

## Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW  
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

**Knight, David B. *A Capital for Canada: Conflict and Compromise in the 19th Century*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Department of Geography, Research Paper 182, 1977. Pp. xvii, 341. Maps, illustrations. \$6.00**

**Knight, David B. *Choosing Canada's Capital: Jealousy and Friction in the 19th Century*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, The Carleton Library No. 105, 1977. Pp. xi, 228. Maps. \$4.95**

John H. Taylor

Number 2-77, October 1977

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019572ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019572ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Taylor, J. H. (1977). Review of [Knight, David B. *A Capital for Canada: Conflict and Compromise in the 19th Century*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Department of Geography, Research Paper 182, 1977. Pp. xvii, 341. Maps, illustrations. \$6.00 / Knight, David B. *Choosing Canada's Capital: Jealousy and Friction in the 19th Century*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, The Carleton Library No. 105, 1977. Pp. xi, 228. Maps. \$4.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, (2-77), 114–118. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019572ar>

All Rights Reserved © Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine, 1977

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/>

geographic factors which the author marshalls so well.

Frederick H. Armstrong  
Department of History  
University of Western Ontario

\* \* \*

Knight, David B. A Capital for Canada: Conflict and Compromise in the 19th Century. Chicago: The University of Chicago Department of Geography Research Paper 182, 1977. Pp. xvii, 341. Maps, illustrations. \$6.00.

Knight, David B. Choosing Canada's Capital: Jealousy and Friction in the 19th Century. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, The Carleton Library No. 105, 1977. Pp. xi, 228. Maps. \$4.95.

A geographer less sensitive to history than Professor Knight might have written a "scientifically" more compelling analysis of A Capital for Canada, but surely he would have written a less satisfying one. The science of Professor Knight's discipline seems to have been sacrificed in this volume to the somewhat more important consideration (at least in this reviewer's mind) of treating a subject in the round, though he has not slipped his disciplinary moorings completely. His book is thus open to criticism both for going too far as well as for not going far enough. The eclectic lives dangerously in this age of specialization.

Clinically put, A Capital for Canada - a Ph.D. dissertation published raw - studies the voting patterns of the Legislative Assembly (as mapped by constituency) over the Seat of Government Question that so wracked the Union of the Canadas for most of two decades in the 1840s and 1850s. It does much more than this, of course, in its provision of context, analysis and interpretation. But the central thrust of the book rests on this relationship between the question of a location for the capital city of the union (generating more than 200

divisions in the assembly), and its projection on a political map of the province.

It is how the author handles this relationship that creates the problems. To begin, he seems to be asking two sets of questions about the relationship. The first question is what the Seat of Government question reveals about spatial patterns in the Canadas: "when ... issues that clearly involve spatial conflict are resolved through the political process there is an ideal opportunity to observe the nature and strength of stratified territorial attachments." (p. 2) The second question - more implicit in the body and conclusion than the introduction - seems to ask whether such patterns were important in the indecision and conflict over the question (though let us be clear not over its resolution): "this basic identification with place was a dominant factor in the seat of government question as it unfolded." (p. 314)

Now it seems fair for a thoroughly unscientific observer to ask: "Who's on first?" It seems that either the analysis of the Seat of Government question admits inferences about spatial patterns; or analysis of the spatial patterns admits inferences about the divisive-ness of the question. Or if both, then it seems that the nature of the interrelationship needs be more carefully hypothesized. As stated, the Seat of Government question becomes both the subject and the object of the analysis.

The conundrum seems to emerge from Professor Knight's attempt to be both geographer and historian: the geographer would seem to be more concerned with what the political divisions reveal about the spatial patterns; the historian more about what the patterns (however he might conjure them up) contribute to the process of division. Both approaches seem to be inherently viable, but their synthesis produces difficulties, at times, it seems, beyond resolution. The solitudes of the disciplines perhaps cannot be transcended, but only accepted, their

separate usefulness lying in the perspective each brings to a subject matter. The problem is not unknown in urban history.

But even this conundrum is insufficient to stem Professor Knight's curiosity. Though the focus of the book is on the Seat of Government question, he cannot resist (and who couldn't?) confronting the Seat of Government answer. What caused resolution? What produced the ultimate choice of Ottawa? Such boldness can scarcely restrain historians, political scientists, economists and others from attempting ambush. Professor Knight is sagely cautious in propounding a thesis, resting for the most part on the suppression or abandonment of the local and regional antagonisms that so protracted the struggle for the capital. As he himself acknowledges the votes on which resolution occurred were "largely cross-sectional party-based" divisions. He is in a sense still wedded to a spatial analysis, but one turned inside out: political division is revealing of spatial patterns, the spatial conflicts contribute to division, suppression of conflicts create resolution. The train of logic is becoming a little stretched.

Rather, the choice of a capital, whether Kingston by Sydenham in 1841, or Ottawa by Queen Victoria in 1857-58, seems to involve appeals that transcend the angry local divisions, whether they were appeals to party, province or empire, or appeals to power, like the executive council or the Crown. And to see the ultimate choice, Ottawa, as a compromise second choice of all the contenders seems cloying and unsatisfying. One is tempted to see the choice, rather, as the victory of an appeal to authority and hierarchy in the face of a democratic impasse. The Crown, the executive, and (one suspects) the Legislative Council played the central roles. More than sectional aspirations seems to have lain behind each of these.

And surely the commercial empire flowing out of the Ottawa valley in the 1850s is central. If the declining economic hopes of Quebec City and Kingston and the rising ones of Montreal and Toronto

are central, why not the economic role of Ottawa? It should be noted that by the mid-1850s, Ottawa had partially broken free of the Lower St. Lawrence system, and on the basis of the sawn timber industry was attempting to develop a system linking Lake Huron and the northeastern United States, a re-iteration, in a sense, of the fur trade system based on the Iroquois and Hudson River rather than the St. Lawrence. The four, apparently anomolous ridings southeast of Montreal that persistently voted for the "Queen's Choice" paralleled the Ottawa-Lake Champlain axis.) By the mid-1850s, then, all the serious contenders for the capital, except Ottawa, were the quarrelling siblings of the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes system: Montreal, Quebec City, Kingston and Toronto. None of the last three were able to assume the capital mantle Montreal had lost as a punishment for misbehaviour in 1849. Ottawa was not merely everyone's second choiee, or the lesser of five evils, it had powerful friends and also the virtue of living outside the imperial family of the St. Lawrence.

Resolution of the Seat of Government question is clearly ancilliary to Professor Knight's major theme, that is, the question itself, and the answers he provides are clearly less comprehensive, as one might expect. To seek the causes of resolution would require another book. Professor Knight has, in part, obliged with a sort of do-it-yourself volume of documents called Choosing Canada's Capital.

The documents are well-chosen, presented chronologically, and accompanied with an introduction sufficiently well modulated that the reader, unlike Queen Victoria, is not led inevitably to a pre-determined conclusion about the choice of Ottawa. A certain amount of mystery is retained in the marriage of the documents and the introduction.

It might be noted that the documents volume is textually "clean" and in good form as compared with the analytical volume. The latter has an excess of errors, some obviously typographical, but many others well beyond the standards of good publishing. (This reader

found more than three dozen, some flagrant, without effort.)

In sum, however, these volumes remain an academic treat. They are informed, balanced and rich in scholarship. Perhaps most important they provide provocative insights for many disciplines in going beyond most. What opens Professor Knight to his most damaging criticism equally provides his most valuable contribution.

John H. Taylor  
Department of History  
Carleton University

\* \* \*

Carpenter, J. H. The Badge and the Blotter: A History of the Lethbridge Police. Lethbridge: Whoop-Up Country Chapter, Historical Society of Alberta, 1975. Pp. viii, 157. Illustrated.

The author, J. H. Carpenter, formerly Chief of Police for Lethbridge, was motivated not only by his own part in the development of the Lethbridge police force, but also by his observation that police history in Canada has focussed on the R.C.M.P. and its predecessors to the almost complete exclusion of attention to provincial or municipal forces. The intersection of police and urban history for Lethbridge has already been noted by A. A. den Otter in the Urban History Review, No. 1-76 (June 1976), where the value of N.W.M.P. records at the Public Archives of Canada for details of early Lethbridge history is recommended. In a more general sense a concentration on social order is appropriate to both police and urban studies.

This is not an academic, analytical work, yet two emphases stand out as guides to future police and urban historians. From police files the author introduces to us the leading preoccupations of town officials and police in the realm of municipal order: prostitution, gambling and drinking from 1891 to at least World War II; automobile traffic and traffic-associated drinking thereafter. Narcotics and,