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Robert J. Smith, *The Bouchayers of Grenoble and French Industrial Enterprise, 1850-1970*. Baltimore, Md. and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. xix + 247 pp. Tables, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 US (cl). ISBN 0-8018-6683-9.

Review by Stephen L. Harp, University of Akron.

In this book, Robert J. Smith sets out to trace the intertwined history of a family, the Bouchayers of Grenoble, and of its company, Bouchayer et Viallet. In eight short chapters, Smith follows four generations of fathers and sons from the founding of Bouchayer et Viallet until its dissolution in the early 1970s. In the process, Smith places the company in the broader context of the evolution of French business from artisanal production in the early nineteenth century, to mid-sized mostly self-financed family firms at the turn of the century, to joint-stock companies, and ultimately to larger-scale corporations after World War II.

Smith begins with a biographical sketch of Joseph Bouchayer. Born in rural Isère in 1835, Joseph left home for Grenoble at the age of twelve. His father was a nailmaker, whose artisan manufacture was being undermined by industrial production, causing the youngster to consider the broader vista that the capital of the Dauphiné might offer. Joseph stayed with an uncle and aunt in the city, found a wealthy contact to pay for his professional education, went into business, and married. Learning metalwork, Joseph Bouchayer initially focused on the pipes and ductwork for heating and ventilation systems tied to the development of gas heating (and the complementary ventilation ducts) in public buildings and elite housing. He was very much a building contractor, essentially grouping together into one workshop the artisans who custom-made the company's products. Various iron and copper casings, steam radiators, and farm implements also became part of the trade. In 1870, needing capital for further expansion as the railroad took his products outside the Dauphiné, Joseph Bouchayer formed a partnership with Félix Viallet. The Bouchayer family would become the dominant partner in the enterprise, even before the reconstitution of the business as a joint-stock company in 1912, but the company carried the name Bouchayer et Viallet.

In 1889, Joseph Bouchayer's eldest son Aimé joined the firm. Groomed by his mother Joséphine as much as by his father to assume the roles of both *patron* and patriarch, Aimé Bouchayer had an eye for business opportunities at a time when they were expanding. The rich mineral deposits north of Grenoble allowed for the development of lime and cement industries, and nearby timber formed the basis of a burgeoning paper industry. As the railroads opened up the area, products could be exported. Energy remained an obstacle, as coal was comparatively expensive in mid-century Grenoble. In 1863, Joanny Joya resolved the problem with a pressure pipeline for water, making possible the use of hydroelectricity for paper mills. Recognizing the potential of this "white coal [*houille blanche*]" for an array of energy-intensive industries, including aluminum production, Aimé Bouchayer expanded heavily in the production of pressure pipelines in the 1890s, relying on the custom production techniques that had characterized Bouchayer et Viallet from the beginning. The growth of the electric industry in *fin-de-siècle* France thus directly built Bouchayer et Viallet's fortunes. The business expanded rapidly as Aimé took control of the firm from his father. By 1913, the company had a revenue of over six million francs. By the 1930s, the Bouchayers would be dubbed one of France's 'two hundred families' thought to

control the economic, and thus social and political, life of the nation.

As for many French businesses, World War I posed serious challenges to the success of Bouchayer et Viallet. Aimé Bouchayer increased his workforce (from 800 to 3,200) during the war in order to produce an array of military goods, including metal shelters, sentry boxes, small boats, and storage tanks impervious to acids. Above all, the company produced artillery shells, particularly the famous 75mm. The company produced up to 2.7 percent of total French production in 1917, "a significant achievement for a medium-sized firm" (p. 59). A friendship with the Dauphinois luminary Louis Loucheur, eventual Minister of Munitions, helped to ensure both government contracts and adequate primary materials for the manufacture of munitions. In the meantime, the business for pressure pipelines, despite the need for cheap electricity used in wartime production, largely stagnated.

After the First World War, Aimé Bouchayer reduced his workforce back to 800, refocusing production on pressure pipelines, boilers, and other custom capital goods. Earnestly believing that the French *patronat* should wait for the French state to reduce taxes and social charges before reinvesting *en masse* in new projects, Aimé hoped to return to the prosperous norms of the *Belle Époque*. But while production of automobiles, rubber, metals, and chemicals grew, a cash-strapped French state did not make the critical investments in capital projects that would have allowed Bouchayer et Viallet to prosper. The company survived adequately, without really thriving, as Aimé, then his son Jean, complained of currency instability, high taxes, an increasingly militant labor force, a general shortage of workers, and high turnover. By the mid-1920s, Aimé Bouchayer's attempts to diversify the company into chocolate making (in order to continue to employ women forced to leave the metalworking shops after World War I) and a host of other business ventures had failed, causing the company to sell bits of real estate to avoid debt.

When Aimé Bouchayer died in 1928, family shareholders who continued to control this joint-stock company agreed that Aimé's eldest son Jean should succeed his father. Neither born with an interest in business nor particularly groomed to become an entrepreneur, Jean Bouchayer embodied, according to Smith, the problem with the family firm--the assumption that the familial patriarch would be the best *patron*, capable of effective leadership, spelled disaster for most family firms in France. In the end, Jean was unable effectively to lead the company in the depths of the Depression. Continued sales of prime real estate in Grenoble kept the industrial side of the company in the black. The workforce fell from 690 to 320 between 1929 and 1936. Despite new contracts just before the outbreak of the Second World War, Smith decisively concludes that "Bouchayer et Viallet's survival during the 1930s was due to momentum from the previous generation rather than decisive management on the part of the new *patron*" (p. 116). Not surprisingly, the constraints of the Vichy years did not change the firm's fortunes; both Jean Bouchayer and the board were willing to work with Vichy officials in planning future hydroelectric projects, but few were undertaken.

The company's "reluctant collaboration" (p. 117) in the German war effort and Jean Bouchayer's firm support for Pétain throughout World War II further limited the company's options after 1945. Essentially forced by the political context after the war to appoint a veteran communist as personnel director, Jean's own entrepreneurial weaknesses were further exacerbated by the strength of organized labor. While much of French industry prospered after the war, Bouchayer et Viallet stagnated. Coal and eventually nuclear-powered electrical generation rapidly grew at the expense of hydroelectricity. Rather than aggressively moving into new products or capital projects, Bouchayer et Viallet stuck primarily to pressure pipelines. Now more than ever, Bouchayer et Viallet balanced the books with systematic sales of real estate in thriving postwar Grenoble. Jean Bouchayer receives much of the blame for the company's mediocre performance in the eyes both of his son and successor after 1956, Robert Bouchayer, and of Smith. Jean Bouchayer is reported to have spent much of his time, even during business hours, on a wide array of avocations, many befitting a member of the haute bourgeoisie but ultimately distracting him from the business.

After 1956, Robert Bouchayer attempted to turn the tide to little avail. Although he launched a series of metalworking and real estate ventures, inadequate planning and ultimately a bad relationship with his father (who undermined Jean with shareholders as payback for Robert's work in ousting his father from control of the firm in 1956) doomed Robert's leadership of the firm. In 1971, Bouchayer et Viallet's assets were liquidated.

For Smith, the history of the Bouchayers epitomizes much of the history of family firms, such a central form of business organization in modern France. Joseph Bouchayer was very much nose-to-the-grindstone, founding the business and paying little attention to social status. Aimé built the business while also moving to a townhouse, becoming a civic leader, and raising his own children as well-off (read spoiled) bourgeois children. Jean spent much of his time on hobbies, providing little leadership for the firm. And Robert, despite some valiant efforts to quite self-consciously recreate the record of his grandfather Aimé, did not have sufficient skills to save a sinking ship.

The strength of this book results above all from its sources. Smith has combined archival and printed primary sources from the Isère with internal family histories, diaries, and correspondence of the Bouchayer clan. Smith even befriended Robert Bouchayer, basing the book on innumerable interviews as well as Bouchayer's own history-in-progress of the company. There are paltry few business families in France or anywhere else that would have offered a professional historian such unbridled access, and Smith's ability to get that access should be highly commended. The abundance of such unique sources allows Smith to fuse a history of the family with that of the business. Smith thus is able to do an in-depth study of the evolution of a family business, an approach that differs from the more statistically oriented Chandlerian framework.<sup>[1]</sup>

Ironically, Smith does not use his potentially new methodological approach to business history to challenge either Alfred Chandler (curiously, Smith does not cite two of the more recent contributions that adapt Chandler's work <sup>[2]</sup>) or David Landes. In fact, Smith sees the history of Bouchayer et Viallet as emblematic of the problems of family firms that Landes described in the wake of World War II. <sup>[3]</sup> That is, Smith sees the significance of this book as a confirmation of Landes' conclusions about the inherent stagnation in French family firms. Bouchayer et Viallet is thus an illustration of a broader trend outlined more than fifty years ago, not an example that questions either Landes' specific conclusions about France or Chandler's broader ones about Western business growth more generally.

Although Smith mentions that this is a cultural approach to business history (p. xvi), and he certainly has the sources that would allow for such a history, some historians might be frustrated by the extent to which Smith ties the book to Landes' framework. Even if one accepts Landes' immediate postwar generalizations, a leap of faith for many of us, some will still see ways that Smith's sources might contribute to broader and more recent questions of French social and cultural history.

For example, though Smith includes several very fascinating quotations by Joséphine Bouchayer (taken from her correspondence with her husband Joseph and others involved in the family business) that reveal how much women could influence the evolution of the business while ostensibly merely exercising their roles as family matriarchs, cultural historians will wonder to what extent Smith's evidence might point to changes in our broader understanding of the notion of separate spheres in nineteenth-century France. The fact that Smith did not use the vast literature on women and gender in nineteenth- and twentieth-century France makes one wonder whether he has mined the sources for the perspectives on the cultural history of modern France that the sources might contain.<sup>[4]</sup> In choosing quotations, Smith seems to sense, without fully exploring, broader issues in cultural history, thus implicitly indicating that historians of France should consider business history for rich insights into the history of gender in nineteenth and twentieth-century France. If the sources are as rich as they appear, a more explicit analysis might have been in order.

Some historians will also wish that Smith had placed his discussion of Bouchayer et Viallet's pronatalist measures in the context of much recent scholarship on family allowances. Smith's sources might well reveal the private motivations of at least some business leaders as they instituted allocations familiales. Recent work has tended to focus either on the nationalist rhetoric of firms establishing policies or on the extent to which family allowances effectively let employers raise the wages of some employees while avoiding across-the-board pay hikes; private correspondence and diaries might help to clarify inside motives versus public rhetoric for at least one French company.[5]

Whatever my criticisms, they should not distract us from the fact that Smith writes very clearly and well, and the press has produced a volume almost entirely bereft of errors. All told, this is a very readable, interesting book that historians of French business and family history will want to read for comparative information. Cultural historians, particularly those focused on women or gender studies, might want not only to read the book but also to mine its sources.

#### NOTES

[1] Alfred D. Chandler, *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[2] Emmanuel Chadeau, "The Large Family Firm in Twentieth-Century France," *Business History* 35 (1993): 184-205 ; Michael S. Smith, "Putting France in the Chandlerian Framework: France's 100 Largest Firms in 1913," *Business History Review* 72 (1998): 46-85.

[3] David S. Landes, "French Business and the Businessman: A Social and Cultural Analysis," in E. M. Earle, ed., *Modern France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1951), pp. 334-53.

[4] On the combination of business and family, see especially Bonnie G. Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoises of Northern France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[5] Compare Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State in Britain and France, 1914-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Cheryl Koos, "Engendering Reaction: The Politics of Pronatalism and the Family in France, 1914-1944" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1996); and Paul V. Dutton, *Origins of the French Welfare State: The Struggle for Social Reform in France, 1914-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Koos and Dutton have also published some of their findings in a host of journal articles.

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