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Fall 2002

## Review of *A Business History of Alberta* by Henry C. Klassen

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Foran, Max, "Review of *A Business History of Alberta* by Henry C. Klassen" (2002). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 625.

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**A Business History of Alberta.** Henry C. Klassen. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1999. xxii + 362 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, index. C\$29.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Given the dearth of business histories in Alberta, and in Western Canada for that matter, *A Business History of Alberta* is a welcome contribu-

tion to Canadian regional historiography. Henry Klassen's study, the result of many years of intensive research at a variety of levels, emerges as a well-written account of the development of business in Alberta from the territorial period to the present day. Using specific examples, supported in many cases by personal interviews, Klassen has brought to life the histories of dozens of business enterprises in all parts of Alberta over a hundred year period. His reliance on the interview process is particularly significant since many of the pioneer businessmen he interviewed are now deceased. Klassen's organization is clear and straightforward, his narrative readable and easy to follow. He develops his themes of development using specific instances, beginning with general business and moving chronologically through the transition to specialization, bureaucratic management, and into the age of decentralized management systems. Also, by compartmentalizing such crucial areas as the role of government, he spares the reader unnecessary confusion.

Relying heavily on individual case studies to exemplify changes in the way business has been conducted through time, Klassen offers new information and perspectives. The crucial roles of wives in early family businesses, enduring family links, the versatility and diverse backgrounds of early businessmen, and the quickness of some (and the refusal of others) to address changing consumer demands for specialty items are a few that come to mind. He also tries to set the business climate against a wider background of social, economic, and technological change. A fascinating insight for Alberta historians is provided by Klassen's discussion of the considerably different philosophies towards business held by Alberta's first two Premiers. In terms of continental focuses, he shows the interrelation between American and Canadian markets and the penchant of Alberta businessmen to seek advice on marketing and distribution systems from successful American enterprises.

The tone of the narrative, however, is uncritical; moreover, the chronicle lacks an overriding thesis. Klassen is primarily interested in documenting the changing nature of business in Alberta through time rather than explaining why certain business enterprises grew and flourished in spite of spirited outside competition. The enduring presence of strong business enterprises in areas like construction, oil and gas servicing, and agribusiness is due primarily to Alberta's economic base and its geographical advantages.

*A Business History of Alberta* makes a viable and important contribution to Alberta historical scholarship. Within his own unified frame of

reference, Klassen has woven together political, economic, commercial, demographic, and social threads to explain how business operations evolved in the province. In showing us the enduring roots of Alberta's self-advertised entrepreneurial psyche, he has legitimized a long-standing popular perception. That he has done so by bringing to life dozens of forgotten individuals is an achievement all historians should appreciate. **Max Foran**, *Faculty of Communication and Culture, University of Calgary*.