THOMAS CHILDS COCHRAN

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THOMAS CHILDS COCHRAN, who died in May 1999, at the age of ninety-seven, was one of the century’s major practitioners of American history. Born in 1902 in New York City, he attended New York University, graduating in 1923. After spending two years as a teaching assistant, he moved on to the University of Pennsylvania, receiving his Ph.D. in 1930. There he remained until his retirement as the Benjamin Franklin Professor of History in 1972. By then he had been president of the Economic History Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the American Historical Association.

Cochran’s most significant and enduring achievement was to broaden the academic discipline of history by bringing the rapidly-growing disciplines of the social sciences—sociology, anthropology, and economics—into its realm. During the 1930s, he began to move beyond the empirical works of Charles Beard and Frederick Jackson Turner in a search for a broader cultural synthesis. Above all he decried the emphasis on political history in terms of what he called the presidential synthesis and in economic history in terms of the debate over the contributions of the industrial leaders as being either “robber barons” or “industrial statesmen.”

In the late 1930s, after his marriage to Rosamond Beebe, he settled down to writing what he had been teaching. At her suggestion he elicited the help of William Miller, a Penn graduate who had worked with him briefly at NYU. The result, The Age of Enterprise: A Social History of Industrial America, published just as the United States entered World War II, was a path-breaking book. It dealt not only with the changing activities of business, both small and big business, but also with those of industrial workers, urban dwellers, philosophers, and politicians.

As a pioneering work in institutional history, The Age of Enterprise laid the groundwork for the coming of both labor and business history as specialized fields of study. It helped to inspire the work of the post–World War II historians of labor, including David Brodie, Herman Gutman, and David Montgomery. In business history, Cochran’s History of the Pabst Brewing Company, published in 1948, was one of the very first objective and analytical histories of a major industrial enterprise based on its own records. In the same year, Cochran published in the American Historical Review his manifesto against “The Presidential Synthesis in American History” that focused on the writings of “a small group of cultural leaders rather than the normal ideas of the average citizen.”

In that same year, Cochran joined the Research Center in Entrepreneurial History at Harvard. That center was formed by the economist Joseph Schumpeter and by Arthur Cole, another Harvard economist as well as an academic entrepreneur, and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. Cochran, as a senior research associate, became the leading intellectual force at the center. (Schumpeter died shortly after the center
was under way.) Cole and Cochran, by bringing together young economic historians, nearly all of them still working on their doctoral dissertations, had a major impact on the postwar writing of economic history. These neophytes included David Landes, Bernard Bailyn, Douglas North, John Sawyer, Henry Rosovsky, Hugh Aitken, and myself, from Britain Peter Mathias and H. J. Habakkuk, and from France Maurice Levy-Leboyer.

For Cochran and the center, the dominant intellectual approach was that of Talcott Parsons, the chairman of Harvard’s recently-formed Department of Social Relations. Parsons was then developing his structural-functional approach to defining and explaining how economic and political processes were inexorably linked with social institutions. Parsons’s critical theoretical concept was that of role and sanctions. In 1949, Cochran’s “Role and Sanctions in Entrepreneurial History,” published in the center’s journal, explored the value of the Parsonian concepts to the study of business culture and entrepreneurship. Role consists of the concepts held by people in general as to their expectations of a position or status in life. Roles were enforced by sanctions, both informal and formal, and so became a society’s “anchors of social stability.”

Cochran’s initial application into Parsonian theory resulted in his Railroad Leaders 1845–1890: The Business Mind in Action. Published in 1953, it became one of the most important books in the field of business history. He and his wife, Rosamond, examined some fifteen hundred letters of sixty-one railroad executives that defined the concepts of their role and the sanctions in a large number of topics ranging from ownership and control to command of capital, the foundations of management, the strategy of corporate expansion, and attitudes toward labor, public opinion, and government, as well as general social attitudes. His major finding was that the values and attitudes of the leaders who created the American railroad system remained relatively little changed. They were concerned with growth, stability, and profits, but less so with internal operations and organization. Both the role and sanction approach and Cochran’s findings were challenged.

The book has remained, however, a classic in business history because of the broad range of questions asked—questions that must be asked by any business, labor, or institutional historian. It remains the basic source of study of the railroads as they created the basic transportation and communication infrastructure for the industrializing of the nation in post–Civil War years.

After the publication of Railroad Leaders, Cochran continued his crusade to incorporate the social sciences into the discipline of history. His Business as an American Institution (1957) more broadly defines the evolution of American business in terms of its heritage and of competing values and ideas as the nation was transformed from an agrarian into an industrial society. Then Cochran turned to cultural
anthropology with his *Puerto Rican Businessman: A Study of Cultural Change* (1959) and *Entrepreneurship in Argentina* (1962). They were followed by *Social Sciences in History* (1964). In these same years, Cochran took his ideas abroad as a visiting professor at Oxford and then at Cambridge and as a participant in the founding of the International Economic History Association.

In 1972, the year Cochran retired from Pennsylvania and was elected president of the American Historical Association, he published his new synthesis, *Business American Life: A History*. Covering a wide range of topics, this history was “presented not as a comprehensive interpretation of our history, but rather one synthesized around a single institution, in this case business rather than politics.” The new “paradigm” was “focused on role playing as the central process involved in social change.” The book is invaluable for understanding the transformation of business and of attitudes and values within the institutions from colonial times to the 1970s. But again Cochran’s theoretical approach was not widely accepted.

If many specifics of role and sanction theory were not enthusiastically received, Cochran’s broader goals were fully achieved. As he wrote late in life: “The principal aim of some 50 years of writing history has been to convince readers that business has been the most important social institution from the Colonial period on. My aim has always been to write cultural, not narrowly economic, history, to place business as a social force as important as politics or religion.” In achieving these goals, Cochran became a pioneer in the writing of institutional history, a founder of the subdiscipline of labor history, and the foremost founder of that of business history.

Tom and his wife Ro were an impressive team, both academically and socially. Both were astute bridge players and first-rate golfers. After their marriage, it was Ro who had urged Tom to work with Bill Miller to write *The Age of Enterprise*. She did a major share of Tom’s research in the study of railroad leaders, and for other books. As Tom often said, Ro was his closest companion, co-worker, and critic.


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[In writing this piece, I’ve relied on David B. Scilia’s “Cochran’s Legacy: A Culture Path Not Taken,” *Business and Economic History* 24 (Fall 1995): 27–39.]