

PREFACE

I make no claim to offer information that will be new to specialists, nor can I do justice to the vast amount of primary research available. . . . At best, a volume like this can synthesize the better general studies of each area, try not to ignore too many detailed studies, and try not to add too many new inaccuracies.

—DAVID CHRISTIAN, *A HISTORY OF RUSSIA,
CENTRAL ASIA, AND MONGOLIA*

The great contemporary historian David Christian's modest disclaimer certainly applies to the present work. Once I realized that a history of early Western business would require delving into various ancient societies over long periods of time, it seemed presumptuous for me to attempt it. I prefer to view this work, therefore, as a report in story form, a report on what an inquiring businessman can learn from the historians who have studied such matters.

My hope was to trace the roots of modern business, meaning business as it developed in Europe and the United States after the Industrial Revolution and today exists in developed countries everywhere. Like the language, social culture, and political systems of Europe and the United States, the lineal ancestry of European and U.S. business traces clearly to Middle Eastern and Mediterranean antiquity. In India, China, and other places business also grew, but historians have not noted much cross-cultural influence.

Every book entails significant editorial choices. A fundamental choice here was to approach business history as a story and to tell it chronologically. The goal has been to report on a sequence of seminal places where

influential changes of significance first emerged, rather than providing a comprehensive enumeration of businesses and their practices. The result is selective in its description of businesses and of the places where business was practiced.¹ Because knowledge about antiquity is often uncertain, those who aim to advance the state of scholarship often disagree about what things mean. As scholars they provide lengthy discussions and citations to justify their views. But since this is simply a report on what the scholars have found, rather than an effort to advance their learning, and since I doubt that most readers would find such discussions of value, I have limited references to the principal sources for each chapter and the particular sources I used for quotations and less obvious information.

I have been the happy beneficiary of enormous help from many people. Intellectually, I have formed my concepts of how history works from, among others, the great twentieth-century scholars Fernand Braudel, Alfred D. Chandler, Sir John Hicks, William H. McNeill, Douglass C. North, and Oliver Williamson.² I also owe a debt to the late Harvard Law School professor of legal history Samuel Thorne, whose careful standards of scholarship I have always tried to follow.

I began this study while operating a business. I could proceed only because of the hard and capable work of its managers, including Arthur Pirrone, Vincent Valicenti, the late Milton Linker, and Wilmer Pastoriza; and my ability to trust honorable business partners like Frank Gilfedder of Stiefel Laboratories, the late Richard Ottaviano of Genesis Management, Bill Weiss and Arturo Peralta-Ramos of Medtech Laboratories (now Prestige Brands Inc.), and Menelaos Kostarelos of the international cosmetics company Farmeco.

Quite a number of friends, colleagues, and teachers have most helpfully read and commented on drafts and chapters of this work. First and foremost has been my mentor, William H. McNeill, the great historian who read, reread, and read again these chapters. I cannot say enough for his guidance and friendship. And if I have misused the word *feudal*, it is not his fault. Another great historian and teacher who freely gave me his time and thought was the late Alfred Chandler, the inventor of modern business history. His early counsel and enthusiasm kept me going through times of grave doubt. My friend Clifford Brown, a distinguished political scientist with a particular love for Thucydides, provided many helpful comments, as did the learned Fred Terna and marketing professor Sashi Gadgil. I am also extremely grateful for the encouragement and friendship of professors Douglass North, the late Peter Drucker, and Karl Moore.

Several business executives, including the masterful entrepreneur Bob Kulperger, my friend Walter Sleeth, and Menos Kostarelos, read earlier version of the manuscript and gave me useful feedback. I received extensive editing help from Ken Atchity and Andrea McKeown of AEI Online, my wonderful agent/editor Paul McCarthy, and Bridget Flannery-McCoy of Columbia Business School Publishing. I would also like to thank Andras Bereznay of London for his maps.

My greatest debt of gratitude is to my wife Verna MacCornack, who first vetted many of my ideas as we jogged in Central Park. She encouraged me to read every chapter aloud to her, through revision after revision, and her sage advice, steady support, and constant enthusiasm for this project have, quite simply, made it possible.

Dear Reader, much as I might wish to blame the book's shortcomings on others, you and I know better.

