

Jim Blanchard, *Thinking Big: A History of the Winnipeg Business Community to the Second World War*, Winnipeg, MB: [Great Plains Publications](#), 2021. vi + 252pp., illustrations, endnotes. Paper; ISBN 9781773370590, \$24.95.

Though it is imperfect, Jim Blanchard's latest five chapter book is a tremendous work. *Thinking Big: A History of the Winnipeg Business Community to the Second World War* takes us through some well-known and less familiar stories of the fur trade, Louis Riel, land speculation, wheat-fueled expansion, and Winnipeg's emergence as an industrial city. As I read, I was often struck by the thought that people and businesses covered by Blanchard were so interesting that they deserved further space and study. This book would be an excellent starting point for a graduate student looking to do further research as part of a thesis. As such, Blanchard provides some real inspiration here and has done the business history community a great service.

Blanchard's opening chapter covers the rise of the fur trade and the struggle for its control. This story has been covered well before as it is part of our larger national history. The book really begins to take flight when Blanchard discusses the various "free traders" that would sell furs to the Hudson's Bay Company and import goods for resale from other sources via Red River cart, steamboat, or rail. As this chapter ends there is a real sense of delight when we learn the stories behind many names that still grace the city's streets. McDermot, Bannatyne, Inkster and others would begin to form Winnipeg's first business elite: These free traders bridged the gap between an economy dominated by a chartered company and a new economy based on the activities of a large number of independent entrepreneurs.

The book's second chapter, "Becoming the Fifth Province" covers the familiar story of Louis Riel and the formation of Manitoba with additional focus on entrepreneur and newspaperman, John Christian Schultz. The closing section on Metis land is perhaps the most interesting as it recounts the activities of Chief Justice Edmund Burke Wood with businessmen and real estate promoters such as Augustus Nanton and Arthur Wellington Ross. Speculators were easily able to acquire script and land intended for Metis children.

The next chapter continues with the early years of Winnipeg's business community concentrating on James Ashdown and other wholesalers coupled with a discussion of the rise of the wheat economy. Revolutionary changes in milling technology involving steel rollers produced a pure white flour and white bread that was in demand. New settlers arriving in the West could grow ideally suited varieties of high-gluten wheat particularly Red Fife to supply grain elevators, mills, and export markets. Winnipeg's business community grew in anticipation of a western settlement boom. In 1879 wholesaler Andrew Bannatyne would become the first president of the Winnipeg Board of Trade, however, this auspicious beginning was soon followed by a depression and the "start of the Northwest Rebellion in 1885 only made matters worse" (87).

The fourth chapter is perhaps my favourite as it details Winnipeg's second era of growth. The immigration policies of Clifford Sifton and dwindling homestead land in the United States combined to divert a new stream of experienced agriculturalists to farm Western Canada. In this chapter, the author discusses the rise of the grain trade, including standard elevators, grain terminals, line elevator companies, and the western farmers' cooperative movement. In the

closing section, Blanchard discusses the Winnipeg General Strike.

With these many elements now in place, the final chapter covers Winnipeg's emergence as an industrial city. A significant portion of this chapter discusses efforts by the Winnipeg Board of Trade to improve the economic prospects of the city, especially during the Great Depression. Blanchard picks up on a previous discussion of wholesalers' large warehouses (some which survive in the Exchange District to this day) and their conversion to manufacturing sites as the garment industry developed.

One criticism of *Thinking Big* is that the reader does not get a great sense of Winnipeg's business community interacting with each other especially in more informal settings. The author does not focus on the personal networking among the city's business elite at social functions ranging from arts and sporting events to club memberships and religious affiliations. I think such activities were essential to the development of Winnipeg's business elite, as a community. This criticism is partially addressed in Blanchard's discussion of the Great-West Life Company which he describes as "one of the best examples of the city's early business community working together to build Winnipeg's economy." (197) It's a rollicking good story. We see members of the Winnipeg Board of Trade supporting an idea, buying stock, serving as directors and even as presidents of the company.

The section on Winnipeg Electric is also very good as we see early Winnipeg enjoying some of the cheapest hydro rates in the country. Electric lights and appliances which had previously been luxury items were now within the reach of average people. This section also demonstrates Blanchard's even-handed approach. This book is not an uncritical series of heroic business stories. As Dale Barbour writes in his review, we see "how Winnipeg juggled the benefits of private enterprise versus public interest." ("Thinking Big: A History of the Winnipeg Business Community to the Second World War." *Prairie History*, no. 6 (Fall, 2021), 67).

As other reviewers have remarked, the book's introduction is lacking. (Gail Perry, "Business was Good," *Winnipeg Free Press*, July 3, 2021) It would benefit by a full and more formal introduction. At the least an introduction could have situated *Thinking Big* within the existing historiography of Winnipeg's development. Despite its lack of introduction and an all too brief conclusion I found myself rereading the book. Blanchard's book has opened the door further to a rich and vibrant area of Canadian business history, hopefully more scholars will follow his lead by examining other aspects of the development of Winnipeg's business community.

Douglas Panting
Winnipeg, MB