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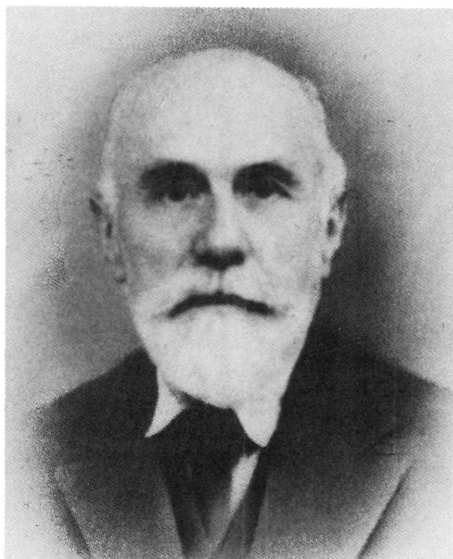
ALBERT DUPONT 1872-1940: THE FRENCH ACCOUNTING HISTORIAN

by
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(EDITOR'S NOTE: This article was edited and/or partially translated by
Alfred R. Roberts and Dale L. Flesher).

I have the collection of Working Papers edited by the Academy of Accounting Historians and am very pleased to possess them, given their value and importance. In Volume I there is, in particular, working paper No. 16 by Gary John Previts and S. Paul Garner about the golden anniversary of one of Accounting History's mysterious contributors. On this subject, I must say that I think all accounting historians who have not written in English are more or less mysterious for the English language area. The importance of this language is growing in the world at a fast rate and, in my opinion, English will take the place Latin once had for learned writing.

The Belgian Raymond de Roover (1904-1972) would not have had the audience he had, if he had not written in English. A. C. Littleton (1886-1974), in *The Accounting Review* (Vol. XII (1937) p. 440), writing about the book in French by Raymond de Roover, "La Formation et l'Expansion de la Comptabilite a partie double" (Librairie Armand Colin, Paris 1937), said at the end of his article: "It is to students with this antiquarian bent, who are also well equipped with a knowledge of several European languages, that most of us here must look for a true perspective of the development of book-keeping. For an art so old, we know painfully little. Now that Mr. de Roover has come to make his home in this country, it is hoped that he will find that our publishers also are interested in



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accounting history". (emphasis added). In other words: Write in English, please.

The Belgian Joseph Vlaemminck (1907-1959) whose work is so important, is rarely quoted in America, Australia, Britain or Japan, because his book—to this day—has not been translated into English. And—I know it is self-centered to speak of oneself—if I have your attention, it is because I have good friends who take pains to translate or correct my lucubrations (if they be such).

To return to the article by Previts and Garner, I want to demystify the "mysterious contributor", Albert Dupont. His father, Louis Dupont, was a wholesaler in textiles. Louis was born in the "Pays

d'Auge en Calvados" but he left his native countryside when he was 20 years old, for Rouen, capital of linen. Later he moved to Paris where, in 1850, he founded his own commercial house. In 1857, Louis Dupont married Miss Chocquet, the daughter of Alphonse Chocquet, director at the "Poste de la Seine", whose father had been himself chief of the "Service des Postes pour l'Etranger" during the First Empire and the Restoration, and whose grandfather had been financial collector during the reign of Louis XV and Louis XVI. Also, Alphonse Chocquet was a well-known fencing champion and a respected referee during the period when dueling was popular with Parisian society.

Albert Dupont was born on the 10th of January 1872 in Paris, in the "Quartier de Sentier" which is today still the center of the textile trade. He was the seventh child of the family, which was composed of five sons—one of whom died in infancy—and three daughters. Towards 1880, the Dupont family settled in a great house on Quai de Billy (now Quai de New-York). In the past the house had belonged to the Marquise de Pompadour, and within the garden a magnificent cedar planted during the 17th century was still alive up until 1950, after then it was replaced by the young tree that can be seen at the corner of the Modern Art Museum. The Quai de Billy house stayed in the family's memory as the center of a happy life around the mother and the grandmother with numerous friends and children.

Albert Dupont was enrolled in the Lycee Janson de Sailly and afterwards at the College Stanislas to prepare for the "baccalaureat" (general certificate of secondary education) and entry into the Polytechnic College. He was admitted at the first attempt. After two school years and one of military service (he was second lieutenant in the artillery), he made the

decision to prepare for the entrance examination for the General Inspection of Finances and he was admitted—as second candidate—in March 1897. Albert Dupont had a great classical background. Until the end of his life, he read fluently and easily in Latin and Greek. Mathematics were for him a studied intellectual exercise. He had also a sound basis in economics and finance, according to the theory and practice of those times.

From 1897 to 1906, Albert Dupont accomplished the rounds of Financial Inspections in the provinces from April to October. It was something of a sinecure.

Sometime in 1906 he took a position in the Department of the Marine (Navy Department) and was commissioned to write a report on the coordination between English and French maintenance shipyards. It was the time of the "Entente Cordiale". (Good relations between England and France.) Albert Dupont's report suggested numerous measures about standardization (in particular for the size of coal briquettes, the use of gunpowder without smoke (invented by the French engineer Paul Vieille)) and the introduction of reforms in the management of the French Navy. In 1908 one reform was the new bookkeeping of applied costs in double entry proposed by Dupont.

In private life, Albert Dupont had married Suzanne Perard in 1902. She was the daughter of a Parisian notary, and ex-president of the Chamber of Notaries. By 1907 Dupont had three daughters.

Also in 1907, he was obliged to choose between a post in the Algerian Direction of Finances or the one of General Secretary to the North Spain Railways. He took the latter situation and resigned from the General Inspection of Finances.

The North Spain Railways Co. (Cie del Norte), founded during the second empire

by the Pereire Brothers, had constructed the Spanish part of the Paris-Madrid Line via Irun (opened in 1864). In this company, the French Capital was in the majority. Their share certificates were moreover considered as value of "Pere de Famille" and appeared often in the dowry of well provided for young women.

At the same time, Spain carried prohibitive customs tariffs agreed to by the monarchist government of Madrid to favor the newborn industries of Catalonia and the Basque country. In addition, Spain had not signed the international convention of Berne (1893) concerning the rules of international railway traffic. The transfer from one train to another at the border was a generator of costs and delays.

Until the beginning of the 20th century, the French wished for the standardization of railroad gauges, and thus a direct and rapid connection by railway between France and Morocco via Madrid and Algeiras. Negotiations had to be conducted to vanquish Spanish isolationism. Those were the aspects of the important mission entrusted to Albert Dupont within the Cie del Norte from 1907 to 1914.

At the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, Albert Dupont was the father of six children and was therefore eligible to be exempted from service, but he did not take advantage of this circumstance and rejoined the army as Captain in the 11th Artillery regiment. He expected to be rapidly assigned to the battle front, but his age and family's situation warded off this possibility and during the whole war he was treasurer of his regiment and stationed at Rohan. His seventh girl, born in 1915, had the Belgian Queen Elisabeth as godmother. In 1919, Albert Dupont returned to his post at the Paris Committee of the "Cie del Norte".

To pay for its war efforts, France had

requisitioned all foreign capital and surrendered to Spain the majority of shares of the railway company. But the Spanish administrators asked Dupont to continue the task he had begun. Negotiations must be taken up again on the questions of gauge of track and creation of a new Trans-Pyrenees railway. The neutrality of Spain during the first world war had liberated her from the results of isolation. The Spanish Senate had adopted, in 1918, the project of a new line with European gauge from Paris to Algeiras via Irun and Madrid. The line from Somport to the neighborhood of Sragossa was inaugurated in 1928 and those from Puymorens to the neighborhood of Barcelona in 1929. The third project was discontinued before the Spanish revolution of 1931.

Dupont's family had continued growing; in 1921, after eight daughters, a son was born. And it is from him that I have received this story.

Also, 1921 was the year of installation in the property situated in the Froc de Launay, purchased during 1913. The house was built at the time of Louis XVI and had been deserted for a long time. Albert Dupont gave it new life and suites of antique furniture. This property is still in the hands of surviving Dupont children. Since his work for the Ministry of the Marine, work which pushed him into prominence in the circle of businessmen, Albert Dupont had never ceased to practice accountancy and to think about it.

We don't know exactly how he came into contact with the Societe Academique de Comptabilite de France. But at that time, Reymondin was secretary of this organization, and it is very likely that they had spoken of bookkeeping history and that Reymondin asked Dupont to prepare a lecture for his organization, touching upon Dupont's favorite subject. In the archives of the Spanish railway company,

there is a thesis of 200 pages written by Dupont and showing the different elements of bookkeeping, giving a rational explanation of its development. This manuscript, which dates from circa 1919, seems to be aimed at popularizing, for business circles, the foundations and constituent parts of bookkeeping by double entry.

Albert Dupont had neither time nor liking for teaching. He thought only of giving his contribution towards attracting some chosen few on the theory and applications of accountancy. Those considerations guided him quite naturally to historical research. Proposed by Reymondin, he was admitted in 1922 as an honorary member of the Societe Academique de Comptabilite de France. The first lecture was given on 25 April 1925. On December 29th of the same year, a new lecture was given about the origins of Bookkeeping before Paciolo. Other lectures on the History of Bookkeeping followed annually:

In 1927: Paciolo's successors in Italy in the 16th century.

In 1928: Forms of Accounts and ways of counting in ancient times.

In 1929: Accounting in the German Empire and in the Netherlands during the 16th century. (For this Dupont contacted the Dutch bookkeeping historian De Waal for information. Dupont was present at the congress of accountants of Amsterdam in 1929 and had spoken in favor of bookkeeping history.)

In 1931: Some French works and documents prior to the reign of Louis XIII concerning ethics, doctrine and commercial accounting.

All those lectures were published in the Society's bulletins at the time. A reissue was made in 1977. So, the articles of Dupont are still available at the S.C.F.

The lectures of Dupont stopped after 1931 for personal reasons. At that time, he accepted the chairmanship of a company created by a nephew, and put in difficulties by the depression crisis. Part of his personal fortune was sacrificed and much time was wasted. He also had many difficulties with the new management at the Cie del Norte after the proclamation of the Republic (14 April 1931). In 1935 Dupont sat for an exam to be nominated "Commissaire aux Comptes". In 1936, the Civil War broke out and all bonds were cut between the head office in Madrid and the committee in Paris. Dupont had quickly realized the imminence of the Second World War. He could not tolerate the inaction of France and Britain, and deplored the Munich agreements, believing that this shameful retreat would not avoid the worldwide struggle, but undermine the spirits of the nations. It was only in 1938 that Dupont returned to resume contacts with the Spanish authorities, but not for long.

After the declaration of the second world war in 1939, the whole family went to the house situated at Froc de Launay. Until June 1940 Dupont made frequent trips between Paris and Normandy. He died at the Froc de Launay among his family on the 26th of August 1940, at age 68. The circumstances of the time did not call for the wide spread publication of this sad news, and it was not noted until four years after the war. The whole world was turned towards the future. This is an abridged biography of Albert Dupont. His work is not voluminous, but very important because he was one of the first bookkeeping historians. He was erudite and showed for his successors the way to follow.