

Charles Williams, *Max Beaverbrook: Not Quite a Gentleman*. London: [Biteback Publishing](#), 2019. x + 566pp., illustrations, endnotes, bibliography, index. Cloth; ISBN: 9781849547468, £25.00, eBook; ISBN: 9781785900303, £19.99.

In the half century following Lord Beaverbrook's death, biographers continue to be fascinated by the man's many contradictions as well as his achievements and defeats in the world of business and politics, a charge to which I must also plead guilty. Who can blame us? A master mischief maker, Beaverbrook upset the apple cart wherever he ventured, making a legion of enemies along the way. He also made some of his friends enormously wealthy. Mercurial beyond belief, he tried the patience of all those who worked with (and for) him. In business and politics, he could change direction on a dime, leaving a trail of confusion and betrayal. He was a dangerous man to get close to, one who could be as damaging to his allies, friends and employees as to his enemies.

However, as every journalist knows, conflict and betrayal are good copy, and Beaverbrook's fights were legion, spawning stories that endure to this day. The seeds of many of these conflicts was his irrepressible willfulness and the perverse pleasure he took in creating mischief and vanquishing rivals. We continue to live with the consequences as the long-standing and bitter dispute over the ownership of paintings that Beaverbrook ostensibly donated to the Beaverbrook Gallery in Fredericton attests.

The author is of *Not Quite a Gentleman* is well suited to his subject. Williams devoted most of his life to the world of business as an executive with British Petroleum and in various banks including the investment bank Baring Brothers as managing director. Later, he was director of Mirror Group Newspapers PLC, a mega-media holding company that came to control Beaverbrook's family of Express newspapers. A renaissance man, Williams became an accomplished author and biographer upon leaving business. He wrote five major biographies of significant historical figures including Charles de Gaulle, Philippe Pétain (winning the Elizabeth Longford Prize for Historical Biography), Konrad Adenauer, and Harold Macmillan.

Beaverbrook, born William Maxwell (Max) Aitken in 1879, the same year Prime Minister John A. Macdonald introduced his National Policy of tariff protection, would make his mark as a financier and merger promoter in Canada, becoming a millionaire by the time he was 30. He took a small Maritime securities firm, the Royal Securities Corporation, and transformed it into a pan-Canadian investment bank that could compete (and beat) the more established financial houses in central Canada. His employees, including Izaak Walton Killam (Royal Securities) and Arthur J. Nesbitt (Nesbitt Thomson, and Power Corporation), would move to Montréal with him and go on to become among Canada's most influential financiers in the first half of the 20th century.

Beaverbrook himself left Canada for Britain in 1910 where he would become even richer and more famous. He sniffed around in his new homeland and made strategic investments in various enterprises including Rolls Royce. In his spare time, he got himself elected to the House of Commons. He then purchased the Daily Express and expanded it into a family of newspapers that met the demands of a growing and newly educated middle class. While drawing some attention as an influential Press Baron in the interwar years, he became even better known as a backroom political operator, and later, as a member of Winston Churchill's cabinet during World

War Two.

There is much to interest the business historian in all this. The problem is that Beaverbrook's constant and often less than constructive involvement in politics have tended to overshadow his genuine contributions to the world of business. As a consequence, his numerous biographers have tended to treat Beaverbrook's businesses superficially. Before Charles Williams' book, we had nine complete biographies of Beaverbrook as well as numerous other books which covered a portion of his life, and almost all of these focused on Beaverbrook's life in politics or as an influencer of politics through his chain of newspapers. To Williams' great credit, he devotes more space to Beaverbrook's business career in Canada than previous biographers. He not only summarizes the evolution of Max Aitken from a bond salesman to an investment banker and industrial merger promoter, the author briefly describes some of the Canadian's more important business innovations. He also describes the sordid mess of the Canada Cement merger, the main reason that Beaverbrook was often perceived as "not quite a gentleman" by the British upper class.

Unfortunately, this focus on business in the first few chapters, is not sustained in the rest of the book. The moment that Beaverbrook moves to Britain, Williams' emphasis shifts to Beaverbrook's preoccupation with politics and his personal life including his relationships with his first and second wives, his mistresses and his longer-term lovers after his first wife's premature death in 1927. As a result, many questions remain unanswered. It would have been great to know whether Beaverbrook's investments in some of Britain's most venerable industrial firms (e.g. Rolls Royce) had any impact, positive or negative, on their subsequent trajectory. Did Beaverbrook's reorganization of the *Daily Express* into the largest mass media publication in Britain alter the newspaper business forever? And what about his uncanny ability to anticipate the stock market crash of 1929 that allowed him keep his own wealth intact? This is especially disappointing in that the author was in a great position to address these very questions.

This omission notwithstanding, Williams' biography delivers a lively and fascinating portrait. It goes beyond all previous biographies in terms of the private, occasionally sordid, details of Beaverbrook's life. Once I started, I had difficulty putting the book down. Unfortunately *Max Beaverbrook* is Williams' final biography as he died just months after the release of this book.

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