

Mexico, Brownlee discusses both the centrality of optical culture in the painting itself—which depicts a small crowd of men gathered on the front porch of a hotel listening to one man read a newspaper—as well as the ways in which the painting circulated, from etchings to folio engravings, in newspapers. In this way, Brownlee argues, the painting both depicts the centrality of vision—the man holding the newspaper brings it close to his eyes in order to read it, while a man behind him uses spectacles in order to read over the first man’s shoulder—and, through its recirculation, demonstrates how optical culture spread. The final chapter turns to the limits of optical culture, with a focus on the phantasmic qualities of the period, particularly fears around the value of paper money, speculators, and ghosts.

Historians of advertising and, more broadly, the visual culture of American business will find in *The Commerce of Vision* an impressively detailed and sophisticated analysis of how advances in the treatment of ocular disease and methods of transmitting, receiving, and processing information brought about an entirely new relationship between seeing and society. As the nation’s vision, quite literally, improved, so did the number of things one could expect to see on a daily basis. While rising literacy rates are an important part of this story, so is the expectation that one needed acute vision in order to be successful in business and other daily activities. While many of the images in the handsomely illustrated *The Commerce of Vision* are familiar to historians of antebellum America, Brownlee gives us a new perspective on the period, in which seeing clearly was not a given but instead something in need of correction.

Martin L. Johnson is assistant professor of English and comparative literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of Main Street Movies: The History of Local Film in the United States (2018).

. . .

Does America Need More Innovators? *Edited by Matthew Wisnioski, Eric S. Hintz, and Marie Stettler Kleine.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019. ix + 397 pp. Photographs, figures, tables, index. Paper, \$45.00. ISBN: 9780262536738.

doi:10.1017/S0007680520000203

Reviewed by Marc Levinson

A few years ago, I wrote the history of a retailer that tried lots of new things: it invented the business of selling tea by mail and then reinvented itself as the first discount grocer; it figured out how to slash supply-chain costs by becoming a manufacturer and then transformed its industry by

replacing thousands of small stores with supermarkets. The Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company's innovations, mundane as they may seem, helped it become the world's largest retailer. It stayed that way for four decades.

That sort of innovation, the kind that successful businesses undertake constantly as they navigate a changing world, gets short shrift in *Does America Need More Innovators?* The thesis of this conference volume is that promoting innovation has become all the rage in government and academia, and the authors consider whether this is a good idea. "Much of the rhetoric about innovation portrays it as a natural and unquestioned engine of economic and social progress," Matthew Wisnioski writes in an introductory chapter. "However, with the growth of so many pro-innovation initiatives, critics are beginning to ask: To what end?" (p. 5). That's a question well worth asking. But, almost uniformly, the essays in this book conflate three very different concepts: innovation, invention, and technology. By characterizing innovation as an engineering task rather than as an intrinsic aspect of good management, they misunderstand its economic benefits and the role government can play.

Innovation, as historian Benoit Godin shows, has not always been deemed beneficial. "From antiquity through most of the nineteenth century, 'innovator' was one of the most odious epithets one could hurl at a rival," he writes (p. 148). The reason, of course, was that innovation, whether in religion, politics, or the economy, was destabilizing. It was well into the twentieth century before innovation came to be seen as a process that could bring about desirable changes rather than as a disruptive act or a heretical idea.

More recently, as the United States came to have a chronic international trade deficit, innovation became associated with the concept of "competitiveness." The underlying notion is that if the United States beats other countries to the punch in creating new technologies, it will fare better in international competition and narrow the gap between its exports and its imports. Such thinking has given birth to a federal Strategy for American Innovation, government grants to promote innovation by small business, and a raft of other state and federal programs overseen by "innovation experts" (p. 17).

There is, as Mariana Mazzucato shows in her 2013 book, *The Entrepreneurial State*, strong historical evidence that government can help speed the development of new technologies both through support of research and by judicious use of its purchasing power. But Mazzucato also emphasizes important points that many innovation enthusiasts ignore. The timing of the economic benefits from technological innovation is highly uncertain: it is impossible to know whether an additional

tax dollar invested in research will bring faster economic growth in five years, or ten years, or never. If the benefits eventually arrive, they are very likely to be diffused across borders. Although U.S. government support for nanotechnology is probably good for the world, it does not follow that such support will create thousands of U.S. jobs, raise U.S. living standards, or make the United States a net exporter of products incorporating nanotechnology. Who captures those benefits depends on public policies relating to taxes, education, law, capital markets, industrial subsidies, and social welfare—all factors that have nothing to do with where something was invented.

Inspired by the historical growth of the car industry in Detroit, the pharmaceutical industry in New Jersey, and the computer industry in Silicon Valley, advocates insist that governments and universities can fertilize innovation by encouraging entrepreneurs in a particular field to cluster in a single place. Historically, though, many such clusters emerged by chance. As economic geographer Maryann Feldman admits in one of this volume's more thoughtful essays, it is wrong to think "that policymakers could simply line up the appropriate inputs and then turn the crank" (p. 84). Clusters take time to mature and often fail to develop. The idea that they will emerge from government support for local entrepreneurs is generally wrong, Feldman adds; in a world of global value chains, clusters are more likely to center around outposts of large corporations, to which local start-ups can become suppliers.

Historians Andrew L. Russell and Lee Vinsel object to the policy focus on innovation, which, they write, will never be the main job of engineers. They argue rightly that maintaining old things well is more important in economic terms than inventing new ones. "Most engineers are going to be maintainers," they assert. "Yet innovation-speak actively devalues this essential work, which will never be radical, revolutionary, or 'whole new'" (p. 257). Their complaint about current innovation-speak is accurate, but it also reveals how misguided the discussion of promoting innovation has become. Earth-shattering discoveries are few and far between. People who find ways to extend the life of a highway paving job or to speed up the line at the coffee shop will never have entries in Wikipedia, but that does not make their innovations any less valuable. Even though they receive little public acclaim or financial support, those humdrum improvements in the way businesses and government function are the main source of the higher productivity that is critical to economic growth. We need to remember that maintainers can be innovators, too.

Marc Levinson, an independent scholar, is author of *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (2nd ed., 2016) and *The Great A&P and the Struggle for Small Business in America* (2nd ed., 2019).

. . .

The Power of Your Life: The Sanlam Century of Insurance Empowerment, 1918–2018. By *Grietjie Verhoef*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. xxv + 409 pp. Figures, tables, appendix, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$85.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-881775-8.

doi:10.1017/S0007680520000185

Reviewed by Geoffrey Clark

For much of the twentieth century, the South African National Life Assurance Company (Sanlam) was the second-largest life insurance office in South Africa. Today it is a highly diversified and multinational financial services group whose constituent companies not only dominate the domestic insurance and wealth management markets but also have extensive operations in Europe, Africa, and the Indian Ocean basin. This company history, commissioned by Sanlam in celebration of its centenary, is the impressive product of a collaborative, decade-long research program headed by Grietjie Verhoef that involved four master's theses, four doctoral dissertations, and several contributions by Verhoef herself as well as a number of former Sanlam employees. The resulting book manages to assemble an encyclopedic range of topics and quantity of detail into an integrated whole and to provide a clear thematic focus. That overlaps and uneven edges are still visible from this narrative stitching is hardly surprising given the scale of the project and the number of separate studies underlying the final text.

The corporate provenance of this history means that several audiences are addressed and several purposes intended. Business and economic historians will be less absorbed by, for example, the picayune details of office staffing or organizational reshuffling in decades past—topics that, from Sanlam's own perspective, valuably memorialize and clarify its institutional development. Likewise the acknowledged purpose that such a history serves in positioning the Sanlam brand in the most flattering light for contemporary consumers, investors, and politicians. That bland corporate agenda is intoned at the book's outset when Verhoef explains that "the golden thread through this history is leadership, management capabilities, and vision" (p. x). Truth be told, most any company in a position to commission the writing of its history after a century of business can lay the same claims to prescience, organization, and hustle. Luckily, though,