

WALTER E. CAMPBELL, Across Fortune's Tracks: A Biography of William Rand Kenan Jr.
(Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. Pp. xviii + 417; figures;
illus.; maps. H/back ISBN 0-8078-2268-x, \$US 34.95).

Across Fortune's Tracks is a well-written, well-researched biography of a man who, despite the sympathetic attitude of the author, seems to have had few virtues. Despite Kenan's own attempts to project such a persona, he appears as neither a great scientist nor an innovative businessman. Rather, as the longtime caretaker of the estate of Henry Flagler, co-founder of Standard Oil and builder of a Florida transportation and tourism empire, and, not inconsequentially, Kenan's brother-in-law, he personifies the Schumpeterian adaptive manager, repeatedly choosing security and the familiar over innovation.

Born during Reconstruction to a family of Southern planter-politicians and confederate veterans, Kenan grew up in the Redeemed South, where technical education, railroads, and diversified entrepreneurial activities were promoted by and for white elites. A child of privilege, Kenan espoused the ideology of meritocracy and progress through science. Kenan's most significant contribution is undoubtedly his many gifts to his alma mater, the University of North Carolina. But both in his gifts and his student activities, Kenan attempted to maintain UNC's function as a training ground for a well-defined Southern elite. By placing Kenan in the context of the New South, Campbell makes a useful contribution to the debate on the relationship between the post bellum and ante bellum Southern elites. The reader comes away with a very vivid, if discomfoting, picture of the personal, political, and business relationships between Southern gentlemen and the Northern "carpetbaggers" who became their friends, partners, and brothers-in-law, as they tried to build fortunes through private enterprise and public coffers, and actively used violence and racial divisiveness to stymie the growth of farm populist movements that

threatened their position.

For business historians, the most interesting sections of the biography may be those describing Kenan's years in Niagara Falls, working for a predecessor of United Carbide. While Kenan was not a central figure in the dramatic technological events occurring in the region during this period, those chapters give a picture of the daily life of the manager of a new chemical plant and the social interactions among the many transplanted chemists and engineers. While in Niagara Falls Kenan consulted for several firms, reinforcing the picture of the Niagara community drawn by historians of technology of a remarkable ease of interaction and flow of information among potentially competing firms within this vibrant industrial district. But Kenan's work has little impact on his employers until Flagler, having married Kenan's sister, offers to lend Kenan a substantial sum to invest in Union Carbide. After much deliberation, Kenan decides that the prospects of the firm do not merit the investment, and he chooses instead to help Flagler build his grand new hotel in Miami.

While Kenan does have a business in New York, purchased at Flagler's suggestion and with his money, his one independent contribution was a dairy farm that he established and through which he financed agricultural research. But most of Kenan's life was spent protecting Flagler's vision of a Florida tourist empire developed in the decades before World War I. When Flagler died in 1913, Kenan became trustee of his estate, charged by Flagler's will with keeping the empire intact. But in contrast to Flagler, who took no constraints as given - he apparently thought nothing of buying the Florida legislature to obtain the divorce law he wanted, or of arming Cuban "independence" forces so that he could expand his empire into the Spanish colony - Kenan seems constantly buffeted about by forces beyond his control, from hurricanes and the Great Depression to competition and technological change. Kenan's response was always defensive, turning to old friends and political connections to preserve the family's assets and

reputation.

A good portion of the book is devoted to two controversies which engaged Kenan and his family. First, Campbell provides a fairly convincing version of the discovery of calcium carbide by UNC professor Francis Venable. Even this version, however, hardly gives Kenan, Venable's research assistant, much claim to a place in history. Second, Campbell disputes rumors that Kenan's sister (Flagler's widow) was murdered by her second husband, suggesting that she died as a result of long term alcohol, and possibly drug, abuse. For social historians of elites, or for those who like to indulge themselves with the details of the lives of the decadent rich, there may be something gained from those chapters. I found even Campbell's very restrained treatment of the social life of Mary Lily Kenan Flagler Bingham extraordinarily distasteful.