

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Young, Brian. *George-Etienne Cartier: Montreal Bourgeois. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1981. Pp. xiv, 181. Illustrations. \$23.95 (cloth), \$11.95 (paper)*

Donald Swainson

Volume 12, numéro 2, octobre 1983

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018963ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018963ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Swainson, D. (1983). Compte rendu de [Young, Brian. *George-Etienne Cartier: Montreal Bourgeois*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1981. Pp. xiv, 181. Illustrations. \$23.95 (cloth), \$11.95 (paper)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 12(2), 137–138.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1018963ar>

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Young, Brian. *George-Etienne Cartier: Montreal Bourgeois*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1981. Pp. xiv, 181. Illustrations. \$23.95 (cloth), \$11.95 (paper).

George-Etienne Cartier: Montreal Bourgeois is a thoroughly researched, tightly organized and well written study of limited aspects of Cartier's political, professional and business careers. The theme that is used to limit the scope of Young's concern is Cartier as a "Montreal Bourgeois." Unfortunately, the term is not tightly enough defined to serve the purpose adequately: "The theme of the present study is that Cartier can best be understood as a Montreal bourgeois. The term is admittedly an inexact one . . ." Young has other problems with his use of class for analytical purposes, as he makes clear: "The actions of Cartier, as an agent of the colonial, business, and religious elite, were determined by the exigencies of class conflict which, although sometimes ill-defined, formed the basis of mid-nineteenth century Montreal politics." What we get in the rest of the book is not really a class-based analysis. Rather, we are shown Cartier in relation to Montreal and Quebec society, business, professional life, institutions and politics. Little is said about other crucial aspects of his career: his relationship with John A. Macdonald; his role as an architect of confederation; his part in the national government's response to the first Riel Rebellion; his negotiations with British Columbia and especially his commitment to build a transcontinental railroad; and his political plight in 1871-73 and its role in the subsequent collapse of the first confederation government. Brian Young gives us a partial Cartier, but an increasing and provocative Cartier that must be understood.

George-Etienne Cartier's conservatism receives succinct and plausible, if somewhat conventional, definition. Young points out that the Rouge/Liberals "opposed Cartier's unrelenting and systematic political conservatism. While they also spoke for factions in the bourgeoisie, they felt that Cartier exaggerated in his efforts to protect property, the propertied class, and hierarchical structures which protected these privileges. An anathema to many nationalists and yet a logical conclusion of his conservatism was Cartier's praise for the conquest, which had 'saved us from the misery and the shame of the French Revolution. The conquest ended by giving us the fine and free institutions which we possess today, and under which we live happy and prosperous.'" Cartier's conservatism involved the protection of the state against "popular elements" and an established church. The young and the poor should not be allowed to participate in public life. British models should be preferred to those from the republican south: "An enthusiastic monarchist, he opposed frequent elections, the secret ballot, and universal suffrage." Even his opposition to representation by population was grounded, at

least in his rhetoric, in his conservatism: it would lead logically to universal suffrage. An appointed upper house in both Ottawa and Quebec City was an essential protection for the propertied classes. Cartier's conservatism was an important part of the nineteenth century and helps explain the fact that he no longer holds much of a place in the pantheon of Quebecois heroes.

Perhaps the most important contribution made by Professor Young is his discussion of Cartier as a major infrastructure reformer. In the process he adds a new dimension to our knowledge of the union period, which becomes "one of fundamental social and economic change in which the La Fontaine-Cartier Conservatives — operating from a base of bourgeois values — succeed in giving new form to the basic institutions of Quebec society." (Presumably the words "bourgeois" and "conservative" are interchangeable in spite of the profound fissures within bourgeois society.) We have here a first-rate analysis of those elements that provided this "new form": the abolition of the seigneurial system; a revised commercial law; improved, "centralized, hierarchical, integrated" education; insulation of Franco-phone society against radicalism; and an expanded railway system.

Other aspects of Cartier and his Quebec are illuminated. For example, it is clear that Cartier was not really a section-wide or provincial leader: "although he spoke as a French-Canadian *chef* his real bailiwick was Montreal." This was especially the case in economic policy, where he was not interested in the effects of economic expansion on any part of Quebec but Montreal. Young does not diminish the corrupt, violent and patronage-ridden nature of nineteenth century politics in Montreal, but he underscores the point that patronage at least had a larger policy goal than electoral success: "Cartier never forgot La Fontaine's emphasis on patronage as one means of entrenching the francophone bourgeoisie."

Cartier's private life was fascinating and receives due attention. His disastrous marriage is explained, as are his social aspirations. Cartier, after all, "possessed a valet, a coat of arms, and a country estate." In spite of his membership in a very conservative and conventional society and his long intimate association with the Sulpicians, he lived openly and brazenly (as some of his colleagues had it) with Luce Cuvillier for many years. This material is of substantial interest, although Young probably makes too much of it when he concludes as follows: "His personal life offers an insight into the bourgeois society of his day: his mobility, shifting residences, and lack of traditional family life suggests a rootlessness that contrasts with the concentration of his social, professional, and investment activities within a few city-

blocks in the centre of Montreal. Another potential contradiction is posed by his political role as a 'national' leader and representative of a working-class constituency and his material condition as a prominent bourgeois who possessed a valet, a coat of arms, and a country estate." A study of his life certainly does give insights into his class, but why should "rootlessness" be deduced from changes in residence and a failed marriage? What is incongruous about a "'national' leader and representative of a working-class constituency" who aspired to the upper classes? It happened all the time in the nineteenth century as it does today.

A few minor and surprising errors flaw the text. After 1849 the assembly of the Province of Canada did not rotate "every two years between Quebec City and Toronto." Young notes that at confederation "most provinces opted for unicameral systems." Actually, bicameral systems were initially established in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick as well as in Quebec. This pattern was subsequently followed in Manitoba and Prince Edward Island.

Quibbles of fact and interpretation aside, this book is a major contribution to our knowledge of the life and influence of George-Etienne Cartier. It should be read and used by those students and scholars interested in nineteenth century Canadian public policy and social history.

Donald Swainson
Department of History
Queen's University

Wismer, Catherine. *Sweethearts: The Builders, The Mob, and the Men*. Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1980. Pp. 222. Illustrations. \$16.95 (cloth), \$7.95 (paper).

Author Catherine Wismer through structuring her book *Sweethearts*, along the lines of its subtitle, *The Builders, The Mob and the Men*, tells a colourful tale of high level intrigue that intelligibly renders a byzantine plot in such a breathtaking way it would make many accomplished novelists envious. However, this format has limitations when applied to a task worthy of Sherlock Holmes. This mission is to firmly establish the often rumoured stories of the involvement of organized crime in the property industry of Metropolitan Toronto. While Wismer's trinity of developers, exploited workers and mobsters is a brilliant device in which to organize the book, too many anecdotes of questionable relevance take the place of the less glamorous, but often well documented, connections between the upfront world of "legitimate business" and the underworld of organized crime.

The first error that Wismer makes on the side of drama over substance occurs in her focus on the "handful of men who went to school together in the 1930s" at Toronto's Har-

bord Street Collegiate. This focus degrades the important subject of the book to the level of an old boys' network; a sort of poor man's Upper Canada College. The net is both too wide and too narrow for the task. Louis Rasminsky, Eddie Goodman, Phil Givens, Philip Roth and Herb Stricker are all tarred by the brush of having gone to Harbord and having an influence on the land development process. Although clever, this stroke is too sweeping to be convincing and leaves out important figures like the Tannenbaum and DelZotto families who, while relatively neglected in Wismer's book, were a focus of attention in the *Report of the Royal Commission on Certain Sectors of the Building Industry* written by Justice Harry Waisberg in 1974.¹

Although Catherine Wismer devotes considerable space to matters of peripheral concern such as union organizer Bruno Zanini's formative influences, remarkably little attention is devoted to the findings of the Waisberg inquiry and to the controversies which finally produced it after years of debate. Her description of Bruno Zanini's heroic struggles for the rights of ruthlessly ravaged Italian-immigrant workers makes exciting reading and is a worthy contribution to a neglected and unflattering aspect of Canadian history. However, so strongly does the portrait of the brave Zanini battling against corrupt contractors and international union officials run through her narrative, that Wismer tends to down play the significance of the role played by Morton Shulman. Shulman is castigated for ineptly denouncing Zanini for working to establish a Sweetheart union, a year after Shulman himself quit such efforts and was on the verge of creating an independent, Canadian concrete former's union. While the most insightful and determined writers would have difficulty dealing with this Kafkaesque tale, Wismer's failure to examine the validity of Shulman's other allegations, especially those that were later substantiated by Justice Waisberg's conclusions, reduces considerably the value of her book.

While Wismer gives full play to Shulman's apparently bungled accusations of 28 October 1970, his more significant speech of 5 December 1972, leading to the formation of the Royal Commission which Zanini himself had been demanding for years, only received mention in her bibliography. In this speech, Shulman alleged that the illegal activities of contractors to obtain monopoly price fixing and fraudulent unions were accomplished through ties to organized crime and the provincial government. In detailing these sensational charges, Shulman focused on the bombing of the office of Acme Lathing. He asserted that these attacks were the work of Acme's competitors in the lathing business: Northtown Drywall, owned and controlled by the Cesaroni brothers, and C. Romanelli Lathing. Shulman added that the Vice-President of Romanelli Lathing was Elvio DelZotto (a former Liberal party provincial election candidate) and stressed, "Elvio DelZotto controls C. Romanelli — and Romanelli is responsible for the bombings." Furthermore Shulman stressed that Elvio DelZotto was "named periph-