

## Utopias of Capitalism Recent Books on Maritime Entrepreneurs

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Volume 44, numéro 2, summer/autumn 2015

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad44\\_2re04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad44_2re04)

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Éditeur(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Nerbas, D. (2015). Compte rendu de [Utopias of Capitalism: Recent Books on Maritime Entrepreneurs]. *Acadiensis*, 44(2), 171–180.

## Utopias of Capitalism: Recent Books on Maritime Entrepreneurs

ENTREPRENEURSHIP IS MUCH TALKED ABOUT THESE DAYS in the Maritimes. From provincial legislatures to institutions of higher learning, municipal governments, and the region's daily newspapers and nightly news broadcasts: the discourse of entrepreneurialism and competition have become the common language through which public policy decisions and economic development initiatives are explained and understood. In public discussion and electoral campaigns, history is often shoehorned in service of the prescriptive idea that entrepreneurship – structured by a neoliberal public policy framework – will serve the collective interests of everyone. It is a powerful myth, but one that flies in the face of serious historical investigation of entrepreneurs and their multiple and changing relationships to the regional economy and economic development. Arguably, this myth of the hero-entrepreneur is also a hegemonic trope that serves to further disempower workers in the more competitive and supposedly inevitable economy of tomorrow. The power of this discourse arises not only from the belief that capitalist markets are politically neutral and predestined, but also in the assumption that market freedom and political freedom are joined at the hip. The privileges of business elites today are thus commonly depicted as the natural outcome of competition in a neutral and meritocratic marketplace. Within this schema, rich entrepreneurs are the chosen few in a hierarchical social order sanctioned by the market.

This review essay examines four books that address and reflect the position of business and attitudes about entrepreneurship in the Maritimes today. Three of the books echo the utopian hero-entrepreneur myth in various ways and to various degrees. They are the revised edition of *Twenty-First Century Irvings* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 2012) by Harvey Sawler, a consultant and professional writer; *Harrison McCain: Single-Minded Purpose* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013) by the well-known expert on public policy and public administration Donald Savoie, author of numerous books on regional economic development; and the winner of the 2015 Robbie Robertson Dartmouth Book Award, *Fire in the Belly: How Purdy Crawford Rescued Canada and Changed the Way We Do Business* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 2014), by author and veteran business journalist Gordon Pitts. Through biographical approaches, these books provide real insight into the mentality and character of their subjects; but they do so largely in isolation from the broader societal context in which their subjects operated. This shortcoming stems in large part from ideological narrowness, and not solely from the methodological limitations associated with the conventions of biography. The fourth book is *Irving vs. Irving: Canada's Feuding Billionaires and the Stories They Won't Tell* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2014) by CBC New Brunswick journalist and author Jacques Poitras. It focuses upon the Irving newspaper empire in New Brunswick and its journalistic and business performance under the ownership of a family that occupies a commanding position in the province's economic life. A more critical book than the others, it poses important questions about the limitations to public discourse imposed by the concentration of

wealth and power. Poitras, then, touches upon a subject that suggests the danger in accepting the hero-entrepreneur myth as reality.

In terms of subject matter, however, *Fire in the Belly* is the outlier here as it reveals more about the corporate worlds of Toronto and Montreal than the Maritimes. In it, Gordon Pitts narrates the rise of Purdy Crawford from his boyhood home in Five Islands, Nova Scotia, to the corporate offices of Bay Street. Crawford's father, Frank Crawford, was overman in the No. 2 Springhill mine. The influenza pandemic at the end of the Great War devastated his family. He lost his wife and a son; he was left with one daughter. Frank Crawford remarried – to Grace MacAloney, who had been abandoned by her first husband and had two sons of her own. After the union of these families, Grace gave birth to Purdy Crawford in 1931. Supported by a loving family, Crawford attended Mount Allison University and won scholarships to attend Dalhousie Law School and then Harvard Law School. Harvard, according to Pitts, stoked Crawford's ambition and conditioned his decision "to practice law in a major centre" (20). He joined the prestigious Toronto firm of Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt in 1956, rose to partner by 1962, and played a decisive role in its transformation in the decades to follow. Crawford's legal and business career was centred in Toronto and Montreal. He thus walked a familiar path of outmigration in pursuit of ambition, not unlike R.B. Bennett – the region's most famous corporate lawyer.

Meritocratic endeavour is a significant theme of *Fire in the Belly*. And of the biographical subjects in the books examined here, Crawford comes closest to fulfilling the role of, as Pitts describes him, "a Canadian Horatio Alger hero" (6). His upward mobility was real and remarkable. Pitts argues "his rise at Osler was a watershed in the firm's move from a family compact of elite, private-school-bred lawyers to a meritocracy" (31). And Pitts goes on to trace Crawford's later role in supporting the careers of talented outsiders, including women, in the legal profession and corporate world. But while Pitts's depiction of the upper echelons of Canadian law in Toronto during the middle years of the 20th century is one of the more richly textured parts of the book, the supposed triumph of "meritocracy" over the old order is overdrawn. The trajectory of Crawford's career – from corporate law to his appointment as CEO of the Montreal-based Imasco conglomerate in 1985 – reflected the increased importance of professional credentials and salaried executives versus old-style tycoons in the operation of big business during the latter half of the century. Crawford's career evinced an evolution of the liberal-capitalist ideal of meritocracy rather than its novel triumph.

The rise of K.C. Irving in New Brunswick during the 20th century demonstrated, however, that the public company and salaried CEO were not superseding the proprietorial industrialist everywhere. And away from Irving's Saint John base, Harrison and Wallace McCain were establishing McCain Foods in Florenceville in the 1950s. The timing was fortuitous as the market for frozen french fries was just emerging, and the growth of McCain Foods was evidence of the enduring vitality of family businesses at the upper echelons of Canadian capitalism. The family firm has had a particularly prominent place in the Maritimes. Think, for instance, of the Irvings, the McCains, the Ganongs, and the Olands: New Brunswick's business elite over the last century has been characterized by family firms rooted in particular locales, a situation fostered by the relative absence of large, publicly traded corporations headquartered in the region.

K.C. Irving and Harrison McCain were born into locally prominent families – in Bouctouche and Florenceville, respectively – and were the inheritors of significant wealth. But their success in building businesses can obscure the dynastic quality of their good fortune. And, indeed, both Harvey Sawler and Donald Savoie prefer to highlight the themes of hard work, competition, and merit in explaining the business success of their subjects. In the lengthy first chapter of *Twenty-First Century Irvings*, Sawler tells the intergenerational story of the Irvings, starting with the modest beginnings of George Irving, who emigrated from Scotland and “cobbled together three pounds sterling in 1837 as the first instalment for the survey and registration of the first piece of land the family would own in New Brunswick” (3). George Irving’s son Herbert became a prosperous farmer and sawmill owner, and J.D. Irving built upon this inheritance. K.C. Irving, son of J.D., transformed local wealth centred in Bouctouche into a vertically and horizontally integrated business empire that assumed a commanding position within the New Brunswick economy by the mid-20th century. The general contours of his story are well known. He began selling Fords in Bouctouche and by 1924 was operating a service station. He soon moved to Saint John and expanded his oil business. During the 1930s, he inherited his father’s lumber company (J.D. Irving Ltd.), established a bus and freight truck business, purchased Thorne’s Hardware, and founded Canada Veneers, which furnished the hardwood veneers that outfitted his buses. His sons, Arthur, J.K., and Jack, were raised to run this empire, which K.C. expanded considerably through opportunities associated with wartime production during the 1940s. From Sawler’s perspective, “the Irvings are an old-fashioned rags-to-riches story” (4). This chapter and the book in general are characterized by an unfocused narrative peppered with anecdotes from Irving loyalists about the excellent personal qualities and public service of K.C. Irving and his progeny. From Sawler’s perspective, the family has often been unfairly criticized for their success. Throughout the book he refers back to Donald Savoie’s statement, first quoted in the introduction, that this criticizing attitude simply amounts to an “alibi for failure.” Says Savoie: “Don’t blame the Irvings for the shortcomings of your own energies, enterprise, and vision” (xx-xxi). Savoie evinces a similar attitude in his biography of Harrison McCain, where he baldly proclaims “farmers did not have the skills and ability to go toe-to-toe with Harrison McCain” (262). Both Sawler and Savoie agree that business success and failure are ultimately determined by personal merit.

Sawler, Savoie, and Pitts, then, all craft narratives that echo variants of the rags-to-riches ideal. Not only does this explanatory schema seem especially ill chosen for both Sawler’s and Savoie’s subject, but it also imposes a blinkered and one-dimensional narrative structure upon the past. All of these books investigate people who occupied specific (and fortuitous) positions in the social order during particular periods and in particular places. Their attitudes, ideas, and entrepreneurial capacities were created within contingent and contested historical contexts. In all three books, however, the broader societal context is narrowed while entrepreneurialism is depicted as the natural outlet of human endeavour and the key to “progress.” Sawler’s lens is the narrowest, the most anecdotal, and hagiographic; Pitts and Savoie use the conventions of biography to more scholarly effect and succeed in painting fuller pictures of their subjects. For example, Savoie provides an insightful account of Harrison McCain’s political attitudes and relationships. And Pitts, in a

crisply written and organized narrative, does an able job of locating Purdy Crawford's career within a changing corporate world, and explaining his timely role in restructuring and restoring the Canadian market in third-party, asset-backed commercial paper prior to the 2008 financial crisis. All three books, nonetheless, fail to provide a substantive analysis of how their subjects related to and reflected broader historical developments beyond the boardroom and elite networks of sociability, kinship, and public life. What emerges is an unbalanced picture of entrepreneurs as meritocratic victors, wealth creators, and philanthropic givers.

Examined against the grain, readers may glean other stories from these texts. For instance, Sawler's *Twenty-First Century Irvings*, based as it is upon interviews with numerous past and present Irving employees as well as J.K. Irving, provides fascinating insight into various aspects of the Irving corporate culture. K.C. Irving – a perfectionist and teetotaler who acted in a plain and direct style – worked punishing hours and was knowledgeable in the smallest details of his businesses. His sons imbibed this ethic. The cleanliness of the washrooms in the Irving Big Stop service stations is testament to this characteristic obsessive attention to detail and customer service; “Irving washrooms have a 1-800 number posted, which you can call to register a complaint if conditions are not up to snuff” (117). This mentality is also seen in Irving hiring practices. Prospective Irving employees are, Sawler observes, required to write a mandatory test with questions such as: “Do you like gangster movies?” and “Somebody keeps taking pens from the office. Do you fire them?” (141-2). The Irvings seek to recruit a particular type of employee, and expect dedication and loyalty. The interviews upon which much of the book is based suggest that this corporate culture is indeed deeply held by managers and executives, but exactly how people feel about their loyalty is not entirely clear from the narrative. Moreover, the book seldom looks beyond the Irving companies' managerial ranks. While Sawler is quick to dismiss critical perspectives on the Irvings as myth, the evidence he presents is nonetheless open to a variety of readings.

All three books also echo elite opinions that depict the general populace of the Maritimes in a critical light. Sawler laments, in defense of the Irvings, that “there are times when all the logic in the world simply can't contend with an emotional individual or an emotional public collective” (179). This unreasoning and apparently irrational public is also prone to envy. For instance, Sawler quotes candy manufacturer David Ganong, who asserts that envy of “success” is “a Maritime problem” and that “we're almost too much a dependent society here in the Maritimes” (159). Pitts shows that Crawford harboured a similar attitude about Maritime “dependency.” Crawford lamented “A lot of the people in the region have too much of a look-after-us attitude. . . . The people are great and hard working, but well meaning governments have created a sense of dependence” (134). And, in arguing for a business-led economic regeneration, Savoie rationalizes Stephen Harper's politically damaging assertion that a “culture of defeat” reigns in Atlantic Canada. According to Savoie, unfair federal economic policies first sapped the region's vitality before “guilt money” (federal transfer payments) began to flow into the region in 1957. These funds, argues Savoie, “inhibited self-sustaining economic development” and sullied the image of Atlantic Canada (275). Savoie thus marries self-criticism of the region with regional patriotism: the way forward, apparently, is for Maritimers to become more aware of their collective shortcomings and take

inspiration from their hero-entrepreneurs in order to transform their culture of defeat into one of success.

But this conclusion, which comes at the end of Savoie's biography of Harrison McCain, is contradicted by the ultimate outcome of the McCain story. Harrison McCain developed and kept his business in Florenceville, but McCain Foods nonetheless evolved into a Toronto-based business after the period of direct family control ended in the 1990s. Moreover, McCain Foods was, as Savoie himself recognizes, decisively supported by an activist state. Thus, as Savoie acknowledges, the fantastic rise of the company is not a story of unbridled entrepreneurship and free-market capitalism; rather, it is a story of the partial success of state-administered regional economic development initiatives. Similarly, the example of Purdy Crawford does not provide a model for regional economic development. His ambition and talents, after all, moved his horizons beyond the region.

The experiences of McCain Foods and Purdy Crawford conform to a familiar pattern in the movement of people and capital that hint at the particular limitations and contradictions of business boosterism in the Maritimes. Contrary to Savoie's assertion – based upon a highly selective and partial reading of history and historiography – that the implementation of the National Policy in 1879 was symptomatic of a national government that served only the interests of Ontario and Quebec (271), numerous historians have shown that the Maritimes experienced a significant wave of industrialization associated with that policy as businesspeople sought and achieved new opportunities in the emerging national economy. In fact, Sir Charles Tupper “was an early convert” to protectionism, and helped develop what would become the National Policy before the 1878 federal election. Tupper's native Cumberland County, with its abundant coal reserves, seemed well positioned to occupy a central role in the new industrial era, and he had earlier expressed the view that Nova Scotia would become a “vast manufacturing mart on this side of the Atlantic.”<sup>1</sup> Over the next half-century, the rise and fall of industrial Amherst would plainly reveal the divergence between local and regional interests and capitalist ones. Although Amherst is a particularly stark example of local businesspeople engaging in accumulation strategies that ultimately devastated their communities, various iterations of this story have been identified and studied by historians throughout the region.<sup>2</sup> Sawler and Savoie seem unwilling to contemplate the complex and ambiguous historical record of entrepreneurship in the region, preferring narratives where entrepreneurial success crowds out all contradictory evidence before it.

1 Phillip Buckner, “Tupper, Sir Charles,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 14 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/tupper\\_charles\\_14E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/tupper_charles_14E.html).

2 Nolan Reilly, “The Rise and Fall of Industrial Amherst, 1860-1930,” in *Industry and Society in Industrial Nova Scotia*, ed. James E. Candow (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2001), 129-58. See also, for instance, David Frank, “The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation,” *Acadiensis* VII, no. 1 (Autumn 1977): 3-34; T.W. Acheson, “The Maritimes and ‘Empire Canada’,” in *Canada and the Burden of Unity*, ed. David Jay Bercuson (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1977), 87-114; Acheson, “The Great Merchant and Economic Development in St. John,” *Acadiensis* VIII, no. 2 (Spring 1979), 3-27; Peter DeLottinville, “Trouble in the Hives of Industry: The Cotton Industry Comes to Milltown, New Brunswick, 1879-1892,” *Historical Papers / Communications historiques* 15, no. 1 (1980): 101-15; James D. Frost, “The ‘Nationalization’ of the Bank of Nova Scotia, 1880-1910,” *Acadiensis* XII, no. 1 (Autumn 1982): 3-38; Ian McKay, “The Crisis of Dependent Development: Class



That is a shame, because it is precisely this record of capital flight that makes the Irvings and Harrison and Wallace McCain unique and helps to explain why they achieved the degree of political and economic power and social esteem that they did in New Brunswick. In a province lacking in capital investment and employment, homespun industrialists occupied (and continue to occupy) powerful political, economic, and social roles while acting as defenders of local interests. However, their activities were not the logical outcome of entrepreneurship, but arose from and were shaped by a constellation of unique attitudes, social and political relations, government policies, business strategies, and historically contingent economic opportunities in an “underdeveloped” region.

The stewardship of such “community-oriented entrepreneurs” has generated highly unequal economic rewards within the region. As I noted in an earlier review of Savoie’s book, the rise of McCain Foods was not a neutral outcome of entrepreneurship combined with globalization. It was the product of human agency and differing levels of access to state power that reflected and reinforced inequalities in the New Brunswick countryside; this marginalized, and ultimately destroyed, the prospects of a different political economy envisioned by many New Brunswick potato farmers.<sup>3</sup> Harrison McCain was, of course, a complex person, and it should be noted that Savoie offers a convincing depiction of his sincerity and civic-mindedness. For instance, McCain’s political attitudes, at least for a time, were clearly shaped by the progressive currents of mid-20th century liberalism. He accepted the need for the state to play a role in providing social services. And he offered principled support of Louis Robichaud’s efforts to reform municipal government and improve access to social services through the Equal Opportunity Program during the 1960s. By contrast, K.C. Irving did not and left the Liberal fold to oppose Robichaud. It is interesting that while Savoie emphasizes K.C. Irving’s role as business mentor to Harrison McCain, he does not name Irving as an opponent of Equal Opportunity. Savoie cryptically writes: “Some anglophone business leaders, the economically strong urban areas, and the English language media went at Robichaud with all the determination and venom they could muster” (227). K.C. Irving embodied all those elements and was indeed among Robichaud’s most powerful opponents. As Jacques Poitras observes in *Irving vs. Irving*, Robichaud’s Equal Opportunity Program threatened the tax concessions that had been granted to K.C. Irving’s paper mill. “Surely the province does not expect to attract new industry,” declared Irving, “or even retain existing industry, under such terms?” (38). K.C. Irving’s loyalty to New Brunswick, it seems, came at a price.

Conflict in the Nova Scotia Coalfields, 1872-1876,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers canadiens de sociologie* 13, no. 1/2 (Winter-Spring 1988): 9-48; Eric Sager with Gerald E. Panting, *Maritime Capital: The Shipping Industry in Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990); Marilyn Gerriets, “The Impact of the General Mining Association on the Nova Scotia Coal Industry, 1826-1850,” *Acadiensis* XXI, no. 1 (Autumn 1991): 54-84; Bill Parenteau, “The Woods Transformed: The Emergence of the Pulp and Paper Industry in New Brunswick, 1918-1931,” *Acadiensis* XXII, no. 1 (Autumn 1992): 4-43; and Don Nerbas, “Adapting to Decline: The Changing Business World of the Bourgeoisie in Saint John, NB, in the 1920s,” *Canadian Historical Review* 89, no. 2 (June 2008): 151-87.

- 3 See Don Nerbas, “New Brunswick Revolutionary: A Review of Donald J. Savoie’s *Harrison McCain: Single-Minded Purpose* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013),” *Journal of New Brunswick Studies* 5 (2014): 105.

Poitras demonstrates that this price was not only paid in tax concessions, favourable Crown land policies, and other state favours; it was also felt in the newsrooms of the province. Irving came to own all of the province's English-language daily newspapers, and the Crown prosecuted Irving under the Combines Investigation Act in the early 1970s. During the investigation, Irving divided ownership of the newspapers among his sons, and appealed the ruling that went against him. His lawyer argued that the monopoly ceased to exist with the new ownership structure and that conviction required proof that the monopoly was actually detrimental to the public interest. The New Brunswick Court of Appeal overturned the ruling against Irving, and the Supreme Court of Canada later confirmed that decision. Today, the Irving monopoly is truly province-wide.

*Irving vs. Irving* traces the evolution and operation of the Irving newspaper chain through 15 interlocking chapters. Roughly chronological in its organization, the book uses a variety of sources to reconstruct the history of a subject that is admittedly difficult to study given the Irving penchant for secrecy. The overall effect is a convincing analysis of how the Irving newspaper business has operated and has been managed, especially since the 1970s. Poitras's study does not show the Irvings as active manipulators of the news; but it does suggest how their commanding economic position in the provincial economy insidiously and subtly creates unspoken limitations on what are acceptable questions and subjects of journalistic pursuit at Irving-owned newspapers. As Poitras notes, the impact of the Irving monopoly is today evidenced by the complete silence of the province's newspapers on an event of momentous significance currently underway in New Brunswick: the breakup of the Irving empire itself.

K.C. Irving first became a newspaper owner in 1936 with the purchase of the *Maritime Broadcaster*, a Saint John weekly. But his really significant entry into the newspaper business occurred in 1944, when he acquired the New Brunswick Publishing Company from Howard P. Robinson. A powerful local capitalist, Robinson had spearheaded the consolidation and monopolization of Saint John's daily press in the 1920s. This included the formation of the *Telegraph-Journal* as an asset of the New Brunswick Publishing Company. The *Telegraph-Journal* is central to the story Poitras tells. From 1961 until his retirement in 1987, Ralph Costello was publisher of the *Telegraph-Journal* and its afternoon companion the *Evening Times-Globe*. While Costello improved the papers from the previous era of Tom Drummie (Irving's first publisher), when Costello's career came to an end the tributes to him failed to "name a single investigative story that defined his journalistic legacy as publisher" (72). In Poitras's view, he did not "bring a new approach to covering K.C. Irving" (25).<sup>4</sup>

But change was underway. On 18 August 1993 the *Telegraph-Journal* published the details of the last will of K.C. Irving. To avoid Canadian taxes, Irving had made Bermuda his home in 1972. He left his billions in an offshore trust. While his sons – J.K., Arthur, and Jack – were still running the Irving companies, the will stipulated that they could not participate in running the trust unless they left Canada. Three non-Canadian trustees, including K.C.'s widow, were responsible for its management. The *Telegraph-Journal* proclaimed: "Irving's Last Will Bequeaths

4 Costello would co-author Irving's biography after his death in 1992. See Douglas How and Ralph Costello, *K.C.: The Biography of K.C. Irving* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1993).



Foreign Exile for His 3 Sons” (2). This moment is described in the book’s prologue as a rarity: when an Irving newspaper shone a light on its owners. The coverage reflected the enterprising approach of the new editor of the *Telegraph-Journal* and *Evening Times-Globe*, Neil Reynolds, and J.K. Irving’s insistence to Valerie Millen, general manager of the New Brunswick Publishing Company, that she not allow any member of the Irving family to “pressure her about any story before it was published” (86). J.K. Irving wanted to improve the reputation of the two papers, and hiring Reynolds, the highly respected and award-winning former editor-in-chief of the Kingston *Whig-Standard*, was seen as a step towards that goal.

Yet the separation of the newspapers from other Irving interests was difficult to maintain, and by the 1990s the Irving grandchildren were assuming a larger role in the family businesses. J.K.’s son Jim had fewer scruples about making his opinion heard in the newsroom. Poitras’s evidence suggests that these different styles reflected divergent generational experiences. For J.K., memories of the brush with the Combines Investigation Act, and the scrutiny of the Royal Commission on Newspapers a decade later, taught the need to keep the newspapers at arm’s length. The younger Irvings were less influenced by that experience. Millen was fired in 1994 and replaced by Bruce Phinney, an accountant who began to supervise the newsroom in a more vigorous manner. Reynolds later claimed that Phinney “didn’t want anything that would produce a phone call from an important person to Mr. Irving” (102). Though fired as well in 1994, Reynolds was re-hired that year. He left in 1996 on good terms.<sup>5</sup>

The departure of Reynolds ushered in a new era. In 1998 the Irvings placed all four of their newspapers – the *Telegraph-Journal*, the *Evening Times-Globe*, the *Moncton Times-Transcript*, and the *Fredericton Daily Gleaner* – under the ownership of a new company, Brunswick News Inc., in order to streamline the business. The printing of all the newspapers was consolidated in Moncton. And Rino Volpé, a hard-nosed executive who had broken a strike at Kent Homes (another Irving company), was brought in as vice-president to make Brunswick News profitable. The papers stopped competing with one another and were instead “considered a single editorial product, each targeting a different segment of the audience” (166). The integration of the newspaper business was further deepened with the consolidation of human resources, circulation, and accounting. The *Evening Times-Globe* was closed in 2001, and Brunswick News began buying up weeklies. The company also expanded into the francophone market. From 1998 to 2004, then, the Irving press experienced rapid transformation. “In just six years,” Poitras explains, “two companies publishing four English daily newspapers had become a single enterprise overseeing three dailies, six weeklies, six French weeklies, and an alternative weekly” (182). Volpé identifies the simple reason for this expansionism: “It was for the distribution of flyers” (181). Brunswick News generated a profit of \$12 million in 2004.

In November of that year Jamie Irving, Jim’s oldest child, was named publisher of the *Telegraph-Journal*. He was still in his twenties. While there was some hope

5 Reynolds was apparently fired because “an unnamed nemesis had falsely accused him of inflating the price of his house near Kingston, which J.K. Irving had agreed to buy as part of his employment contract.” Reynolds was rehired after pleading his innocence to J.K. Irving (104-5).

that he would move the paper back to the investigative bent of the Reynolds days, Jamie Irving envisioned it as “a business-driven political newspaper” (204). Despite this, in 2005 the *Telegraph-Journal* was critical of the special tax concession Kenneth Irving negotiated for Irving Oil’s LNG terminal with Saint John Mayor Norm McFarlane. Poitras speculates that the coverage reflected a growing division between the Arthur branch (Irving Oil) and the J.K. branch (J.D. Irving Ltd.) of the family. J.K. was reportedly furious about how the LNG deal had damaged the goodwill in the community towards the family. Nonetheless, after the election of the Shawn Graham Liberals in 2006 the *Telegraph-Journal* became a vociferous economic cheerleader. But the promise of a second oil refinery in Saint John did not come to fruition. Graham’s effort to achieve cheaper power rates for large industrial users through the sale of NB Power to Hydro Québec failed in the face of popular protest. And Jamie Irving was caught up in the *Telegraph-Journal*’s infamous “Wafergate” scandal in 2009, which prompted Neil Reynolds’s return as editor-at-large of the Brunswick News papers.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Kenneth quarreled with his father Arthur and left Irving Oil abruptly in 2010, and the split between the branches of the family continued. The Irving press, Poitras concludes, though it does not preclude good journalism, ensures that the ongoing saga of the Irvings remain largely untold in the province.

The recent history of the Irvings that Poitras recounts demonstrates how fast and unexpectedly change can occur. It is unfortunate that Sawler’s *Twenty-First Century Irvings*, first published in 2007, was not more thoroughly updated for its 2012 edition to reflect these changes. The book’s references to the forthcoming boom with the construction of the second oil refinery in Saint John reads as yet another example of exaggerated expectations and a reminder of how fickle private capital investment can be. The project was cancelled in 2009. In a region that has historically served as a hinterland for other centres, such disappointments have not been uncommon. Savoie, Sawler, and Pitts, however, adopt an idealist perspective. They examine their subjects through the utopian lens of capitalism, where hero-entrepreneurs serve as the vanguard in a world-historic process that spreads wealth and freedom. Yet this ideological framework limits the questions they ask, and runs contrary to the broader experience of the Maritimes. After all, the entrepreneurship of many large companies in the region was heavily subsidized by public money during the latter half of the 20th century. Today, McCain Foods has apparently transcended the state that facilitated its growth. And J.D. Irving Ltd. and other wood-manufacturing corporations have demanded continuing state support in the face of worsening international market conditions, even though, as Mark McLaughlin and Bill Parenteau posit, the prospects of New Brunswick’s forest-dependent communities

6 The scandal was over a *Telegraph-Journal* story in which Prime Minister Stephen Harper was said to have pocketed the Communion wafer offered to him by the archbishop of Moncton at the funeral of former Governor General Roméo LeBlanc. Evidence to substantiate the allegation was lacking. It was also revealed that the claim about the wafer was added to the story submitted by the two journalists whose names appeared on the byline. The suspension of Jamie Irving suggested his responsibility, but the paper provided no public explanation – only an apology (244–51).

continue to deteriorate within the existing paradigm of development.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, as Poitras demonstrates, the concentration of economic power can limit what gets heard in the public sphere in New Brunswick. This makes it all the more difficult for different models of development to receive a serious public hearing. And, indeed, since the 1980s the rise of neoliberal globalization and the concomitant dissipation of the nation-state as an economic unit have, as elsewhere, empowered capital in the Maritimes. The optimistic discourse of entrepreneurship and competition seems more likely to derive from capital's relative political strength than from any particular evidence for optimism. Its deadening effect upon the historical imagination ought to be resisted.

The history of business and entrepreneurs was at one time a burgeoning field within Atlantic Canadian history. The release of new histories that embed entrepreneurs in accounts of historical change in Atlantic Canada and the rise of a new subfield on the history of capitalism in the United States suggest a renewal of scholarly interest in capitalists and their role in shaping society in Atlantic Canada and beyond.<sup>8</sup> More historians ought to reoccupy that terrain. Such an effort would historicize – and thus denaturalize – the role of the entrepreneur in society, and hopefully contribute to a fuller account of history as well as a more historically grounded and reflective public conversation about entrepreneurship.

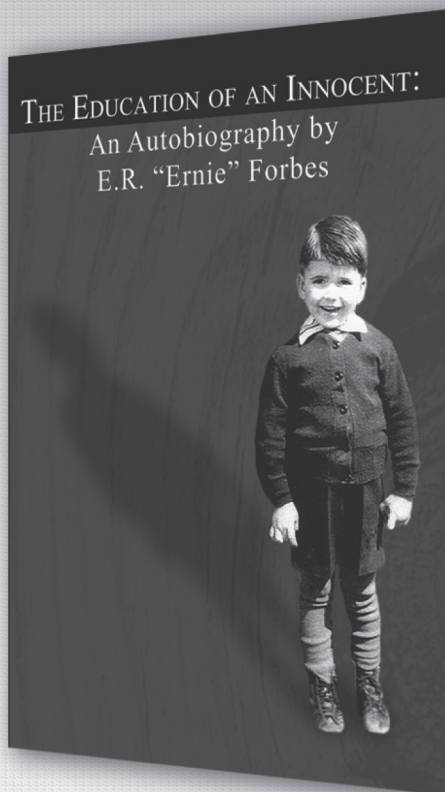
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7 Mark J. McLaughlin and Bill Parenteau, "A 'Fundamental Cost That We Can't Deal With'? The Political Economy of the Pulp and Paper Industry in New Brunswick, 1960-Present," in *Exploring the Dimensions of Self-Sufficiency for New Brunswick*, ed. Michael Boudreau, Peter G. Toner, and Tony Tremblay (Fredericton: New Brunswick and Atlantic Studies Research and Development Centre, 2009), 13-34.

8 See, for instance, Daniel Samson, *The Spirit of Industry and Improvement: Liberal Government and Rural-Industrial Society, Nova Scotia, 1790-1862* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008); Béatrice Craig, *Backwoods Consumers and Homespun Capitalists: The Rise of Market Culture in Eastern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Sven Beckert, "History of American Capitalism," in *American History Now*, ed. Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 314-35; and Sven Beckert et al., "Interchange: The History of Capitalism," *Journal of American History* 101, no. 2 (September 2014): 503-36.

# “are you THE Ernie Forbes?”

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