more recent analytical essays (usually excerpted from articles or books), which expand more broadly on some of the issues raised by the documentary evidence, rounded off with introductory comments by the editors and a well-chosen guide to further reading on each topic. However, the book lacks an index, which would have been helpful to students.

The challenge of identifying documents that are representative of the complexity of historical experience but that enable students to grasp central issues is not straightforward, but it is one that Regina Blaszczyk and Philip Scranton have triumphantly surmounted. Their eclectic editorial approach will particularly appeal to brighter history students: difficult issues are confronted, conflicting views explained, but without excessive spoon-feeding in "five-key-point" boxes. The tone of editorial comment is frequently interrogative, leaving questions open on which the reader is encouraged to reflect. The aim is clearly to encourage students to work toward their own conclusions from the sources and debates covered, rather than to provide oversimplified textbook clarity: "simple questions do not lead to simple answers," as the editors themselves remark in their analysis of the recent Love Canal environmental scandal (p. 409). There is a potential downside to this insistence on opening up rather than closing down debate: the incautious or ill-informed might too readily believe doubtful views

expressed in sources—such as the claim that airline deregulation increased air fares (p. 460)—without the guidance of a good instructor.

The freshness of approach—benefiting from the rich resources of the Hagley collections and other archives—can be seen even in well-worn topics, such as the subject of the middle chapter, entitled “The Age of the Octopus: Business and the Reform Impulse, 1876–1920.” It would have been easy here to fall back on the usual suspects (John D. Rockefeller, John Sherman, J. P. Morgan, Ida Tarbell), but the choices are more interesting, as they are directed to upper-division students already familiar with textbook outlines. Contemporary antibusiness critiques are represented by the 1878 constitution of the Knights of Labor, by Henry Demarest Lloyd’s 1881 *Atlantic Monthly* exposé of Standard Oil, and by a Pennsylvania factory inspector’s 1893 report on sweatshops in the local clothing industry. Business views are represented by George Pullman’s 1894 address to stockholders on the infamous strike, by Henry Havemeyer’s 1899 attack on the tariff (motivated not by free-market zeal but by the fact that his own sugar company was less protected than most U.S. industries), and by Goodyear Tire and Rubber’s 1920 statement on its initiatives to improve labor conditions. The public-policy response, more conventionally, is represented by Theodore Roosevelt’s cautious 1901 congressional speech on the case for federal regulation of trusts and Louis Brandeis’s 1913 invective against the money trust. The analytical essays accompanying these documents are two strong pieces: Colleen Dunlavy’s little-known 1994 article from *Audacity*, “Why Did Some American Businesses Get So Big?” confronts contemporary views that the tariff (as much as efficiency considerations) drove the shift to large scale, while an excerpt from Sanford Jacoby’s *Modern Manors* (1997) analyzes the role of welfare capitalism at Eastman Kodak.

The thirteen other thematic and chronological chapters—all following this format—will be of interest to instructors, even for courses in American business history covering less than the three-plus centuries surveyed in this book or more focused on a specialist field, for most provide something similarly fresh. The introductory chapter (“Business and Us”) also orients the novice student of the subject to five major contemporary issues that business history can illuminate. Philip Scranton’s “Why Study Business History?”—patently the work of a skilled teacher—was specifically written for

this volume. “What Is a Firm?” (reprinted from the *European Economic Review* [1992]) by the late, and much-missed, Alfred D. Chandler introduces readers to the disciplined case-study methodology of the doyen of business historians. Mary Yeager’s “Considering Businesswomen” is drawn from her 1999 anthology *Women in Business* (1999) and locates the gender debate in broader cultural and social issues. David Vogel’s “Do Business and Government Get Along?” from Stephen Wilks and Maurice Wright’s edited volume, *Comparative Government-Industry Relations* (1987), shows how international comparison can clarify the question effectively. Christine Meisner Rosen and Christopher C. Sellers’s “Business and the Environment,” from the Winter 1999 issue of the *Business History Review*, is a manifesto for an ecocultural approach. In short, we are offered a rich diet, which the editors and publishers have served up with the panache of a Parisian chef.

Leslie Hannah has served as dean of two European business schools and is professor of economics at the University of Tokyo. His last book (with Margaret Ackrill) was Barclays: The Business of Banking, 1690–1996 (2001), and he is currently editing his Oxford Clarendon lectures on persistent biases in Anglo-American business history writing and their relevance to issues in the business-school curriculum. He was, until September 2007, visiting the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, as directeur d’études associé.