

Northern Ontario: Introducing the Unknown Country By
Michael Barnes

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*Northern Ontario:
Introducing the Unknown Country*

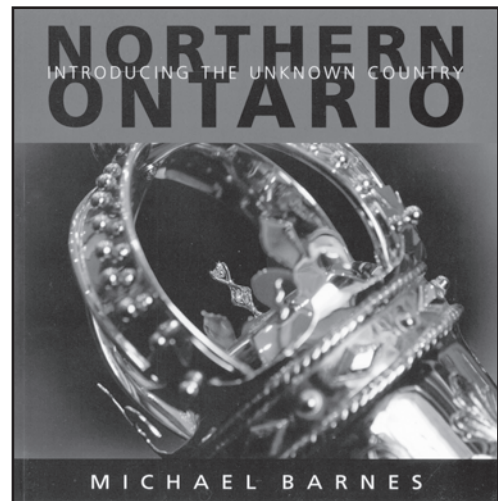
By Michael Barnes

Renfrew: General Store Publishing House, 2012. 167 pages.
\$29.95 paperback. ISBN 978-1-92692-227-6.
(www.gsph.com)

To those familiar with the history of Northern Ontario, Michael Barnes is no stranger. Barnes is the author of more than 50 books dealing with aspects of the region and—as acknowledged by his 1995 membership into the Order of Canada—his work has garnered admiration across the country. Barnes' latest offering, *Northern Ontario: Introducing the Unknown Country*, is intended to provide an introduction to the region, combining general history and highlighting key aspects of what constitutes Northern Ontario. Like all of Barnes' works, his enthusiasm and a wealth of knowledge about the region are apparent throughout.

Consisting of two sections (although not divided as such in the table of contents), the first five chapters explore the general history of Northern Ontario as a region. Here Barnes takes a fairly standard approach, coupling the national narrative used by traditional Canadian historians with regional anecdotes that demonstrate how various parts of Northern Ontario participated in events or traversed the issues of the day. Beginning with a discussion of the geological formation and first peopling of the area, he moves through the European contact, development in the region during the nineteenth century, and finishes with a discussion of the twentieth century.

The final twelve chapters of the book explore various thematic and topical aspects of the region. This section begins with "Getting Around," an extended short overview of transportation in the region. It



mixes a bit of history with the strengths and importance of transportation in Northern Ontario as well as the challenges that it faces today. For those familiar with Barnes' previous works, it should come as no surprise that natural resource industries receive a significant amount of attention in this part and, in fact, this section is the best written and the most compelling. What Barnes has to say about the region will be interesting to those who live here and those from away, as his writing envelops the reader through a well-honed storytelling approach.

However, the narrative does not entirely hold together in many places and his transitions from one topic to another are often very abrupt. For example, in the chapter dealing with the twentieth century, Barnes strings together discussions on Indigenous Rights movements, Ed Deibel and Northern Ontario separatism, the Edmund Fitzgerald, and Terry Fox, with no discernable linkages (aside from the fact they happened in the latter half of the century). Similarly, there tends to be a lot of information not really pertinent to the history of the region. While the story of Bill Barilko, for instance, is fascinating, the

death of this Timmins native is not really germane to the objectives of the chapter or really significant to the history of the region.

According to Barnes, what prompted this book was “the lack of a current account of Northern Ontario” (x). His hope is that *Northern Ontario* “will dispel the notion that this beautiful land is the frontier; rather, it is an extension of the province northward” (xii). Essentially, Barnes attempts to reveal the “unknown country.” However, as Barnes’ own significant body of work indicates, gone are the days when claims of a dearth of material on Northwestern and Northeastern Ontario can be made. While Barnes is correct that few overviews have been attempted, a multitude of community histories written over the past twenty years, and a number of substantial works on aspects of the region that have been critically acclaimed make this book not as significant as it might have been, due to its limited analysis. The award winning work of Kerry M. Abel, *Changing Places: History, Community, and Identity in Northeastern Ontario* (2006), for example, has become the definitive text on history, community, and identity in Northeastern Ontario. Similarly, Robert and Nancy Wightman’s *The Land Between: Northwestern Ontario Resource Development, 1800 to the 1990s* (1997), while dense, remains the most valuable source of the history of Northwestern Ontario. Both of these works challenge historians of the region to rethink how Northern Ontario developed and also position it as less isolated than historians have tended to portray it.

While reading the book, the thought that kept coming to mind was that it is unfortunate that the information presented in the final twelve chapters was not developed and incorporated into the first five to make the book a more comprehensive and

cohesive overview of the region. As the final twelve chapters stand, they are great short introductions to a host of topics ranging from various transportation and natural resource industries, to city profiles, and key figures in the region’s development; however, an opportunity has been lost. Barnes himself writes at the very beginning of the book, no “single work purporting to be about Northern Ontario can be nothing more than an introduction” (ix); however, *Northern Ontario* still leaves the reader disappointed as an opportunity to have a fully developed synthesis history of the region from one of its most significant writers is lost.

While Barnes does not neglect to include Aboriginal Peoples (and in fact some chapters have quite a bit of discussion), as so often is the case in Canadian history, their story is largely compartmentalized. They appear, and disappear; in such a way that their continual presence is not really established. At times, the various peoples in the region are not dealt with at all adequately. The chapter on “First People,” for example, only deals with Aboriginal Peoples for two pages. The same amount of time is spent discussing the controversial (and generally accepted as erroneous) issue of the Viking artifacts found near Beardmore. The chapter, “Exploring the Unknown Country,” has little to say about the experience of those to whom the country was not “unknown.” Instead here, and elsewhere, it is the story of the conquerors that is told.

Northern Ontario: Introducing the Unknown Country does, in most respects, what it sets out to accomplish—introduce a region often forgotten by all but resource developers and campers. Criticisms aside, the book is an enjoyable read and does a good job of introducing many of the region’s main features and its role in some significant historical events. However, its

appeal will largely be to those who have never visited the region or read anything about it. For that, the availability of such a book makes it a success and a good entry into the ever-increasing amount of material being written about Ontario's largest

region and, both historically and today, most important.

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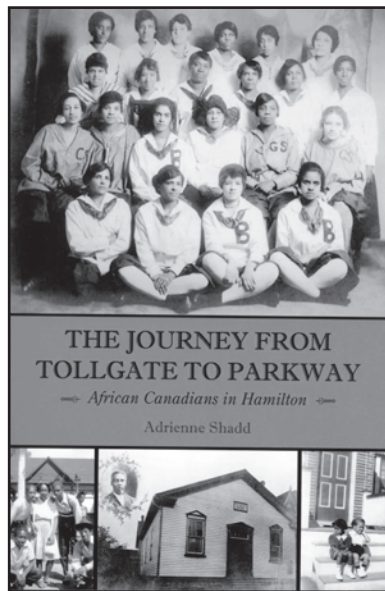
The Journey From Tollgate to Parkway: African Canadians in Hamilton

By Adrienne Shadd

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010. 368 pages. \$35.00 softcover. ISBN 978-1-55488-394-3. (www.dundurn.com)

In this book, historian Adrienne Shadd presents a comprehensive history of the Black experience in the Hamilton-Wentworth region. Rich in detail, peppered with real stories of long forgotten people, events, and places, Shadd has written an engaging and much needed history. Set in the larger context of Canadian history, *The Journey From Tollgate to Parkway* takes us from early Black settlement during the rise and fall of slavery, to its years as a thriving and expanding community filled with individuals who made history but who have, until now, been forgotten. Thanks to Shadd's extraordinary research, these long forgotten community and national heroes of colour, who individually and collectively shaped Afro-Canadian culture locally and nationally, are now restored to their rightful place at the center of a story of community and nation building.

Black Hamiltonians fought for free-



dom, equality, justice, and self-determination. Known as Head of the Lake in its infancy, Hamilton served as a settlement place for free Blacks who established homes and businesses there well over two hundred years ago. Later, these pioneer settlers would be joined by freedom seekers fleeing slavery and discrimination in the United States. Their stories reveal complex experiences intertwined with themes of freedom and servitude,

family and community, church and work, equality and discrimination, over two centuries of persistent settlement.

One of Shadd's strong points is her effective framing of this community's history within the context of the institution of slavery in Canada, the nation's ultimate disengagement with it, and generations of struggle to garner equality for all people of color into the twenty-first century. According to Shadd, Hamilton was not only a ha-