

David M. Culver with Alan Freeman, *Expect Miracles: Recollections of a Lucky Life*. Montréal, PQ & Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press [<http://www.mqup.ca/>], 2014. xi + 233pp., photographs. Cloth; ISBN 978-0-7735-4355-3, Cdn \$34.95.

David M. Culver joined Aluminum Company of Canada (Alcan) in 1949 as an ingot salesman, was appointed the company's president in 1975, and served as CEO from 1979 until his retirement in 1989. It was an impressive rise up the ranks of what Culver proudly called "Canada's most prominent multinational" (117), and followed a privileged and protected upbringing marked by private schools, childhood summers vacationing among the tony crowd at Murray Bay, Quebec, university studies at McGill and Harvard, and a brief military stint during the Second World War when he claims to have learned "what makes organizations successful" (27). Culver's heavily anecdotal recollection of life at the top of Canada's corporate elite – his board memberships also included Canadair, Seagram, American Express, American Cyanamid, Lehman Brothers, and Atomic Energy of Canada – is replete with references to his many prominent business and political associates and his devotion to golf and salmon fishing as tools for cultivating valuable corporate connections.

McGill-Queen's University Press has included *Expect Miracles: Recollections of a Lucky Life* in its "Footprints Series," which is intended to introduce "extraordinary Canadians, past and present, who have led fascinating and important lives at home and throughout the world" (np). While Culver's undeniably influential professional life warrants a biography, this book of "recollections" unfortunately falls short of the Footprint Series goal of providing "nuance" to "larger historical narratives," particularly if in Culver's case that narrative entails elucidating how his tenure at the helm of Alcan informed business practices in Canada and abroad. In Culver and Freeman's telling of the story, the focus is more often about what was accomplished rather than how. Whereas Alcan's priority under Culver was to locate new markets for aluminum since the Canadian market could absorb less than fifteen per cent of total production, the explanation of how this need "lent the company a certain missionary zeal" (64) is treated in a cursory fashion. Granted, Culver offers relatively more detailed descriptions of some other key events, such as his role during the early 1980s spearheading development of "Maison Alcan," the company's Montreal headquarters, at a time in Quebec when "the threat of political separation hung heavily in the air" (120). Similarly, his decidedly unsympathetic account of the 1976 strike that shut down most of Alcan's Canadian smelting operation, his succinct explanation of the economics behind aluminum smelting versus secondary aluminum processing, and his strategy for maintaining amicable relations with Quebec governments of all political stripes over the years, are worthwhile.

To the extent that Culver developed a personal philosophy of management during a lifetime spent in business, it can be gleaned from the numerous pithy maxims sprinkled throughout the book: "leading is an exercise in selflessness, not selfishness" (33); "it should be very clear who's in charge of what [with] very few layers of management" (57); "overhead will kill you if you try to take on the whole world at once" (64); "the art of management is learning how to get first-class results out of second-class people" (165); "try to promote from within before looking

outside” (166); “good managers are big talkers” (167); and “you don’t have to be excellent all the time. You only have to be excellent at the right time” (178). Moreover, the job of effective CEOs is “to grow people quickly” (165), demonstrate trust of subordinates by delegating responsibilities, listen to opinions “from anyone and anywhere” (172), understand thoroughly their business’s technology, and know the needs of their “customers’ customers” (176).

Culver’s occasionally sweeping stereotypes of foreign people and places should give readers pause. Australia is described as “a great place to live if you have money to fly out of there when you start feeling isolated” (155). Indians are “millions of greyhounds on a leash” (159). Culver, who was co-chair of the Canada Japan Business Committee, explained that the Japanese are “so afraid of the word ‘no’ [they] have traditionally been terrible sellers” (133). Anyone intent on developing business ties with Japan needs to be “slow,” “deliberate,” and “transparent” in order to “develop trust” (133). In China, the fact that traditionally it was “not natural” to build a business beyond the scale at which it could be managed by the extended family is presented by Culver as evidence of why “the Communists were able to build huge enterprises” (141). As for France and Germany, their inability to coexist peacefully for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was due to the French possessing “an overly sensitive sense of measure” (145) compared to Germans, a distinction which carried over into their respective business practices. A “sense of measure,” Culver explains, “is a great asset” with which some nations are “more blessed” than others. Not only does it result in a more developed “sense of humour,” it enables one “to make sensible judgments” (146). Other comments were simply curious, such as Culver’s claim that the “problem with union rules is that they make work boring” (79), or his observation that British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher “looked clean as a whistle” (149) during their meeting to discuss coal prices.

Should business historians read this book? Although published by a scholarly press, *Expect Miracles: Recollections of a Lucky Life*, and in particular its thin treatment of Alcan’s activities, is definitely not academic. While it provides an opening into the varied interests and otherwise largely unexamined yet extraordinary career of a leading Canadian corporate executive of the late twentieth century, the book and its generally chatty prose style would presumably appeal to a non-specialist reader but offers little of substance to the serious business historian. The editorial decision not to include an index should also be questioned. Much more can be learned about the global aluminum industry, for example, in which Alcan was a principal player (it was acquired by Rio Tinto in 2007 and renamed Rio Tinto Alcan) from reading other sources, such as *Aluminum Ore: The Political Economy of the Global Bauxite Industry* (Vancouver, 2013) edited by Robin Gendron, Mats Ingulstad and Espen Storli.

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