

Scientia Canadensis

Canadian Journal of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine
Revue canadienne d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine

Scientia
Canadensis

POITRAS, Claire. *La cité au bout du fil : Le téléphone à Montréal de 1879 à 1930*. Montréal, Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2000.

Janis Langins

Volume 24, Number 52, 2000

Les artisans canadiens au XVIII^e siècle

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800418ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/800418ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Langins, J. (2000). Review of [POITRAS, Claire. *La cité au bout du fil : Le téléphone à Montréal de 1879 à 1930*. Montréal, Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2000.] *Scientia Canadensis*, 24, 100–102.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/800418ar>

Copyright © Canadian Science and Technology Historical Association /
Association pour l'histoire de la science et de la technologie au Canada, 2002

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

POITRAS, Claire. *La cité au bout du fil : Le téléphone à Montréal de 1879 à 1930*. Montréal, Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2000.

This book is the result of a thesis in planning and consequently concentrates on the telephone as a central actor in the process of modern urbanization that took place in the last half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries in North America and Europe. During that time Montreal grew rapidly in population and territorial extent, and the demographic profile of that population changed as well, with more and more francophones arriving from the countryside to work in what was the chief metropolis of Canada. As in other parts of North America and Europe, reformers and city planners expanded their concerns about public sanitation to included esthetics and mobility in increasingly congested cities. All this occurred against a background of major technical changes such as telegraphy, electrification, and telephony that were at once driven by and facilitated the new "networked city." Poitras thinks that many of the visions of this kind of city antedated the technologies that made it possible and examines how the telephone was integrated into these visions and transformed them. The other theme in her fine-grained study of the case of Montreal is the role of Bell Telephone Company of Canada, the establishment of its monopoly, and the triumph of its vision of a regulated public utility over the competing models of a free market and a state monopoly.

The story of Bell seems to illustrate very nicely Gabriel Dupu's model for the appearance of technical networks in the modern city:

the implantation of the telephone was rapid; technical innovation had a major role; private capital was predominant; monopoly was established after a brief period of competition; and economic considerations, as opposed to social ones, were primary. Under the leadership of the energetic Charles Fleetford Sise, an American dispatched by the Boston company to manage its Canadian operations, Bell Canada implemented the successful approach of its American parent company in controlling the market. This involved aggressive litigation, predatory competition, expansion of long distance lines and exclusion of competitors from them, control of equipment manufacturing, and an active research and development program to maintain the company at the forefront of technical developments. In view of this, Poitras' assertion that before the 1910s it is difficult to grasp Bell's strategy in Canada (p. 119) is a little puzzling. Armstrong and Nelles have argued in *Monopoly's Moment* that influences were not unidirectional and that the American company followed with great interest Bell Canada's successful policy of cooperating with government regulators to better consolidate its position.

Notwithstanding its francophone population, its rapid rate of growth, and its peculiar topography, Montreal seems not to have differed much from other North American cities. According to Poitras, Bell was insensitive in its early years to the needs of francophone subscribers, but this was merely an aspect of its concentration on the traditional business market hitherto served by telegraphy and the more affluent private subscribers. (After the introduction of automatic switching the gap between the numbers of anglophone and francophone subscribers shrank, presumably because francophones did not have to deal with imperfectly bilingual operators.) As the market of private subscribers increased in importance, Bell conducted an astute advertising campaign not merely to increase its volume of business but to convince the public of benefits of "natural" monopoly and Bell's right to exercise it.

Poitras provides an insightful chapter on Bell's long term planning in the 1920s. At a time when the Soviet Union was making its Five Year Plan, Bell was thinking twenty years ahead. Its "general plan," based on detailed market surveys and socioeconomic analyses, also allowed considerable room for flexibility to adjust to changing conditions and requirements. Although Bell's executives and engineers were making plans based primarily on economic considerations, they were ahead of politicians and urban planners in gaining a clear idea of the needs and evolution of the city. Along with its attention of profitability, Bell could certainly justify its public image of an indis-

pensable service utility that thought in terms of a metropolitan network over long periods of time.

Bell did not need to pay much attention — nor did it — to municipal complaints about rates and installation of poles. Sise had succeeded in making Bell subject to federal and provincial (not municipal) regulation and was careful to cultivate Bell's friends in the legislature. Poitras describes the relatively unsuccessful attempts of Montreal's municipal politicians to control rates and to impose the burial of telephone lines on their terms. It is here, perhaps, that Poitras might have improved her excellent account by making some comparisons and putting the Montreal situation in more focus. According to Armstrong and Nelles, it was federal politicians from Quebec who were the defenders of Bell in the federal parliament during the Mullock commissions hearings of 1905, when a serious threat to Bell emerged from Toronto and Western Ontario. Why was this so? A look at Toronto, the other great city of Canada where Bell also had a dominant presence, might give some additional insight into Montreal. And Bell's short-lived independent rivals in its early years in Montreal might have been given more attention.

But Poitras is right to concentrate on Bell. Ultimately, it was the only company that counted and it effectively became the only company to count. She has done an excellent job in giving us what will probably be the definitive history of the telephone's early years in Montreal.

Janis LANGINS
University of Toronto