This edited volume is a major result of the "Achievement Project." The Project must be seen as a rare research exercise for modern days, being an investigation by a group of historians funded by a private patron (in this case Mr. Gerry Martin, industrialist and engineer). The goal of the investigation was set by the patron, in grandly ambitious, open-ended terms, to wit, establishing ways of explaining why people "achieve"—the "wellsprings of achievement." Mr. Martin also wanted team work, but there is little cross-fertilization among the essays here. Six of the contributors discuss theoretical approaches to achievement and creativity while another six present historical cases. The theorists are sometimes at odds with one another; for instance, one appeals to individual psychology, whereas the next rejects this in favor of social structure. That would not matter had the disagreements been teased out and a choice of tools decided on before other contributors started hacking away at the historical coalface. Instead, the result is a rather unfocused book, but since it is avowedly so, challenging methodological issues emerge.

Some of the chapters read very well, notably Deborah Christie's clear exposition of psychological theory, Donald McCloskey's characteristically vigorous piece on economics and economic history, and Ian Inkster's excellent comparison of English and Japanese economic performance. Other chapters fall prey to the academic tendency to discuss issues too indirectly, through the writings of authorities. A lot of quotations are used. As with all literary evidence there is a sampling problem: what world do the sources actually reflect, and did action really follow proclamation? The father-figure of students of achievement is undoubtedly Max Weber, whose approach brings this matter of the relationship between values and action into stark prominence. Among those of the
contributors who discuss Weberianism only one, Ian Inkster, is, in my view, appropriately skeptical.

An introduction by the editor eschews generalization but does give a fair summary of all the contributions. Two aspects deserve special notice. First, methodological stance: the editor takes the view that her contributors are post-modernists and proclaims that the quest for universal laws is out of favor. Fortunately, neither assertion is quite correct. Christie and Inkster, for example, are conspicuously down-to-earth. McCloskey, whose early work was fiercely neo-classical economic history, but who went on to expose its rhetorical component, now comes back through the door he first went in. He has by no means abandoned all criticisms of "scientific" economics, but nevertheless argues here for sensible positions that post-modernists would surely try to muddle, the most important being that England and Holland have never experienced economic decline except in a relatively uninteresting sense. Of course, economies do go through cycles but one might have expected historians of all people to be professionally inoculated against short-termism and not to be so influenced by the politics of the moment. That does not always prove to be the case in this volume, where there are signs of what McCloskey calls the panic of intellectuals, i.e. the sort of paranoia that takes international trade to be a contest and invokes the national leadership fallacy. During the 1990s when the book was being written, one form this was taking was the American fear of Europe and Japan, which was ridiculous not only in practice but in principle.

Post-modernism leads the editor to decry the possibility of measuring achievement in a uniform way. Had this opinion been taken seriously, the Project would have been aborted before it began. Her stated alternative is to deal with "concrete examples;" yet by the post-modernist token, these could never be summed up. The approach would mean the still-birth of comparative work. Happily not quite all of the contributors agree. Most never actually get as far as a comparative cultural history of early modern England and Japan, but Inkster does, and in such a useful way that the second half of this review will be devoted to his chapter.

As for the denial of universal laws, nothing could be further from the patron’s productive world of science and engineering. Moreover, economics (which, for all its faults is still the most developed, powerful and consistent of the social sciences) continues to operate on a foundation of statistical regularities. We all accept that in various respects