

Donald J. Savoie, *Harrison McCain: Single-Minded Purpose*. Montréal, PQ & Kingston, ON: [McGill-Queen's University Press](#), 2013. xii + 336 pp., illustrations, endnotes, appendices, index. Cloth; ISBN 9780773543218, Cdn \$29.95.

Frozen french fries seem like an unlikely product upon which to build a global business empire. But this time-saving innovation hit the market at a time when more women than ever were entering the workforce and they needed quick and easy meal options. Restaurants and pubs also wanted to efficiently serve busy families while saving on the cost of labour cleaning and preparing fresh-cut fries. Taking advantage of these demographic shifts, McCain Foods began its steady growth.

The subject of Donald Savoie's biography, *Harrison McCain: Single-Minded Purpose*, is one of the two brothers that founded the McCain Foods corporation. The McCain brothers established and grew what was to become their business empire from the unlikely location of small-town Florenceville, New Brunswick. Their business success is even more surprising given the high rate of corporate failure within an industry squeezed by thin margins.

Making frozen french fries, it turns out, is not so simple. Machinery to flash-freeze potatoes was not widely available at the time and the McCain brothers had to risk everything on an eccentric engineer who promised he could equip their first production facility. The risks they took didn't end there. The brothers soon discovered that not all spuds are created equal. Common table potatoes grown in and around Florenceville had sugar levels that made them incompatible with flash freezing. This led the brothers to research potatoes that could be quickly frozen and still be grown in the Canadian climate. From those early days onward, the McCains continued to invest in food research and development.

Overcoming these early challenges allowed McCain Foods to survive while other frozen food factories went bankrupt on the meagre markups afforded to producers. The brothers soon realized that the real profits could only be had by establishing their own brand. This meant that they needed to develop trust in their brand and establish their own sales channels. It soon became clear that McCain Foods corporation needed a chief salesman and marketing officer – a role that was a natural fit for Harrison McCain.

McCain Foods first expanded throughout Canada. Soon, however, the McCain brothers were travelling the world – first to the United Kingdom and then throughout the rest of Europe – in search of new markets for their frozen french fries. Despite the firm's rapid growth, Florenceville remained the home of both McCain brothers and McCain Foods global headquarters. Even with all that success, McCain Foods deliberately stayed out of the American market until the firm was sufficiently large to withstand the world's most competitive market.

Despite numerous economic challenges, the brothers made a series of unconventional decisions. The head office would remain in the brothers' home town of Florenceville, New Brunswick, for Harrison McCain's lifetime. The brothers rejected larger centres such as Halifax, let alone Toronto. Savoie deftly conveys how this pride and loyalty to McCains' hometown and its residents suffused all of his decisions.

One senses that at some level, Harrison took more than a little satisfaction at being a successful business person existing well outside the orbit of Toronto's business and social elites. Once, when asked for a multi-million dollar donation for a Toronto concert centre in exchange for the naming rights, Harrison quickly agreed. Harrison's offer was subsequently rejected based on his condition of naming the site the Florenceville Dance Hall. Today, the iconic Toronto building is known as Roy Thompson Hall.

Family remained important for Harrison McCain throughout his life. Even during their worst disagreements, Harrison's brother Wallace was always close by. The two McCains shared a bed as children, were close neighbors throughout adulthood and had offices across from one another at work. In the end, a painful rift developed between the brothers over who would lead the firm after the brothers stepped down. Wallace advocated for his son but Harrison disagreed and wanted a split board with representation from the extended family. Savoie handles the split between the brothers fairly – he emphasizes the book is about Harrison McCain and not the McCain corporation or the split with his brother. Despite this, one senses that Savoie has gone to great lengths to be fair to both sides without delving into excessive personal detail.

When asked about his success, Harrison McCain frequently indicated the secrets of his success were “Good timing, good luck, right place” (p77). His emphasis on luck signals an awareness that in the early days McCain Foods could have failed in many different ways. In the early days McCain Foods benefitted from generous subsidies from Canadian regional economic development agencies. Harrison frequently acknowledged this early help and continued to take advantage of it as the firm expanded across the country.

Here, the book takes an interesting turn and broadens its scope to the role that government can have in developing regional economies. Savoie, an expert in regional economic development, explains throughout the book how Harrison McCain was deeply invested in the success of his native New Brunswick. Harrison McCain was well aware that McCain Foods had become the largest employer in Florenceville and provided a steady income for potato farmers throughout eastern Canada.

Savoie, a native New Brunswicker himself, builds on these themes and wonders if the success of McCain Foods can still be reproduced in eastern Canada. Are governments now so risk averse that they can no longer deal with market opportunities in a timely way? Even worse, have governments now given up on Eastern Canada altogether? These important questions are worth considering in the light of the success of McCain Foods. Savoie notes that subsidies for the auto industry are unquestioned as good for Canada but investments in Eastern Canada are assumed to be a loss. Regardless of where one stands on these issues, they were issues that Harrison McCain was passionate about. Savoie does an excellent job of putting the problems forward.

This multifaceted book will appeal to a number of audiences. Business historians gain a book that adeptly confronts a number of different issues – entrepreneurship, strategy, family business and public policy. Canadian students of regional economics and public policy will benefit from the policy perspectives in the book. These are clearly articulated points that consider a Canada that exists beyond the Montreal-Windsor corridor and the western Canadian oil patch. Despite Savoie's assurances that the book focuses on Harrison McCain, family business researchers will

find an excellent in-depth work on a successful Canadian business and the family conflict that came about in the transition to the next generation. Similarly, scholars of entrepreneurship and strategy will find the book a rich source of case material. While the academic will appreciate Savoie's attention to detail, the book is engagingly written and will appeal to a general readership interested in the history of an iconic Canadian business.

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