

One Job Town: Work, Belonging, and Betrayal in Northern Ontario by Steven High

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Volume 112, Number 1, Spring 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069017ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069017ar>

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Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Tough, D. (2020). Review of [*One Job Town: Work, Belonging, and Betrayal in Northern Ontario* by Steven High]. *Ontario History*, 112(1), 116–117.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1069017ar>

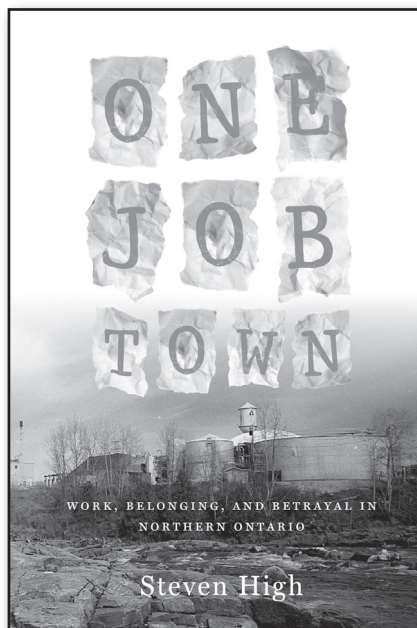
One Job Town *Work, Belonging, and Betrayal in Northern Ontario*

By Steven High

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018. 392 pages. \$41.95 Paper. ISBN 9781442610231. \$93.00 Cloth ISBN 9781442640832. (www.utorontopress.com)

Steven High's *One Job Town* is a careful and thoughtful account of the rise, fall, and rise and fall over roughly a century from the 1890s to the very early 2000s of the paper mill in Sturgeon Falls in northern Ontario. The book focuses on the lives and memories of the workers at the mill, with particular attention to the period of uncertainty in the mill's final decade, when it appeared that the workers had beaten the odds and kept the mill open, only to see it close for the final time. It is of course a book about deindustrialization set in Northern Ontario, a topic and a place High is uniquely well suited to writing about, but it's also about sources, and how the documents of the past we have access to as historians determine to a large extent the histories we write.

The book has been a long time coming. A young history professor at Nipissing University in North Bay when he began the project at his students' urging, High has been Director of Concordia University's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling for over a decade. When he started the research, it was unclear if the plant would re-open; as



oral history interviews of former workers unfolded in the years that followed, the picture changed, such that “each interview is effectively time-stamped, as the changing present profoundly shaped what we heard and saw.” High aptly describes the book as being “built from the ground up,” combining oral history interviews with “textual documents found in people’s garages and basements.”

Oral history, by rooting its account in the lives of its subjects, allows a more complex engagement with the subjective texture of memory, the institutional authority of the professional historian-as-author, and the community it defines. In terms of periodization, though, it tends to tether the historian to the past half-century: in the context of deindustrialization, the period after the 1960s when the shift of manufacturing production to the global south set off the North American rust belt’s decline; this framing, which is very effective for underlining the trauma of lost work, has the effect of normalizing industrial labour under the somewhat exceptional conditions of post-war affluence as the *status quo ante*—the before in a nar-

rative that problematizes the after.

Though *One Job Town* uses oral history extensively and thus privileges the recollections of workers who experienced the mill's closure, High is intent on expanding the time frame so that the story includes Indigenous dispossession as a condition of possibility for Sturgeon Falls. The carving up of the Anishinabe lands by lumber and railway interests and the industrialization of the Sturgeon and Temagami rivers, upon which the opening of the mill depended, was itself dependent on the legislative framework of the Indian Act and the confinement of the Nipissing First Nation to a reserve under the terms of the Robinson-Huron Treaty. High's ambition here is important: the opening of the mill, its early business history and its first decades of labour strife, are told alongside the history of Indigenous land dispossession. But the many threads make for a bit of a dense read, with very little of the personality of the place or the people on display.

The next chapter, which deals with the 1930s and early 1940s, when the mill was shut down for a number of years, is much richer and livelier, aided substantially by the availability of rich documentary evidence. The problems that arose in the community when the mill shut down and relief spending soared were covered extensively by media at the time, and were the subject of public inquiry. So, the period in which the mill didn't operate is, somewhat ironically, better documented than the period when it did. The reader begins to get a sense of the community as a set of people living their lives, rather than a developmental project.

The book really gets going when it begins to feature oral history interviews, which High treats reverently, leaving intact long monologues in block quotations and multi-part dialogue, including interview-

er questions. Where these aren't directly quoted, they are referenced and paraphrased, never simply used to buttress a point High is making. This foregrounding of the sources of the story, with all due attention drawn to their gaps and inconsistencies, is the book's signature. High writes with confidence and calm erudition, but what he says about Sturgeon Falls and the workers at its plant is always clearly flagged as a story someone else told, not as his academic property.

High's greatest awe is reserved for the memory book, a massive binder put together by former employees of the plant, which is the focus of the last chapter. The memory book is clearly useful and even necessary given the lack of company records to draw on, but its importance to High's telling of the story goes further, into sublime vision. That breathless excitement when you find a perfect primary source, and you suddenly see your whole project arrayed in it, is a common moment for historians, and High's capturing of it should be read alongside H.V. Nelles's similar moment at the start of *The Art of Nation Building*, by anyone interested in the evocation of a sensory experience of archival research.

One Job Town does justice to the people of Sturgeon Falls, to their experiences of work and of deindustrialization, and to their memories and their practices of memorialization. It does so by putting the sources of its richness of detail—the oral history interviews and the workers' own book of documents at the centre of the story. It also asks historians to query the value of a narrative where each part is of equal meaning and value, as against a telling that is honest about what part of the story is merely structural and what is truly remarkable.

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