

Michael Bliss

Skating on Thick Ice: Gerald Tulchinsky and Canadian Business History

It was an honour to be invited to participate in the Tulchinsky symposium, but there was a strong sense of being a fish out of water. First, I was asked to pretend to an expertise in an area of research, Canadian business history, in which I have not done any research, or writing, for more than a quarter century. Second I was being asked to contribute to a conference devoted to Jewish studies, an area of research to which I have never made any contributions. Thirdly, and not without relevance, I am not Jewish.

But I was asked to talk specifically on Gerald Tulchinsky and the history of business in Canada—Gerald's work before he did Jewish history. Having been a colleague and friend of Jerry's for almost fifty years, it was nice to be able to pay tribute to his historical scholarship at the symposium. Moreover, we had had significantly parallel careers: both of us started out as Canadian business historians in the 1960s, both of us left business history for other areas (I may not have published any Canadian business history since 1987, but Gerald hadn't since 1990). As well, this conjunction of parallel and changing careers has been in some ways a kind of microcosm of what happened to Gerald's and my generation of Canadian historians during our lifetime, and to business history in Canada, career shifts that are perhaps of wider interest, even as we reflect on how Jewish studies in Canada has developed.

To come back to my not being Jewish: As a boy in small-town Ontario (another parallel with Gerald, who came from small-city Ontario), I was spectacularly un-Jewish in the sense that my little community, Kingsville, down in Essex County, had hardly any Jewish presence of any kind. There here were only two Jewish families in town, and we had next to no contact with them. It's true that Caroline Weintraub, a realtor's daughter, was about my age and very good looking and I would have liked to have had more contact with her. But we were a Protestant Christian family and since I wasn't even allowed to go out with Roman Catholic girls, I didn't even try. Until I left Kingsville to attend University College at the University of Toronto, I knew nothing about Jewish culture and had no Jewish acquaintances. We did live in silos.¹

What I was steeped in, aside from the United Church of Canada, was medicine. As the son of a small town general practitioner, whose offices were in the house, I had witnessed the routines of doctoring morning, noon, and night all my life. My family's identity, such as it was, was medical, and though I came to university intending to become almost anything but a doctor, this background would become important.

In the 1960s I decided to become a historian, and returned to the University of Toronto for my doctoral studies, just a few years after Gerald Tulchinsky did the same. We were not classmates in any seminars, but we were contemporaries in history at University of Toronto. In fact we were part of a huge cohort of history students wel-

came into advanced studies by the prospect of almost unlimited opportunities in universities desperate for warm bodies to teach the baby boomers, and funded by the easy fellowship money that was available from governments to subsidize the creation of the new professoriate. It was a very good time, the best time, to go into academic life. (Virtually a whole generation of Canadian historians went through the University of Toronto in those years, as undergrads or graduate students, including the first major cohort of Jewish kids. My classmates included, for example, Irving Abella and David Bercuson. Jack Granatstein had gone off to do his doctorate at Duke; Michael Marrus, a Toronto grad, had gone to Berkeley).

We saw ourselves as a new generation of professional historians. Not for us the simplistic approaches to history offered by the old guard – the whiggish accounts of history as the expansion of liberty, or in Canada the nationalist histories celebrating our progress from colony to nation. We sat at the feet of old masters, and in some cases not-so-old masters, but we knew we would soon find our own legs and use them to march off in different directions. In particular we would walk away the obsession with national political history driving our mentors, scholars like Donald Creighton, the biographer of Sir John A. Macdonald, and Maurice Careless, the biographer of George Brown. We knew that history was hugely multi-faceted and that up-to-date historians were adjusting to its complexities by becoming highly specialized. You could do political history, but you could also make a specialty of doing, say, social history, perhaps urban history, diplomatic history, maybe religious history, labour history, or even business history. The American historical profession was well-along these roads toward specialization and we young Canadianists often took our models from the best practitioners in that country.

Our professors were, by and large, quite comfortable with encouraging us to open up new areas of study. I have a vivid memory of Donald Creighton, who taught the senior seminar on Canadian history in the age of Macdonald and Laurier, asking us one day if any of us knew anything about the history of Canadian business. None of us did. None of us knew of anything that had been written in the field, partly because except for a few hagiographic corporate histories written by the failed playwright, Merrill Denison, and a history of Stelco by William Kilbourn, nothing much had been written. Except of course that Professor Creighton himself had written almost thirty years previously a major book that sort of qualified as business history, *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence*. It purported to be a history of the struggles of the merchant communities of Quebec, mostly Montreal, to create and maintain a great commercial empire based on their river system. It was a very well-written book that had become a kind of Canadian classic, not least because of the big questions Creighton posed. He was advancing a hypothesis (shared with Toronto's great economic historian, Harold Adams Innis) about the role of the St. Lawrence as the great east-west artery that provided a kind of natural geographic basis for the Canadian state. He also articulated a view of the apparent dichotomy between the

enterprise of English-speaking merchants in Quebec and the lack of enterprise of its conservative French-Canadian peasantry.

Creighton's Laurentian view of Canada was a big Canadian idea, much to be wrestled with. So was that subsidiary theme of French-Canadian disinterest in enterprise, a notion that was being much discussed among French-Canadian historians, who were asking big questions about whether the Conquest in 1763 had somehow decapitated the French community in Canada or whether, as the prominent historian Fernand Ouellet argued, the French-Canadians simply were not attuned to the spirit of commerce, not attuned to capitalist values. Others in the 1960s, such as the leftist economic historian Mel Watkins, were asking similar sweeping questions about Canadian economic development in general. Why had Canadians apparently failed to develop the institutions, such as investment banks, that could have funneled capital out of staple industries, such as the fur trade and the timber trade, into creating a more diversified economy with a heavy manufacturing presence? Perhaps Canadian businessmen as a whole were a little weak in the spirit of enterprise, a little unsatisfactory as entrepreneurs. In the sixties, a time when we were doing much national hand-wringing about foreign ownership of Canadian business, these and similar big questions were the stuff of much casual debate in seminars and such semi-learned journals as the old *Canadian Forum*.

Tulchinsky's doctoral research was in the realm of business history with a bit of a bow to urban history. He decided to take a close look at what was going on along the St. Lawrence, especially in Montreal, during the years when the recognizably modern foundations of the Canadian economy were being created. His thesis, supervised by J.M.S. Careless, was finished in 1971 and was published in 1977 by the University of Toronto Press under the title, *The River Barons: Montreal businessmen and the growth of industry and transportation, 1837-1853*.

The book was instantly seen to be an important contribution to our understanding of a seminal era of transition in the history of business in Canada. On rereading it still stands up more than 35 years after publication as a model of the new scholarship we were aiming to produce in those years.

As I suggest in the title of this paper, Tulchinsky as a business historian skated on thick ice. His research had been prodigious. He had mined archives, read newspapers, scoured city directories, and used many other sources to try and find out exactly what was happening in Montreal business during his period. Forget about *a priori* assumptions. Find out who the merchants were. What kinds of business were they in? How did their businesses evolve? How did they raise capital? How did merchants become involved in transportation? How did sail give way to steam along the St.

Lawrence and who then got interested in steam locomotives and railways? Where did the railways run? Where did the money for railways come from? Who got interested in manufacturing and why? Gerald's work became thick ice because he piled layer upon layer of research, flooding the rink as it were. He knew so much about his river barons. He knew far more about the people involved in the commercial empire of the St. Lawrence than Professor Creighton ever did. Creighton's scholarship had always been thin – the grand old man had always skated on thin ice, partly because he was a product of a time before the doctoral degree, partly because he was at heart a writer/dramatist and polemicist rather than a historian.

Cautious and focused where Creighton and the other generalizing historians had been bold and sweeping, Tulchinsky in *The River Barons* was able to use his scholarship to show how inadequate their sweeping, simplistic conclusions about Montreal or Laurentian or Canadian enterprise were as a representation of historical reality. His Montreal merchants and their associates were acting out a grand Laurentian dream, were not self-conscious builders of a Canadian nationality. Rather they were profit-seeking businessmen, interested in exploiting opportunities wherever they could be found. As often as not, the opportunities for doing good business ran south from Montreal, along the old Richelieu River–Lake Champlain route, down to Boston or New York. If it was cheaper to move product out of Canada through the United States, that's how you did it – and that, for the most part, was where the railroads would run. So much for all the seminar chatter about Creighton, Innis, and the Laurentian hypothesis.

Nor had the Montrealers been slow to perceive opportunities in the new economy. As merchants and businessmen they worked in relationships and organizations structured for flexibility. They had ways of mobilizing capital that did not require such vehicles as investment banks. They responded eagerly to the development of markets for all manner of products, including manufactured goods ranging from steam engines to shoes and shovels. By the 1850s Montreal, in fact, had evolved into a major industrial city. So much for Mel Watkins and the idea that the merchants of nineteenth century had failed to seize manufacturing opportunities.

One of Tulchinsky's many strengths in *The River Barons* was that he saw from the sources how clearly businessmen in a pre-corporate era used networks of kin and kind. Family and ethnic and religious connections were important foundations for merchants' networks of trust and confidence. Of course the story of Montreal commerce was mostly about Scots Presbyterians, McGills, MacKays, McTavishes, a dozen other Mcs and Macs. But Tulchinsky also showed us how open the city was to immigrants from the United States, mostly also of Scots Presbyterian background, but distinctively clannish in their own circles. Without giving it undue attention, he described a small but significant Jewish presence in Montreal business; and he very importantly undercut the assumptions of the Creighton–Ouellet school of histo-

rians by showing that French-Canadians seemed to participate enthusiastically in Montreal commerce wherever they saw reasonable opportunities. “French Canadian enterprises,” Tulchinsky wrote, “were characterized by a verve and resilience, but an unwavering pursuit of profits sometimes attributed to ‘the Protestant ethic’ ... French Canadians appear to have been as aggressive and flexible in business as other Montreal businessmen, and ... many of them were fully capable of adjusting successfully to the mid-nineteenth century challenges in transportation.”² And with findings like that yet another big issue haunting Canadian historians of the time began to fade away, made irrelevant by good scholarship.

I first came to know Gerald in the years of *The River Barons* because I too was trying to do Canadian business history. I knew Jerry as a fellow business historian. We were not close personally, and few of us at Toronto in those years cared about ethnic distinctions, so I have no idea when it occurred to me that Tulchinsky happened to be Jewish. You would not have known it from reading the text of *The River Barons*, though I now notice that there was a clear enough giveaway in the book’s dedication to Gerald’s father – in Hebrew. In any case, these things hardly seemed to matter. It was time to get on with the writing of the history of Canadian business.

Which we did for a while. For a few years in the late 1970s and early 1980s it seemed that business history would flourish as a sub-specialty of Canadian business history. Some very good scholars (such as Doug McCalla, Chris Armstrong, Viv Nelles, Tom Traves, and Duncan McDowall) were active in the field, there was quite a bit of publication, and there were even two or three national conferences on the subject, with, of course, keynote addresses by top American business historians from Harvard. A few of us got commissions from companies to write business history, and some interesting business biographies were written.

One of the best of the biographies was Michael Marrus’s *Mister Sam*, a definitive but very readable study of the patriarch of the Bronfman dynasty, written in part to counter the nonsense contained in Peter C. Newman’s smirking book, *Bronfman Dynasty*. [I had also been a candidate to get this commission, and was told that one reason Marrus was selected was a better comfort level with his understanding of the Bronfman family’s Jewish roots, which was perfectly reasonable.] Other very successful Canadian Jewish business leaders were interested in commissioning biographies of family histories, but under circumstances that suggested they expected to control the outcome. Both the Reichmann family—the developers—and Garth Drabinsky—eventually got the favourable biographical treatment they wanted, but from journalists not historians).³

As the 1980s wore on it was clear that there were problems with Canadian business history, problems peculiar to the field, problems involving the evolution of historical interests, problems in the careers of the people who had been doing business history.

As a field of study business history is congenitally short on constituents and patrons. Most businessmen are forward- not backward-looking. Most are not students of history - when I taught a course in Canadian business history at U. of T. for two or three years in the 80s I found it was attracting the absolute dregs of the university, commerce and finance students looking for the softest possible option. Canadian universities do have a lot of business schools, and many of them claim to have aspirations towards becoming centres of scholarship, but they tend to be late bloomers compared to say the Harvard Business School, and in the twentieth century none of them did more than dip cautious little assistant professor's toes in the subject of business history. During all the years I did business history at U. of T. I only once was asked to give a talk to our business school students.

There are also methodological problems involved in doing business history, not least the lack of good archival sources. Corporate records are usually inaccessible and then they have a way of disappearing. Good corporate archives are very rare.

Tulchinsky ran into this issue with his main business history project of the 1980s, which was to be a history of the Canadian clothing history, particularly first in Montreal, then as it grew in Toronto. He invested a huge amount of time and work in this, again following his method of creating thick ice with meticulous, detailed research, which, to change the metaphor, too often involved trying to make bricks with only the smallest bits of straw. He published one major article about this research, a paper in a 1990 festschrift for JMS Careless, entitled "Hidden Among the Smokestacks: Toronto's Clothing Industry, 1871-2001."⁴ Almost twenty-five years later, like *The River Barons*, it still stands as the definitive work on its subject - very detailed, with all sorts of statistics, very thick ice indeed on which Gerald built a contrarian argument that the industry was "unusual in its labour force, capital structure, organization, entrepreneurial recruitment, responsiveness to tariffs and general growth trends."⁵ Here, too, although Tulchinsky certainly had a strong feel for the way the Jewish presence developed in the Toronto clothing industry, this was not any means a story of exclusively Jewish enterprise, nor did the text reveal much about the author's own ethnicity.

Changes in historical interests in the 1980s also affected the field of business history. Students of leftist persuasion had always been hostile to capitalist enterprise. Some were totally uninterested in it; others wanted to study it, but only within Marxist frameworks that saw capitalism as mostly being about exploitation and theft. Believers in, say, the labour theory of value, tended to be a lot more interested in labour's history than in the history of management. The idea that history was driven by class

struggle created a lot more interest in, and sympathy for, the working class than for the bosses.

The new idea that history could also centre on the dialectic of gender relations also spawned new specialties in that area. Finally, and perhaps most interesting, there was also a renewed interest in ethnicity and the history of ethnic groups, of which more below. In a more general way, the historians of the 1960s, now middle-aged, were being challenged by a younger generation of students, who had their own interests and agendas. As I experienced at Toronto, not many had business history on their agenda.

The 1980s witnessed the effect of age and maturity on the young professionals of the 1960s. We had cut our historians' teeth in fields that had so interested us and our supervisors, we had proven ourselves, we had advanced into fairly senior positions at our universities, gained our tenure, and could now do what we wanted to do. Some wanted to go into administration, and did that. Some—many—wanted to do nothing, and they certainly did that. Others, including Tulchinsky and Bliss, radically changed the focus of their scholarship.

The ice that you want to skate on as a senior scholar, confident of your abilities, able to choose your rinks, may be very different from the frozen ponds you worked on so carefully as a graduate student. After building that small starter-house in the city, you decide it's inadequate and you're going to move on to something bigger and better. Many of our generation of Canadian historians moved in the 1980s into quite new areas in the middle of our careers. Almost invariably our desire was to cultivate subjects that now seemed of more interest and relevance in our lives, and perhaps of more importance in understanding history.

In many cases, not all but many, middle age begins to be a time of greater reflection on one's cultural roots and how important it is to understand them. You begin to be called back to your own past, and you find in that a way of going forward.

This happened to me. After paying my dues to Canadian business history, I felt called back to my cultural roots. What were they? There did not seem to be a lot of usable content in having been a member of the Canadian WASP majority, especially after I had abandoned the Christian part of it by becoming an atheist.⁶ Where I personally felt most strongly rooted was in having been part of a family dedicated to doctoring, to medicine. And so when I became bored by and frustrated with the prospect of spending the rest of my career doing business history, that was the cultural heritage I fell back on and began to explore through doing a book on the discovery of insulin. After a bit more to-ing and fro-ing I spent the rest of my scholarly energies in medical history, and the books I have written in that field are my most important, just as I had my best experiences with students in that field, and have most of my ongoing scholarly attachments. Business history seems a long time ago, though it did help a

retooling medical historian develop a grip on the economics of health care.

In the 1990s Gerald Tulchinsky also switched fields and began publishing his big books on the history of the Jewish community in Canada and its journey to the present. In his fascinating response to earlier drafts of this paper he explains vividly how his interests had evolved. He now had an area of transcendent interest; he moved into a more leading and more vibrant field of history; and although he continued through his research always to build very thick ice to skate upon, his rink had become incomparably larger than the old Montreal commercial arena, or the garment factories of Toronto. And now he could swoop and dance and generalize almost as freely as any of our old masters, becoming the kind of Donald Creighton of Canadian Jewish history, but with more substance and scholarship (and a much less grumpy personality).

Of course you never forget your first experiences on skates, you never forget your first loves. Sometimes you even come back to them. Gerald and I both agree that the field of Canadian business history has never been the same without us. He thinks he may come back to it. And that might even provoke more papers from me at future conferences.

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Qualification: As a child in the 1940s and a teenager in the 1950s I was exposed to bits of the casual anti-semitism of Anglo-Christian culture, but more importantly to the very substantial sympathy in the West for Jewry and for Israel arising out of World War II. Although the word wasn't used, we were taught about the Holocaust in school and we absorbed almost entirely favourable media coverage of Israel and its struggles. The good Ontario high school curriculum in the 1950s was geared to producing tolerant graduates who abhorred the old ethnic and racial stereotyping. As well, my older brother who was a medical student at UofT often spoke both respectfully and with envy of the talented Jewish students with whom he was competing - one of whom, Bernie Langer, bested him for the Gold Medal in the Meds class of 5T6.

2

Gerald Tulchinsky, *The River Barons: Montreal Businessmen and the Growth of Industry and Transportation, 1837-53*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977, 67.

3

I elaborate this point, as well as my later turn to medical history in my memoir, *Writing History: A Professor's Life* (Toronto, Dundurn, 2011).

4

David Keane and Colin Read, eds., *Old Ontario: Essays in Honour of JMS Careless*, (Toronto, Dundurn, 1990), 257-284.

5

Ibid, 278.

6

I am now beginning to realize how wrong I've been not to want to write more about the culture into which I was born, not least the religious culture and how it has evolved - mostly weakened - during my lifetime. Much could be learned about the past half century of Canadian social history in a book about the decline of the United Church of Canada.