

Fredrik S. Eaton, *Between Stone and Stars: A Memoir*. [Toronto, ON]: [Barlow Books](#), 2018. v + 276pp., photographs, resources. Cloth: Cdn \$20.00.

Fredrik S. Eaton was the president, chairman and chief executive officer of the T. Eaton Co. from 1977 to 1988. Eaton's was probably the greatest of Canadian retailers and still is sorely missed by many. He was the fifth of his family to head the firm, just before the calamitous decade that resulted in its bankruptcy. It is rare for a major Canadian businessman to publish a memoir, and this book of almost 300 pages, produced with the assistance of Douglas Hunter, is welcome for being both elegantly written and good-humoured as well as occasionally revelatory. Eaton was approaching 80 when writing it for all his descendants rather than for students of Canadian business history. In some places charmingly self-deprecatory and in others surprisingly candid, the book is naturally decorous in alluding to, or in failing to allude to, family difficulties. Discretion is the prerogative of a such an author, following the well-mannered autobiography of his grandmother Lady Eaton (Flora McCrea Eaton, *Memory's Wall* (Toronto, 1956). Although his memoir contains no references, at its end it lists "Resources" consulted or quoted from, and they are a useful point of departure for anyone wishing to follow up.

Almost all memoirs can be of inherent interest to historians and this one is no exception. First, this is a primary account of what has been described as the "Canadian establishment", as celebrated in books by Peter Newman and others. The Eatons have loomed large in Canadian business for over a century, and this volume comes from the heart of their world, one well beyond their stores across the country and their corporate directorships. Its chapters on the author's work for the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Toronto General Hospital and the University Health Network; his High Commissionership in London; his chancellorship of the University of New Brunswick; and his chairmanship of the Canadian Museum of Civilization all reflect a life of exceptional variety and usefulness. Its last chapter is about the Toronto Club, the York Club, Bud McDougald, Conrad Black, Palm Beach, and the Young Presidents' Organization. Such connections -- social, marital and business -- form a web probably as resilient now as ever, even as so lightly depicted by this insider. There is probably more here about boats, cars, planes, hunting and fishing than about business, but it properly rounds out the self-portrait of a very traditional sort of Canadian businessman.

Secondly, it follows that this book conveys well an almost old-fashioned sense of social responsibility as well as of privilege. Timothy Eaton, the author's great-grandfather, was an Ulsterman, a convert from Presbyterianism to Methodism, a ferocious teetotaler and almost a force of nature. It was unlikely that his heirs, so very different in personality, could do more than build on his formidable legacy. But some have, such as the author; and his giving of time as well as money to good causes must be weighed against various criticisms of his family, on which he is silent.

Thirdly, there are irrefutable personal nuggets to glean from its generally spare narrative. They include family tidbits, such as that Lady Eaton suspected that the successor to her husband as president of the company for twenty years, R.Y. Eaton, was "somehow going to steal" it, "which she would never allow to happen" (p. 8). The next president and the author's father, John David Eaton, retired in 1969 but left his four sons to share the T. Eaton Co. through a holding company, Eaton's of Canada. None was originally intended to be president. Eaton admits ruefully of the transition that "Not hiring Don McGivern was the biggest mistake I ever made" (p. 59), especially as McGivern was to have an illustrious career with HBC, including Hudson's Bay Oil and Gas, and the purchase of Simpson's. After Earl Orser had taken over from Bob Butler and closed the catalogue division in 1976, the opening of the Eaton Centre in Toronto in 1977, turned out to be a great success, but then the brothers Fredrik, as president, chairman and CEO, and

George Eaton, as vice-chairman and vice-president, took over operations themselves. In ten years, the author claims to have turned the company around, with a profit of about \$120 million in 1989.

His brother George succeeded him as president, but he had never worked in the company and was suffering from multiple sclerosis. There is undisguised bitterness in the memoir about the new COO, Tim Reid, but there was probably much blame to spread for the events that followed. Eaton's sought protection from its creditors in 1997, when all its board except for George resigned. Fredrik apparently had never rejoined the board after becoming High Commissioner in London in 1991. The other two brothers, Thor and John, hardly receive mention in this or any context. In 1998, the family sold 48% of its shares in a public offering, and in 1999 the entire company was sold. For Fredrik, the sale was "a tremendous personal blow" and he felt "tarnished" (p. 76).

The swift collapse of Eaton's was a tragedy for more than its founding family. Patricia Phenix describes how devastating it was for its employees in *Eatonians: The Story of the Family behind the Family* (Toronto, 2003). Eaton's stores were woven into the fabric of Canadian life for over a century, and the loss of the public's attachment to them occurred in stages. First, with the abandonment of their catalogue, with the loss of 9,000 jobs. The author describes the sacrificing of a cultural icon as merely the elimination of a "money loser" in the 1970s. This liquidation was followed by the termination of their Santa Claus parades in 1982, apparently at the instigation of the author although he does not admit this. The Parade is celebrated by Steve Penfold in *A Mile of Make-Believe* (Toronto, 2016), but not mentioned in Eaton's account, except for its start by Timothy in 1905. Neither is the history of bitter labour relations in the store, which has so far been chronicled by others only piecemeal.

Phenix notes that amid the Eaton's papers at the Ontario Archives, those on the closure of the catalogue and on union activities were unavailable to researchers for 75 years as of 2002. This restriction seems to have confirmed a fundamental misunderstanding by the firm of both its traditional market and its potential new markets. Barbara Amiel suggested as much in her "Trouble in Eatonia" (*Maclean's*, 31 May, 1976) as did the desperate rebranding efforts towards the end in the 1990s. The replacement of Trans-Canada Sales by George Eaton's Everyday Value policy was another blunder unmentioned in this book. Such themes may be explored in the future, perhaps with an eye on the assault on department stores generally by online retailing after the closure of Eaton's. Tangible vestiges of the Eaton's legacy can still be subjects of contention, such as the restoration of the seventh floor of Eaton's College Street in Toronto as the Carlu in 1983, or the debate in 2019 over the future of the ninth floor of Eaton's in Montreal, which was the Ile-de-France restaurant.

There is much else in this memoir even about business alone, such as the Baton Broadcast System and the TD Bank. There are also a few tantalizing vignettes, such as on when the author "began pontificating to the Queen Mother about divorce and how it affected the children" (p.141), at the time when the marriages of the Prince and Princess of Wales and the Duke and Duchess of York were in the news. After Duff Cooper had published his memoir, *Old Men Forget* in 1953, one gibe was that they sometimes do not forget enough. This cannot be said of *Between Stone and Stars*.

William Fong
Montréal, Quebec