

“Telling the Irvings’ Stories”: A Review of Jacques Poitras’ *Irving vs. Irving: Canada’s Feuding Billionaires and the Stories They Won’t Tell*. Toronto: Viking, 2014.

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Very few last names stir up as much debate in New Brunswick as “Irving.” As Canada’s third-wealthiest family and the fifth-largest private landowner in the United States, the Irvings have had disproportionate impacts on the historical development of our small province. Consequently, many people have strong opinions about the Irvings, and yet more often than not the family has tried to stay out of the media spotlight. In his book *Irving vs. Irving: Canada’s Feuding Billionaires and the Stories They Won’t Tell*, Jacques Poitras offers readers some of the behind-the-scenes details of how the Irvings made their fortune, consolidated economic and political power, and were later plagued by infighting. In particular, Poitras uses the Irving monopoly on New Brunswick’s English-language print media as a window through which to view the family and its dealings.

First, a word on what the book is and is not. Poitras is an experienced reporter; he worked at both the Irving-owned Moncton *Times-Transcript* and Saint John *Telegraph-Journal* before his current position with CBC New Brunswick News. Despite the fact that he worked in the Irving employ, Poitras’s narrative approach is objective exposé. As he explains, “I have written this book neither to praise nor to condemn the Irvings, their newspapers, or their employees....There is, however, a broader story of how the worlds of industry, media, and politics influence each other” (xiv). This is not to condemn the author’s chosen approach, but to tell academics and others who might be looking for a focused criticism to look elsewhere.

In building his case, Poitras draws heavily upon primary research, including more than fifty on-the-record and anonymous interviews and hundreds of newspaper articles. He also relies on four previously published books on the Irvings, a CBC Television documentary, and various other academic and non-academic secondary studies.

Divided into fifteen chapters, the book reveals the story of the Irvings, focusing mainly on a series of post-1980 newsworthy events, which sometimes did not make it into the local newspapers. The chapters are not grouped in any formal manner, but four main sections are discernible. In the first four chapters, Poitras effectively describes how the Irvings became the most prominent industrialists in New Brunswick—including the purchase of Howard Robinson’s newspapers in the 1940s—and how they later came to view newspaper ownership as something of a burden, largely due to the Canadian Senate’s combines investigations in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In those chapters, the next generation of “Irving boys”—J.K., Arthur, and Jack—is introduced, as is the idea that K.C. imparted to his sons: the drive to succeed, seemingly at any cost. Readers also learn of the “Irving Way”: pro-development, pro-business, competition-wary, willing to intimidate governments when needed, and always wrapped in the New Brunswick flag.

The fifth to eighth chapters cover the Saint John, Moncton, and Fredericton newspapers, as well as the Irvings in general in the 1990s. Poitras shows how the Irving-owned newspapers followed the conventional reporting model, and how the practice of investigative journalism increased after the hiring of certain senior staff in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Poitras astutely zeroes in on the tension that

arose when this more aggressive coverage of local events repeatedly encountered other aspects of the Irving empire, including the shipyard's federal contracts, strike action and air pollution at the oil refinery, PCBs and the raising of the Irving Whale barge, and monoculture forestry. The next generations of Irvings, K.C.'s grandchildren and great grandchildren, also appear in this section, with particular attention paid to Jamie, who had a keen interest in the newspaper business.

In the ninth to twelfth chapters, Poitras outlines how the Irvings consolidated their control over most of New Brunswick's print media. With the founding of Brunswick News in late 1998, the Irvings were soon buying up English and French newspapers of all sizes across the province. In the process, Jamie eventually worked his way up to be head of Brunswick News, and thereafter often used the newspapers as unabashed cheerleaders of industry. Jamie's desire to be deeply involved with the media portion of the Irving empire is used by Poitras to highlight growing differences between parts of the family, some of whom wanted to maintain the traditional hands-off approach that was adopted after the Senate investigations in the early 1970s. Some of the newsworthy events presented in this section include the natural gas tax concessions, the announcement of a second oil refinery, and the Jaakko Pöyry forestry report.

The final section of the book, the thirteenth to fifteenth chapters, examines divisions within the Irving empire and some of the realities of the Brunswick News era. There are traces of family discord interspersed throughout the chapters, discord that comes to the fore near the end of the book, with the most glaring example being the falling out between Arthur and his son Kenneth. Poitras frames the resulting division of various businesses among family members as the contravention of K.C.'s dying wish for everyone to "behave themselves." As for Brunswick News, there are some triumphs, such as the successful implementation of a paywall for online content, and failures, such as Wafergate (when Prime Minister Stephen Harper was wrongly reported to have pocketed the communion wafer at Roméo LeBlanc's funeral mass) and overhyping the ultimately cancelled second oil refinery. What is consistent throughout is that the newspapers underreported on the Irvings themselves.

In terms of strengths, the book has several. Perhaps the main one is the way in which Poitras teases out individual personalities and humanizes not just the Irvings but newspaper staff as well. This gives readers insight into why certain decisions were made or why events unfolded in a particular manner, and serves the purpose of making the politically and economically powerful seem more like the rest of us, faults and all. The author must also be lauded for the amount of behind-the-scenes information the book discloses. Most of the events the book covers are well known to New Brunswickers, but Poitras's details are unfamiliar and tantalizing. Finally, Poitras does a good job of capturing the Irvings' sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes questionable, yet constantly evolving relationship with newspaper ownership.

That said, I do have criticisms. Poitras is too quick to explain away many of the Irvings' actions as a case of "boys will be boys" or, more appropriately, "businessmen will be businessmen," as if much of what they do is simply natural for people in their position. The Irvings have a long record of employing aggressive tactics beyond that which Poitras draws attention to in the book: from K.C.'s commandeering and recklessly driving a truck through picket lines in the late 1940s (Wilcox 62–3), to putting together a "rent a crowd" of workers to pressure a board of directors in 1969 (Kenny 34–5), to demanding ever-greater financial assistance from taxpayers, often accompanied by the implication that mills or companies might otherwise be moved elsewhere (McLaughlin and Parenteau 20–1). Poitras does identify the concept of the Irving Way, but he only uses it sporadically and within limited contexts,

probably due to his inclination to come across as objective. And yet, this remains problematic. The normalizing of what are at best borderline-dubious corporate practices contributes to a broader false sense that this is how companies are supposed to act, making it more difficult to hold them accountable on a variety of measures in the long term.

I have a couple of other significant criticisms. The Irvings are portrayed as self-made billionaires who cobbled together a business empire in the so-called economic backwater of New Brunswick. This line of thinking almost inevitably leads to the question, Where would the province be without the Irvings? But what if we reframe the question: where would the Irvings be without New Brunswick? In short, the family empire would likely be much smaller without the tens of millions of dollars in government assistance over the last several decades (McLaughlin and Parenteau 20–1). Furthermore, at points in the book Poitras focuses too much on individual agency and neglects structural determinants, leaving readers with a less than complete understanding of events, such as failing to note the neoliberal turn at many Canadian newspapers since the 1980s.

In the end, Poitras's *Irving vs. Irving* will appeal most to those seeking insider-type information on the Irvings, the newspapers they own, and the major events they have been involved with. While the astute reader will come away with criticisms, the book is fun and accessible nonetheless.

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