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Norman R. Ball and John N. Vardalas

Ferranti-Packard: Pioneers in Canadian Electrical

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As is pointed out in one of the Prefaces to this work: "While Canada has no shortage of theoreticians or science and industry policy experts, it has alarmingly few studies which explore corporate culture, technology, and how things really worked over the long haul". In fact, this reviewer knows of no other work which approaches the comprehensive study of one Canadian industrial organization that is contained in this book.

The firm of Ferranti-Packard was created in 1958 out of the two firms Ferranti Electric and Packard Electric - shortly after the British parent firm (Ferranti Ltd.) gained complete control of Packard Electric. While this major merger had profound effects on both partners, they actually had their respective roots deep in Canadian corporate technology with a history that extended back 100 years. Although superficially in the same business, each of these firms had a very different approach to the creation and marketing of high-voltage transformers and other power engineering equipment. The merger was further complicated by the resulting corporation attempting to branch out of its traditional market to enter the newly-emerging fields of electronics and computers. The situation was complicated by the English parent firm vacillating between paying too much, then too little, attention to the Canadian subsidiary. The problems generated by all these factors make for a fascinating, and sometimes horrific, story - one that is well told by the two authors.

The book begins by a survey of the emerging technology of electric power and the 1880s pioneering efforts of people like the Ferranti family. After setting the background, the authors turn to the early years of electric technology in Canada and the origins of the Packard Electric firm in St. Catharines Ontario where they began with a plant that produced items such as light bulbs and

small transformers and later branched out into the manufacture of early versions of the Oldsmobile automobiles.

The book continues to alternate between an examination of the products and corporate culture of each firm as they matured into the Canadian and, to a limited extent, the North American market. While the information on the corporate activities is interesting, I have to admit that I am a technological junkie and the heavily illustrated (an average of one photo per page which almost put this book into the coffee-table category) descriptions of the early technology is one of the real joys of this work. By the time the story has been brought up to the 1950s, the authors have given us not only a good look at how the two very different corporate cultures worked in the limited Canadian marketplace, but have also provided an interesting historical tour of the development of a major technology of our era - a combination that very few authors can manage.

It is the last third of this book which really stands out in my mind as a superb example of the description of a little-known aspect of Canadian technological history. The Ferranti-Packard firm, in its efforts to diversify into the electronics business, was responsible for many innovative products, not the least of which was an extensive military communications system (DATAR), the airline reservation system pioneered by Trans Canada Airlines (later Air Canada) which was actually functional before the more famous American Airlines Sabre system, and the production of Canada's first computer as a commercial product. Along the way are described many of the smaller ventures that set the stage for these impressive developments. These little known developments were a huge technological success (which speaks highly for the Ferranti-Packard research and development staff) but were to be a marketing disaster. The authors detail reasons behind this unbalanced effort and there are many modern firms which could learn from this tale of success and failure.

As you may have gathered I liked the book and highly recommend it to anyone interested in either science, technology, or business in the Canadian context. The book is very well produced with a nice layout, good typeface, solid binding, and a nice intermixing of photographs, charts, and text.

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