

# *Overcoming Niagara: Canals, Commerce, and Tourism in the Niagara-Great Lakes Borderland Region, 1792-1837* by Janet Dorothy Larkin

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vide Canadians with a better understanding of the lengths their government has gone to in the past to repress certain forms of thinking and action inside its borders. It is also a passionate call for ensuring proper

accountability for Canada's security services, as they have proven time and again that they will not willingly give up their secrets.

Colin McCullough, Ph.D.

## *Overcoming Niagara* *Canals, Commerce, and Tourism in the Niagara- Great Lakes Borderland Region, 1792-1837*

By Janet Dorothy Larkin

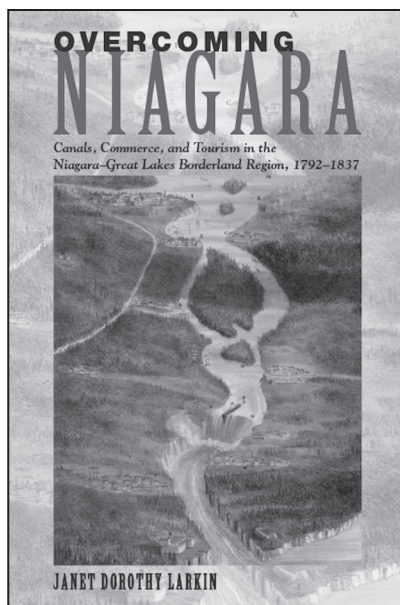
Albany, NY: State University Press of New York, 2018. 266 pages.  
\$90.00 hardcover (US). ISBN13: 978-1-4384-6823-5

As a long-time resident of the Niagara region, at times the area's peninsular-like geography renders it almost invisible in the landscape of southern Ontario. Moreover, despite thriving pockets of tourism, generally organized around wine, Niagara Falls, and Niagara-on-the-Lake's Shaw Festival, Niagara's economy often struggles with plant closures or reductions in operations. Its status as a borderland has at times been as much of a hindrance as an asset. Surges in the Canadian dollar, for example, lead to corresponding increases in cross-border shopping in Buffalo or Niagara Falls, New York, while tightened controls at the border can make it more difficult for American tourists to return the favour.

Yet as Janet Dorothy Larkin's *Overcoming Niagara* demonstrates, such was not always the

case. Although the Niagara River and Falls have been seen as obstacles dividing British America from the United States, Larkin's book makes a compelling case for them as an important link in a number of networks, bodies of water that connected the colony of Upper Canada to the new republic and linked both to the West. While much has been written about the canals that cut

through the landscape, the Erie, Welland, and (to a lesser extent), Oswego, as Larkin points out these waterways have been seen through the lenses of nation or empire. Political leaders on both sides of the border assessed the canals for their potential to shore up military defence or to circumvent each others' markets. However, by shifting her focus to the perspective of those who advocated for, designed, and (where sources allow) built the canals,



Larkin makes a compelling case that the Erie, Welland, and Oswego represent far more cross-border cooperation and convergence than national or imperial politicians—and subsequent historians—were willing to admit. The canals, as she points out, opened the region “to commerce, tourism, and improvement in general on a grand scale” (3). Far from isolating communities on either side of the border or exacerbating commercial rivalries between Upper Canada and the United States, the canals helped shape a Great Lakes community, one marked by the dynamics of borderlands and transnationalism. In Larkin’s estimation, the Erie, Welland, and Oswego canals benefited both Americans and Upper Canadians: moreover, people on both sides of the border were well aware of those benefits.

Larkin has organized her work into six substantive chapters. She looks first at the Niagara-Great Lakes borderland prior to the War of 1812. She points out that the pre-1812 period was an important moment, one in which local merchants and business leaders on both sides of the border worked to construct transportation systems (roads, bridges, and ferries) and create networks that would overcome the natural obstacles created by the River and the Falls. Both communities were distant from their respective capitals and located within the interior of New York State and Upper Canada; thus, turning to the border for “social, cultural, and commercial sustenance and prosperity” was a logical choice (14). Yet transportation remained a problem; the growth of the settler population on both sides of the Niagara River was a catalyst for cross-border discussions of ways to improve it and meet the needs of a growing trade in goods, animals, and people. While the War of 1812 put serious considerations of cross-border cooperation

on hold, it did not prove fatal to them; the Erie Canal’s 1825 opening was celebrated by both Americans and Upper Canadians in the region, the latter hoping that the Canal would benefit colonial trade. Larkin sees similar patterns at work in the building, operation, and ramifications of the Welland Canal, a structure even more directly influenced by transnationalism since many Americans were consulted and/or hired for its construction. The Oswego Canal also linked British American producers of grain and timber to American and European markets. In Chapter Six, Larkin points out that not only did the canals help integrate tourist economies on both sides of the border, they also proved tourist attractions in their own right (much as other industrial or technological sites, such as Manchester’s cotton mills or Pennsylvania’s large mines, fascinated early nineteenth-century tourists).

Well-written and cogently argued, Larkin’s book is a welcome addition to a small body of scholarship that argues for the importance of a Great Lakes and transnational perspective in Ontario history. Although her focus is primarily on middle-class entrepreneurs, engineers, and local politicians, she reminds us that the workforce responsible for building the canals—and all too often, dying in that process—was a transnational and transatlantic one, composed of men, women, and children who moved across borders to follow the work. As well, her discussion of social reform as it moved along the canal corridor, while overly celebratory regarding the reformers’ motives and methods, opens up discussions about the canals’ roles in conveying the currents of reform and abolition across the border. Yet Larkin’s work also reminds us of some of the potential problems of transnational history. At times she seems less aware of Canadian scholarship: her argument, for

example, that historians of Niagara tourism have been overly focused on the nation does not mention Karen Dubinsky's important cross-border study of Niagara Falls. Moreover, although Larkin at times points to the depredations that the Six Nations experienced because of the Welland Canal, she does not pause to reflect on whether the canals (on both sides of the border)

were such a boon to Indigenous territories and peoples. Nevertheless, the next time I am "caught by a boat" on either side of the Welland Canal, I will try to control my impatience and remember its role in shaping this transnational community.

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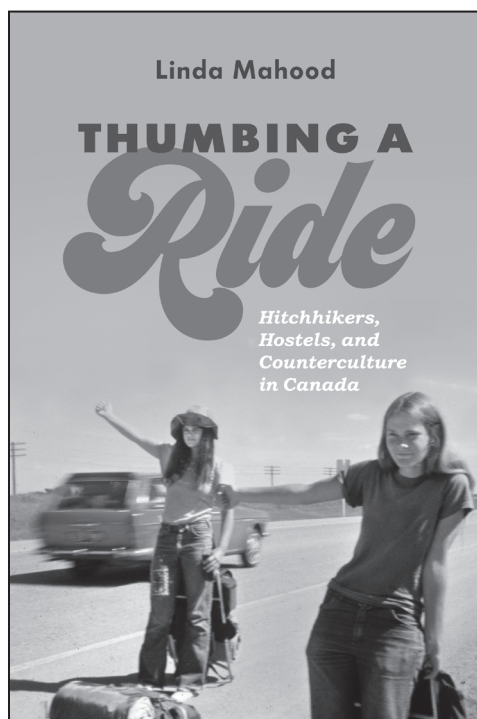
*Thumbing a Ride*  
*Hitchhikers, Hostels, and*  
*Counterculture in Canada*

By Linda Mahood

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018. 344 pages. \$89.95  
hardcover. ISBN 978-0-77483-733-0. \$32.95  
paperback. ISBN 978-0-77483-734-7. \$32.95 e-  
pub. ISBN 978-0-77483-736-1. (ubcpress.ca)

In *Thumbing a Ride*, Linda Mahood examines the early seventies phenomenon of teenagers and young adults hitchhiking across Canada. The book opens with the author's personal account of thumbing a ride in Quebec in the fall of 1978. Because I also hitchhiked in my youth, and am also a scholar of countercultural movements in Canada's "long sixties," I was eager to read this work, and it did not disappointment.

Mahood shows that from the 1930s to the 1950s, Canadians hitchhiked throughout the continent, and overseas. In these years, the press and popular culture presented two competing narratives about hitchhiking. On one hand, it was seen as healthy outlet for adolescent wanderlust, and a way for those of limited means to enjoy the cultural and educational benefits of travel. On the other hand, it was perceived to be a risky activity associated with "wild boys" and "unadjusted girls" who



posed potential dangers to motorists and to themselves. Mahood shows how, in the post-Second World War years, it was the latter narrative that dominated. In many provincial jurisdictions including Ontario, it was also against the law.

But by the end of the sixties, an era of hitchhiking had begun in Canada, thanks to a confluence of factors: the completion of the Trans-Canada Highway; a substan-