

MacKay, Donald. *The People's Railway: A History of Canadian National*. Vancouver; Douglas & McIntyre, 1992. 328 pp.

Ken Cruikshank

Volume 24, numéro 1, octobre 1995

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019238ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019238ar>

[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

Cruikshank, K. (1995). Compte rendu de [MacKay, Donald. *The People's Railway: A History of Canadian National*. Vancouver; Douglas & McIntyre, 1992. 328 pp.] *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 24(1), 63–64.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1019238ar>

ern"—e.g., the Northwest Leisure Centre in Regina (1984)—seem dubiously classified, as is the revivalist West Edmonton Mall which is included under "Modern." Clearly, Kalman's primary interest is with pre-modern, and with both historical and physical restoration. His introductory framework for post-modern architecture (p. 845), undoubtedly the most significant discourse under way at present, does not push the subject much beyond the superficial and ultimately self-defeating level of "reuse of historical forms."

But these minor reservations aside, there is no doubt that this is by far the most comprehensive account of Canadian architecture ever produced. It resoundingly confirms Kalman's contention that "a uniquely Canadian (architectural) character" does indeed exist, and this account will stand as a significant accomplishment in Canadian architectural scholarship. At the same time, the field is still open for more narrowly defined work, particularly in the area of Canadian architecture since the mid twentieth-century, and Canadian urbanism. Kalman's theoretical stance—that architecture "is no more or less than an expression of the values of the people who built it"—is essentially the half-century-old viewpoint and methodology of Lewis Mumford's. Valuable as Kalman's (and Mumford's) work is and will be for the future, the present state of architectural understanding in the profession, as in the general public, desperately needs scholarship that recognizes architecture's unique field of action more explicitly and sees it as a mode of building culture rather than merely as a means of expressing culture.

H. Stanley Loten, School of Architecture,
Carleton University,
sloten@ccs.carleton.ca

**MacKay, Donald. *The People's Railway: A History of Canadian National*.
Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1992.
328 pp.**

One of Ken Mackenzie's last acts as archivist for Canadian National was to build support within the corporation for a Canadian National history project. The centrepiece of the project was a commissioned corporate history, to be written by popular historian Donald MacKay. The result is *The People's Railway*, a solid but traditional account of Canadian National.

The contradiction created by the railway's two roles, as a public service enterprise and as a profit-maximizing business, is the most important theme in the book. MacKay makes a convincing case that, at least since 1935 when C.D. Howe became minister of railways and canals, Canadian National has been moulded "into more of a business and less of a government agency for national improvement." (p. 118) Although MacKay appears to sympathize with this development, he is evenhanded in his treatment of the issue and is willing to see the merit of the public service argument.

This debate over the role of the Canadian National provides one of the few coherent themes in MacKay's book. MacKay adopts a top-down approach to corporate history, tracing developments under each Canadian National administration. This approach has some merits. It permits the reader to associate particular policy innovations with the responsible chief executive officers, and the personalities of Henry Thornton and Donald Gordon enliven the narrative. The chronological approach also provides a convenient way of ordering the history of a corporation that at various points in its history was involved in railway transportation, merchant shipping, radio broadcast-

ing, the hotel business, and real estate development.

On the whole, however, I found MacKay's approach made for frustrating reading. Subjects such as the changing nature of employer-employee relations, the impact of technological innovations, or the development of freight and passenger services receive a few brief paragraphs in many chapters. Readers of this journal will be particularly disappointed by the scattered references to Canadian National's role in postwar urban development projects. Overall, MacKay's approach limits his ability to offer any kind of coherent or consistent analysis of particular subjects and obscures long-term developments. The best chapters are those in which certain themes flow from the chronological approach, such as the chapters on the impact of World War II, or Canadian National's "pursuit of passengers" in the 1960s.

In preparing the book, MacKay conducted interviews with executives and veteran railway workers. The voices of ordinary workers can be heard at various points in the book, most clearly in an intriguing chapter on "railway people." MacKay allows the railroaders to speak for themselves, giving the reader a sense of what it meant to work for Canadian National in the twentieth century. Much more could be done with these interviews, and historians can be grateful that MacKay has deposited the transcripts in the "CN Archivist's Collection."

It is always difficult to evaluate in an academic journal a book written for a general audience. While willing to overlook omissions in the bibliography and several minor factual errors, I would like to register an "academic" complaint about the haphazard endnotes contained in this history. Interested readers are on their own in tracking down quotations

from Thornton's published memoir, or Starr Fairweather's unpublished autobiography—key sources for this book that are never cited. In a quick sampling of the book, I found other uncited quotations that did not appear to be from either of these sources. Since I assume endnotes are only of interest to "specialists," "specialists" would appreciate consistency in and sensible guidelines for citations.

Donald MacKay concludes his book by speculating that in 70 years "a national railway authority will have replaced both CN and the CPR to haul . . . bulk freight." (p. 303) Recent events in the corporate boardrooms of the two railways suggest that such a railway authority may be in the making. Whether that authority will be private or public, and how "public service" and "private interest" can be reconciled, will undoubtedly remain as contentious as they have been during the 70-year history of Canadian National outlined in *The People's Railway*.

Ken Cruikshank, History,
McMaster University

Aspiring Women, Short Stories by Canadian Women, 1880–1900, and Pioneering Women, Short Stories by Canadian Women, Beginnings to 1880. Edited by Lorraine McMullen and Sandra Campbell. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1993.

"Let no one who may read this simple tale," warned Harriet Vaughan Cheney, at the close of "The Emigrants" (1850), "suppose it is entirely a fiction of the imagination." Cheney's work owes more to close observation of the city around her than to any flights of fancy. Her "simple tale" provides Canadian historians with a window on a world that we have imagined in other ways, an opportunity to

confirm and correct our assumptions about the past.

With a third companion volume, *New Women: Short Stories by Canadian Women, 1900–1920*, published earlier, these anthologies take us from "the beginnings" to the 1920s, through the critical and observant eyes of Canadian women writers. The volumes are prefaced with an overview of the period, and each author is introduced by a valuable biographical sketch and bibliography.

The stories are useful for historians because, as editors Lorraine McMullen and Sandra Campbell note, the lines between fiction and nonfiction were blurred. Diaries and letters, the primary material of history, are now analysed by literary critics as literary forms, constructions that mould a life to a particular genre. Conversely, stories like these often had a documentary nature.

Early Canadian fiction is particularly rich for historians. The need of Canadian writers to, as the editors put it, "imaginatively occupy" the new country led many of them to adopt descriptive forms of literature such as the sketch, a short piece focused on a single closely-described incident. Catharine Parr Traill's sketch—"The Bereavement" (1846), describes the death of an infant with a realism in which the conventions of sentimental fiction were only superimposed upon her close observations of the lives of pioneer women.

The documentary quality of the stories also reflects the fact that many of the writers were writing for a trans-Atlantic audience that was unfamiliar with, and intrigued by, life in Canada. Susanna Moodie's description of the rigours of a trip through the bush, "The Walk to Dummer" (1847), is aimed at such an urban audience, but serves equally to acquaint

modern-day readers with the material realities of early settlers. "It would be vain to attempt giving any description of this tangled maze of closely interwoven cedars, fallen trees, and loose scattered masses of rock," she writes, and then proceeds to describe the bush in a long and detailed paragraph.

Perhaps more important than the material realities are the opportunities these stories offer for the historian to understand the mental outlook of an earlier period. Harriet Vaughan Cheney's story is imbued with the Christian benevolence that underlay much nineteenth-century philanthropy. Our very antipathy to her sanctimonious depiction of the grateful poor, alerts us to the distances between her world and ours.

Urban historians will be interested in the implicit rejection of the city in most of the stories. Eden is placed in a country garden, juxtaposed to urban artificiality and stress, in Ethelwyn Wetherald's "How the Modern Eve Entered Eden" (1882). Most of the stories take place in the settled countryside, and even urban figures are depicted at their country estates. This bucolic bliss is bounded by the urban misery of Cheney's "The Emigrants," as well as the rough wilderness depicted in stories by settlers like Moodie, Traill, and westerner Frances E. Herring.

The stories also provide some insight into contemporary reactions to the great historical events. Annie Fowler Rothwell's piece, "How It Looked at Home: A Story of '85," (1893) gives us the Riel Rebellion from the perspective of a fiancée left at home.

Some of the stories reveal how slowly our outlook has changed. Pauline Johnson's "A Red Girl's Reasoning" (1893), and Catherine E. Simpson Hays' "An Episode at Clarke's Crossing" (1895), are fascinat-