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Charles Elliott Perkins: Beau and Baron

I WAS really more interested in Indians than I was in business history. A seminar in some aspects of the operation of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad was far down on my list of preferred courses, but not much else was available, so I took it. The first assignment given the seminar was to browse for a few weeks in the Cunningham-Overton Collection on railroad history and then come in with a topic to write on. Browsing through the annual reports, financial records, and figures on miles of track laid and cost per mile only reinforced my earlier notion that I didn't want to take a course in business history.

The one bright spot amidst the volumes of statistics was the papers of Charles Elliott Perkins, president of the C. B. & Q. from 1881 to 1901. As I paged through the letters of his presidency I became increasingly interested in this man who began with the Burlington as a poor clerk and ended a millionaire. I thought of writing on his business policies, but was not really satisfied with the idea. It was too impersonal. Then by chance I came across several old black ringbinders which contained letters written by Perkins long before he became president of the road. They were his courtship letters, written to Edith Forbes in Boston. The possibilities of entertainment they offered drew me from what I thought was my work for an entire afternoon. More important to me than the messages of endearment contained in the notes was Perkins' clear expression of his views on life, money, happiness, religion, and politics. They were, in short, the essential philosophy of the twenty-three year old clerk.

After a few days the idea struck me that a comparison could be made between the thoughts and actions of Perkins during both periods, his courtship and his presidency. I went back to the letters and began to study them. The object in making such a comparison was to determine, where possible, the extent to which a change in circumstances, from struggling clerk to wealthy executive, brought about a change in Perkins's attitudes and ideals. Research has been done with a view to discovering these changes and illustrating why they occurred. The results of that research have been more than rewarding. They may be summarized by the statement that, aside from a loss of idealism, Perkins the baron was the man Perkins the beau wanted to be. He was rich, but more important, through wealth he gained the acceptance that he felt was denied him earlier.

Problems with the paper have been minimal. Research materials were nearly all at hand in the Cunningham-Overton Collection. The biggest difficulty was that I am not a trained psychiatrist. This is not to suggest that Perkins was in need of that sort of professional attention. However, I feel that a psychiatrist's aid in interpreting Perkins's actions, in the light of his difficult childhood and subsequent struggle to become what he considered a success, would have been most helpful.

In conclusion, I must remark that I have found business history to be very different, and far more interesting than I imagined it would be. What others with more experience in the field might take as obvious has become apparent to me only in the last few months: that business, and therefore business history, does not exist without people. There can be no history of rails extending themselves across a continent, nor of computers revolutionizing a nation. The figures, the records, the hardware, and the machines, all of which appear so cold and impersonal to the novice in business history, are only the tools of people. Business history is inevitably the story of people as well.

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Better Britons for the Burlington

BETWEEN 1871 and 1875 the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad operated a colonization agency in Great Britain. This agency was opened in an effort to secure colonists who would settle with little difficulty on the company's lands in Iowa and Nebraska.

A study of the Burlington's British agency would seem, at first glance, to be well removed from the mainstream of historical interest. Overcoming this possible criticism has been an enlightening task because it has involved an attempt to place the British agency within four frameworks of more general interest. The first framework was provided by the C. B. & Q. as a corporate entity. Within this context the British agency demonstrated the basic methods and attitudes of the company, and it reflected the impact of such men as George S. Harris and Charles E. Perkins. Understanding the significance of the policy decisions undertaken by the Burlington's leaders involved the study of another framework, the general nature of American colonization companies during the 1870's. When this review of other companies was completed, an awareness of the uniqueness of the Burlington's selective approach was the result. The third framework was provided by the general economic, social, and political circumstances in both the United States and Great Britain during the 1870's. These circumstances profoundly affected the attitudes of Britons toward emigrating to the United States and, therefore, were very important to the men in charge of the agency. The final framework was the migration movement itself. The basic characteristics of this movement meant that the Burlington's men had to concentrate in certain areas and had to cooperate with the men and forces controlling north European emigration. The company's men, for example, had to adjust to the demands of the shipping companies, and this consideration eventually restricted the Burlington's attempt at protecting and assisting settlers. In fact, for all its desires to shape the migration movement for its own purposes, the Burlington ultimately had to adjust its policies to meet the conditions inherent in the movement itself.

A study of a rather obscure office within a single railway company, therefore, can provide insights into a host of vitally important topics. These insights can be meaningful because they can be new. Historians, for example, have not fully explored the late nineteenth century migration of British peoples to the United States. As a minor attempt at filling this gap, a study of the Burlington's search for better Britons can be historically significant.