

MICHAEL BLISS. — *A Canadian Millionaire: The Life and Times of Sir Joseph Flavelle, Bart. 1859-1939*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1978. Pp. xii, 562.

This is an exceptional study, often as readable as a fine novel, of one extraordinary tycoon's achievements and behavior during the booming times of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many historians assume that an account of business activities, even in biographical form, will be unavoidably dull, in any event tedious to plough through. All those statistics and the confusion that seems inevitably to accompany an account of which type of shares did what for whom! But in this excellent life of Sir Joseph Wesley Flavelle, pork packer, financial manager, Methodist, philanthropist and public servant, there is at least as much of fascination and interest as in a biography of even the most eminent politician or intellectual. This kind of book reminds us that the great central dynamic feature of Canadian life in these years was business, and within it were to be found many of the most talented and impressive figures.

A tycoon's origins and the foundations of his success properly demand his biographer's scrutiny. In Flavelle's case, we find a strong mother and a weak alcoholic father, as well as timely early financial boosts from other relations and from the Cox family. Flavelle owned his own flour, feed, pork and provisions store in Peterborough at the age of eighteen, in 1876. Eleven years later, he moved to Toronto, where in the early 1890s he bought into the William Davies Company, pork packers, and became its general manager. We learn of Flavelle's skills at mastering the pork business, during a time of depressed North American grain and hog prices and a wildly expanding British market for pork. By 1900, in his early forties, he was a millionaire, Toronto was being called Hogtown and the William Davies Company was the largest pork-packing firm in the British Empire. Bliss takes us behind the scenes in the business as Flavelle learns how to encourage Ontario farmers to raise leaner hogs, how to cure "Wiltshire sides" of bacon and how to out-hustle competitors. We can almost smell the abattoir.

Flavelle continued with the Davis Company for many years, and from 1901 was its majority owner. But his fortune, connections and interests pushed him into a wide range of activities. In business, principally in connection with the wealthy Cox family, now also transplanted to Toronto, he had investments and directorships in Canada Life, the Bank of Commerce, National Trust and the Robert Simpson Company. He bought the *Toronto News* in 1903 and for five years lost large sums supporting it as an "independent" paper, notwithstanding his own Conservative leanings. He chaired an Ontario royal commission which in 1906 pointed the way to a revolutionary re-structuring of the University of Toronto. His greatest philanthropic service, among a great many, came with his leadership in the planning and funding of the splendid Toronto General Hospital project on College Street. And he was a devout member and benefactor of the Methodist Church, particularly the Sherbourne Street congregation. There were an impressive number of "good works" in an incredibly busy life.

It is ironic, therefore, that a question concerning Flavelle's integrity constitutes Bliss' most difficult scholarly problem in this biography. In the midst of his brilliant war service as chairman of the Imperial Munitions Board and while one of the most prominent and outspoken business critics of war profiteering, he suffered a severe blackening of his reputation because of the William Davies Company's immense wartime earnings. In one year it made a return on investment of eighty percent, and fifty-seven percent the next. Bliss shows that Flavelle had been little involved in the company at the time and that it was the state of the British market, free of continental European competition for Canadian pork products, which explained the great profits. It is demonstrated that the earnings

largely went into giving the company the strength to withstand the post-war recession. And anyway, we see, Flavelle probably gave away more than he earned personally from this source at the time. Nevertheless, Bliss concedes, Flavelle became the most widely hated "war profiteer." After all, amid the war trials — of loss of life and sacrifice — for so many other Canadians, how could Flavelle expect understanding for the piling up of vast profits, even if achieved perfectly legally? As Bliss puts it, "A man who wanted and was thought to be a credit to his generation of businessmen did as much as anyone to bring that generation and its value into disrepute" (p. xii).

A Canadian Millionaire is a superb achievement. It is a business study that is neither an embarrassing apology for, nor a simplistic denunciation of, past practices. No doubt individual company studies could provide fuller treatment, from several perspectives, of the various enterprises. But enduring capitalistic success always has rested in the end on the special qualities of mind and nerve possessed by individuals responding creatively to the challenges of particular circumstances and opportunities. We understand that better now because Michael Bliss has conducted a delightful tour of the "life and business times" of Sir Joseph Wesley Flavelle.

Richard CLIPPINGDALE
Carleton University.

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JOHN HERD THOMPSON. — *The Harvests of War: The Prairie West, 1914-1918*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978. Pp. 207.

The Canadian social history series is, in the inelegant words of the publisher's blurb, "devoted to in-depth studies of major themes in our history, exploring neglected areas in the day-to-day existence of Canadians." Previous volumes have dealt with business history, the poor, education and women's history, all qualifying as "neglected," or, to be more accurate if not even more inelegant, "hitherto relatively neglected" by the masters of the Canadian historical tradition of economic, political and especially political biographical studies. Clearly, however, times are changing and newer and sometimes younger historians now have a valuable format for expression of their work within the format of this series.

The specific volume under review here explores and, I hope, inaugurates yet another aspect of this broadly conceptualized social history. J. H. Thompson has written a regional history that synthesizes the politics, economics and social development of the western prairie region of Canada in the period of World War I. His theme is clearly drawn. Here was a relatively new society, geographically remote from the European holocaust of 1914-18, inevitably and profoundly affected through political and economic ties as well as the many complex links of kinship and loyalty of the people of the region with Europe.

Transcending specific references to time and place the study of the impact of war upon society provides examples of the foolish as well as the wise aspects of human character. Here the author is not found wanting. In the first "Innocent Enthusiasm" (a chapter heading) of the first few months of war a few sober and prophetic warnings appeared of horrors barely imagined that were to come. *The Voice*, the Winnipeg labour weekly noted: "Those of the great majority think that it is brass bands, braid and feathers, and the throwing out of the chest, but if you have ever seen the regiments of militia on parade you will notice that the stretcher-bearer section is there" (p. 24).