

Profiting the Crown : Canada's Polymer Corporation, 1942-1990. By Matthew J. Bellamy. (Montreal / Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005. xxiii + 304 p., ill., tab., notes, bibl., index. ISBN 0-7735-2815-6 \$65)

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Profiting the Crown : Canada's Polymer Corporation, 1942-1990. By **Matthew J. Bellamy.** (Montreal / Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005. xxiii + 304 p., ill., tab., notes, bibl., index. ISBN 0-7735-2815-6 \$65)

What made Polymer different was making money. This is the essential argument in Bellamy's boardroom-level company history of Polymer from its wartime origins as a manufacturer of synthetic rubber through to its acquisition by German chemical giant Bayer AG: "As an instrument of state capitalism, Polymer operated primarily for the purpose of generating a profit" (p.214). Profitability provided the principal reason for Polymer's continuance after the war, the relative freedom of its managers from political direction and was the aim of corporate strategy and behaviour. Rather than acting like the lumbering, deficit-ridden monstrosity so reviled by critics of Crown Corporations Polymer behaved, essentially, like many other similarly-sized Canadian industrial firms. Bellamy makes this point very effectively and convincingly as he chronicles the company's growth and vicissitudes in world petrochemical markets. Firmly and explicitly situated in a framework of Chandler's *Scope and Scale*, the book was the winner of the National Business Book Award in 2006.

Many readers of this journal will have had the pleasure of hearing Ian Slater's paper *Shaking the Invisible Hand: Privatization, Market Forces, and the Control of Science and Technology* at the CSTHA meeting in Toronto in October 2007. That paper was informed by the extensive body of economic scholarship regarding privatization and firm efficiency, attention to which could have sharpened Bellamy's analysis. Bellamy feels the focus on profitability was a mark of Polymer's success as a Crown Corporation. He even quotes the Glassco Commission's assertion that Polymer "cannot be regarded as an instrument of public policy. Its ownership by the Crown is in no sense essential... to any of the programs of the federal government" (p.135). The ultimately convincing conclusion however was that Polymer ought not be a Crown Corporation. The author's arguments also develop themes from Frank Underhill and Hugh Aitken concerning the role of the Canadian state in general and Crown Corporations in particular. Unfortunately, like so many others, what he sees as a unique Canadian approach to national development is more a statement of American exceptionalism and that even an exaggerated one.

As a work of business history *Profiting the Crown* is a particularly effective empirical study in understanding issues of the boundaries of the firm, though here again it does not draw upon the substantial economic literature on that topic. For the most part technical issues are given their

full measure of importance and handled deftly but unobtrusively. The author has a good eye for what is important including effective downstream technical communications with the company's customers and the perils of not maintaining R&D spending in troubled times and has a nice if brief discussion of the culture of synthetic rubber. He does however miss the significance of whether a given artificial rubber could be run through existing machinery to fabricate objects. Perhaps most of all the book succeeds as a truly outstanding study of the nuts-and-bolts of public policy, of "How Ottawa Works", even if much of the action is taking place in Sarnia. It helps us understand the particulars of C.D. Howe's wartime economic miracle and the post-war conversion to a peacetime economy, even if at times the author's admiration for Howe borders on hero-worship. In separate discussions of the early attempts to prairie farmers and politicians to force the use of grain alcohol as a feedstock and the much later takeover of Polymer by Bob Blair's Nova, An Alberta Corporation we see too how the political economy of federalism intersected with staple-based development.

The author has done a lot in a short book and while he can not be blamed for not doing everything there are though some disturbing lacunae. He notes in passing that in Sarnia "where there had once been an Indian reserve, a compound of petrochemical plants now stood" (p.88). This elides a rather important issue, as shown by the landmark case of *Chippewas of Sarnia Band v. Canada (Attorney General)*. As well as land claims, questions have also been raised by representatives of the Amjiwnaang First Nation Community, alarmed by grossly skewed sex ratios in recent births, over the effects of exposure to chemicals in their environment. Having virtually nothing to say about the environment in a book about a chemical company seems rather dubious in post-Love Canal world.

In his writing the author tends to repeat himself though that is not the worst of it. Sentences such as "The 'Ottawa men' (to use Granatstein's term) were also sanguine they could maintain a 'high and stable level of employment' – a phrase enshrined in the Canadian lexicon by the 1945 *White Paper on Employment and Income* (discussed below) – through supplementary countercyclical policies" (p.61) should not have made it through the editing process. Not even the Lambton County tourism site dares call so prosaic a shipping channel the "majestic St. Clair River" which Bellamy does twice (p.56, 65). The book is also marred by outright errors. The Catholic Church required fasting including abstaining from eating meat; it did not required its adherents "to eat fish up to 166 days a year" (p.5). A muddled discussion (p.116-117) either confuses the 1956 Diefenbaker win with his 1957 sweep or dates the latter also to 1956,

though a few sentences later the year is given correctly. A photo caption (p.137) confuses the location of Polymer's manufacturing plant in Strasbourg, France with its marketing centre in Fribourg, Switzerland. The Polymer pavilion at Expo was not "a short distance" (p.157-158) from Habitat; the latter was in Cité du Havre and the former on Ile St. Helene. Finally, as a work of scholarship the book is marred by an overly casual attitude to sources. The illustrations in particular have either no acknowledged source or the not very helpful "National Archives of Canada".

This is not a comprehensive history of Polymer but more a focussed argument about its history. In the end it is a very welcome contribution to the literature on Canadian business and, while an effective study, it may be hoped it will not be the last word on the topic of Polymer.

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***Roughnecks, Rock Bits, and Rigs: The Evolution of Oil Well Drilling Technology in Alberta, 183-1970.* By Sandy Gow.** (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005. 674 p., ill., bibl., app., ISBN 1-55238-067-x \$44.95)

Roughnecks, Rock Bits and Rigs is an encyclopedic, descriptive history of oil and gas field drilling in Alberta from the industry's origins in the late nineteenth century until 1970. Thematically organized, the book includes chapters on petroleum geology, Alberta oil and gas fields and prospecting, companies active in Alberta's oil and gas industry, labor conditions, drilling problems, and hazards. Other chapters focus on drilling technology and methods, including the standard cable tool rig and its evolution, the rotary rig, the components and accessory technologies of the rigs, the development of well instrumentation and logging, in short everything having to do with finding oil and bringing wells into production in the Alberta fields. The book is packed with detailed empirical information on all of these topics, and provides a sense of daily working life and technical challenges in the oil patch and how these evolved over nearly a century. The author draws upon a wealth of archival and primary sources, including oil company records, technical reports, industry journals and newspapers, and memoirs, oral histories, and interviews with key figures in the industry. Given the technical complexity of the oil drilling business (evidenced by the book's thirty-five page glossary of terms), bringing all of this information together in a