

Morton, Desmond, with Copp, Terry. *Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour*. Ottawa: Deneau and Greenberg, 1980. Pp. xviii, 349. Illustrations. \$14.95

Heron, C. ; Hoffmitz, S. ; Roberts, W., and Storey, R. *All that Our hands Have Done: A Pictorial History of the Hamilton Workers*. Hamilton: Mosaic Press in association with the Office of Labour Studies, McMaster University, 1981. Pp. vii, 181. Illustrations. \$14.95

Nolan Reilly

Volume 11, Number 2, October 1982

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019039ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019039ar>

[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

Reilly, N. (1982). Review of [Morton, Desmond, with Copp, Terry. *Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour*. Ottawa: Deneau and Greenberg, 1980. Pp. xviii, 349. Illustrations. \$14.95 / Heron, C. ; Hoffmitz, S. ; Roberts, W., and Storey, R. *All that Our hands Have Done: A Pictorial History of the Hamilton Workers*. Hamilton: Mosaic Press in association with the Office of Labour Studies, McMaster University, 1981. Pp. vii, 181. Illustrations. \$14.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 11(2), 86–87.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1019039ar>

Other problems with the book include several of an editorial nature. This is one of the most poorly edited volumes that I have ever encountered. Typographical and grammatical errors are numerous enough to be an embarrassment to the author. Some lines are so garbled (for example on p. 126), that they are meaningless. The table of contents includes reference to a phantom tenth chapter, and Newfoundland is referred to as a Maritime Province (it is an Atlantic Province). Furthermore, the index is not nearly full enough for a volume of this complexity.

In spite of more than four decades of housing legislation in Canada, one must agree with Professor Rose that "the crisis has worsened and the plight of the low-income groups has become increasingly worse. The group unable to take care of its housing requirements within its own resources has widened substantially to include a significant proportion of all those families and individual who fall within the lowest half of the Canadian income distribution" (p. 195). *Canadian Housing Policies* makes a useful contribution to our comprehension of this dilemma. Professor Rose displays an enviable sensitivity to the plight of needy Canadians. He is correct in suggesting that only a change in attitude on the part of Canadians, whereby housing comes to be viewed as a service rather than a good, will ensure adequate housing for all citizens. I only wish that Albert Rose had delved more deeply into the roots and nature of Canadian attitudes toward land and housing. Clearly, much research remains to be done in this area.

Michael J. Doucet
Department of Geography
Ryerson Polytechnical Institute

Morton, Desmond, with Copp, Terry. *Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour*. Ottawa: Deneau and Greenberg, 1980. Pp. xviii, 349. Illustrations. \$14.95.

Heron, C.; Hoffmitz, S.; Roberts, W., and Storey, R. *All that Our hands Have Done: A Pictorial History of the Hamilton Workers*. Hamilton: Mosaic Press in association with the Office of Labour Studies, McMaster University, 1981. Pp. vii, 181. Illustrations. \$14.95.

Labour studies are today enjoying an unprecedented popularity in Canada. The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and its regional affiliates are devoting increasing resources to labour education, within which working-class history is recognized as an essential element. Over the last decade, labour history has also begun to make inroads into university curricula, and teaching and research in the area have been fostered by the Committee on Labour History

through its journal, *Labour/Le Travailleur*. The two books under review are recent products of this interest in working-class history.

Desmond Morton's *Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour* is the first attempt to produce a popularly written synthesis of Canadian working-class history since the 1967 publication of Charles Lipton's *Trade Union Movement of Canada*, a more nationalist and leftist interpretation of labour than *Working People*. Morton is one of Canada's most distinguished and versatile historians, whose accomplishments in labour, military and political history are well known to Canadian scholars. Terry Copp, who assisted Morton in the writing of *Working People*, has published widely in the field of Canadian labour history and is best known for his monograph, *The Anatomy of Poverty: The Condition of the Working Class in Montreal, 1897-1929*. In the introduction to *Working People*, Morton calls for "a view of Canadian labour history that struggles to bring together the old institutional approach and the new awareness of region and localism, and that respects the radical and the pragmatist." These are difficult standards to fulfil, and Morton is only partly successful in bringing the new concepts of working-class history to his survey of the Canadian labour movement. *Working People* does offer the most comprehensive study to date of most of the major and many of the minor strikes, organizing campaigns and political activities of Canadian unionists. The story is told chronologically, beginning with a brief description of craft unionism before Confederation. It is carried forward to the present through studies of the Knights of Labour in the 1880s, working-class militancy in the early twentieth century, the organizing of workers in the country's mass production industries during the Depression and World War II, the formation of the CLC in 1956 and, finally, the relationship between organized labour and the New Democratic Party (NDP) after 1961. As this brief outline of *Working People's* contents suggests, the survey seldom escapes the institutional boundaries of the trade union movement and its leadership. This is a rather surprising feature of the book considering Morton's introductory comments and the inclusion in his useful bibliography of many of the more recent writings on working-class history. *Working People* has little to say on the contributions made by women to the Canadian labour movement or on the importance of the workplace control questions that influenced the institutional and ideological responses of Canadian workers to industrial capitalism.

After reading *Working People* one is left with the impression that the author's objective is to convince Canadian workers that the NDP is their only legitimate political option. With the formation of the NDP in 1961, Morton asserts, finally "Canadian labour had a winner." Throughout the study, socialists and conservatives in the labour movement who stood outside the mainstream social

democratic tradition in the CCF/NDP are painted as the villains of the Canadian working class. In this regard, *Working People's* assessment of the communists' contribution to the labour movement is most disturbing. The author's earlier appeal for a history that "respects the radical and the pragmatist" is frequently disregarded when communists or their sympathizers are marched onto the pages of *Working People*. The portrayal of communists as straw men and women awaiting "fresh orders from Moscow" is, as recent scholarship clearly demonstrates, an oversimplification. Indeed, a double standard operates in the pages of *Working People*. Shifts in communist policies are strongly criticized, while new directions in the CCF/NDP programme are celebrated for their pragmatism. The Communist Party is ridiculed for its changing policies during World War II, but the CCF's decision to abandon its longstanding tradition of pacifism, which required the unceremonious dumping of J.S. Woodsworth, receives no greater scrutiny than the comment that "the Nazi menace had to be faced." There are, unfortunately, too many examples of this problem in *Working People*. Such is the author's zeal to attribute the failures of the Canadian labour movement to the socialists and communists that the role of the state and business in labour relations occasionally recedes into the background, as for example in the discussion of the early 1930s. It also provides an underlying rationale for the vicious attacks on the communist unionists by social democrats like David Lewis and Lary Sefton in the 1950s, of which the United Steel Workers' smashing of the Mine Mill and Smelter Workers is an inglorious example. The stereotyping of social democrats and communists in *Working People* avoids critical assessment of the contribution that both groups have made to the Canadian labour movement. *Working People* should be read by all those interested in Canadian working-class history, but perhaps in conjunction with Stuart Jamieson, *Times of Trouble: Labour Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada, 1900-1966*.

All That Our Hands Have Done: A Pictorial History of the Hamilton Workers is radically different in concept and design from *Working People*. The fact that both studies are illustrated histories is really the only element they have in common, and, in this regard, *All That Our Hands Have Done* is manifestly superior to *Working People*. Beyond their divergence in subject matter – *All That Our Hands Have Done* focuses on working-class life in Hamilton, Ontario, to 1946 – lies a more fundamental divergence in their approaches to working-class history. Prepared under the auspices of McMaster University's Labour Studies Programme by its research assistant Shea Hoffmitz, historians Craig Heron and Wayne Roberts and sociologist Robert Storey, *All That Our Hands Have Done* delivers on its promise to lay the foundation for union struggles in the workers' "everyday experiences in a rapidly changing industrial world."

The study is divided into two sections, the first of

which explores the work, domestic and recreational experiences of Hamilton's working people. In this richly illustrated segment of *All That Our Hands Have Done*, the reader tours the city's workshops and factories and experiences workplace of craftsmen, mass production workers and labourers. The selection of photographs on women explores the entire spectrum of their work experience, whether it was home-making, packing olives in the McLaren's food processing plant in the 1920s, or working in a female "pick and shovel" crew laying railway tracks during World War II. In the captions that accompany the photographs, the workers voice their daily joys and disappointments with their jobs, employers and fellow workers. Culled from newspapers, letters and reminiscences by Hamilton workers, these commentaries bring the photographs to life.

In "A Union Town," the essay's concluding half, the economic and political struggles that brought the Hamilton labour movement to institutional maturity are sketched. Hamilton workers joined the Nine-Hour Movement and the Knights of Labor, built an impressive craft union presence before World War I, and struggled in the 1930s and 1940s to win recognition of their industrial unions in Hamilton's mass production industries. This historical overview of the labour movement by necessity adopts a more traditional format and, though it is well written and informative, the reader is tempted to rush ahead to the vividly illustrated chapter on the 1946 steelworkers' strike. This strike gained community support on a scale unprecedented in Hamilton's history and this working-class solidarity won union recognition for the Stelco steelworkers.

All That Our Hands Have Done does tend to romanticize the working-class experience, however, for workers were more divided in their factories and neighbourhoods by skill, ethnicity, religion, politics and sex than the book suggests. When studying the photograph of an aging moulder's wife fetching wood for the family kitchen, for example, one cannot help but wonder what she thought about the "gregarious craftsmen" whose patriarchal attitudes excluded her and other women from much of that "rich craft experience" of the late 1900s. Finally, the introductory essay on documentary photography seems somewhat inappropriate. Readers might have benefited more from an introduction that established the local and regional historical context of Hamilton's working men and women.

In conclusion, *All That Our Hands Have Done* deserves a wide readership both for its fine technical qualities and for its sensitivity to the peculiarities of time and place in relating the working-class experience.

Nolan Reilly
Department of History
University of Winnipeg