

Urban History Review

Careless, J.M.S. *Toronto to 1918, An Illustrated History*. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company and National Museum of Man, 1984. Pp. 223. Illustrations \$24.95 cloth

Meyer Brownstone

Volume 14, Number 1, June 1985

URI: id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017888ar
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1017888ar>

[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 article

Brownstone, M. (1985). Careless, J.M.S. *Toronto to 1918, An Illustrated History*. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company and National Museum of Man, 1984. Pp. 223. Illustrations \$24.95 cloth. *Urban History Review*, 14(1), 74–76. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017888ar>

All Rights Reserved © Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine, 1985

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/>]



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. www.erudit.org

This structure generates an unfortunate reification of urban history as an "it" that is born, grows, develops, has direction, problems, accomplishments, and failures; particular historical works are then measured in terms of their "contributions" to "its" progress. This is not necessarily the most helpful or accurate way to understand the dynamics of historiography, much less its particular direction at any given point. Consider the following examples, which fairly capture the tone of historiographical pronouncement in the report:

"Questions are being formulated that will, it is hoped, lead to new plateaus in the development of the field" (p. 11).

"The field of history has been influenced to a great extent by social history and its methods. . . . This interest parallels labour and women's history, two relatively new fields of study that have also been strongly influenced by social history" (p. 16).

"This problem has begun to be addressed by urban political scientists, and while no general framework has yet been developed, concern has been expressed and research goals established. The task of specifying what is distinctive and what is commonplace about Canadian [urban] politics is now underway. Progress should be fairly rapid" (p. 28.)

"The numerous studies of labour historians . . . turned more and more to examinations of the working class and working-class culture. These studies . . . did provide a significant indirect contribution to urban history" (p.31).

In such usages, the notion of the shared "field" functions as a kind of controlling fiction conferring a comforting sense of common purpose over historical energies that are, in reality, far more diverse and conflictive — concerned with advancing often mutually exclusive views of reality, rather than filling in the numbers on some presumptive big picture. Within such a self-conscious historiographical orientation, it is especially hard to detect and record, much less amplify, the intellectual and political dynamics out of which the sought-for theory, generalization, and conceptualization actually arise.

This development-of-the-field orientation, in fact, tends to obscure more fundamental conflicts over definition and direction that have animated much recent work, such as the work on Montreal by Linteau and others; Palmer and Kealey's studies in urban labour history; and the broad synthesis by Katz, Doucet, and Stern based on their Hamilton studies — all of which are less concerned with "contributions" to urban history than with forcing us to understand the basic processes and dynamics of change, particularly urban change, in fundamentally new and different ways. Ironically, then, the authors may have been led by scrupulous attention to their historiographical subject into underestimating some of what is most exciting and portentous about current work in Canadian urban history.

Perhaps it is only a matter of semantics or emphasis. But I wonder how different such a survey would have been had it begun not with the genealogy of "the field" as an institution and with broad historiographical generalizations, but rather with the works themselves, summarizing the most important questions they ask and the answers they begin to provide, and on this basis moving on to assess the most pressing intellectual issues and the agenda for future work. For after all, the study of history presumes a relentless, open-ended search for a widened power of explanation, regardless of often arbitrary sub-disciplinary lines or received frames of analysis and organization. From this vantage, for many who find Canadian urban history an object of intense curiosity and a fit subject for exploration, there are surely more important issues than whether or not, in this report's revealing closing phrase, "the study of the urban past has a secure future in Canada" (p. 36).

Michael H. Frisch
Department of History
SUNY-Buffalo

Careless, J.M.S. *Toronto to 1918, An Illustrated History*. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company and National Museum of Man, 1984. Pp. 223. Illustrations \$24.95 cloth.

Toronto to 1918, An Illustrated History is in many ways a successful and enjoyable contribution to the *History of Canadian Cities Series*, itself a highly welcome project. It is very readable, well organized, beautifully produced, bountifully illustrated with photographs, maps, charts, cartoons and reproductions of drawings and paintings. There are bonuses for the reader including interesting historical statistical series, careful and thorough documentation, a generous bibliography and useful annotated "Suggestions for Further Reading and Research."

After establishing site characteristics, the history takes us through a chronologically organized journey from gestation to birth to emergence as "The Nearly National Metropolis" by the 1918 period. J.M.S. Careless characterizes each period with general and imaginative interpretations such as "government village," "railways and regional hub," leading to the grand metropole finale. Within these major historical themes he proceeds to explore growth and economic, social, cultural and demographic changes, urban landscape, and urban political and service variables.

The writing of histories of cities cannot be a task easily undertaken even for expert practitioners such as J.M.S. Careless. Cities are an unending complex of humans and nature; they may have physical boundaries but beyond a few related formalities these are misleading, constraining identities in modernizing and modern world (e.g., the "urban

place and non place urban realm”); they contain their own indigenous, remade or transitional and many non-indigenous cultures. To undertake a history of a single aspect of complex elements is challenge enough. To undertake a history of the City is surely a truly heroic commitment.

It is tempting, in a critique, to avoid the author's undertaking to focus on particularities where any general history would be clearly vulnerable. Furthermore in a text of this limited length, replete with illustrations, a charge of superficiality is not too difficult to document and defend. But this may also be expecting too much of the author, and the reader might reasonably be asked to accept a text which is patently survey. In fact *Careless* has done more, but the “more” has to be watched for carefully since it usually appears in an interpretation, a phrase, almost an aside, a brief comment displaying briefly an interesting insight and definition. For example “a bottom class provided underdogs to whom social faults were regularly attributed.”

Finally one might ask for more richness, more life, more soul than is given in most historical texts, although for my own reading and teaching I am happy to combine historical texts with novels (Dickens, Sinclair, Balzac, Orwell) and with the critical and utopian social science literature (Engels, Benjamin, Bookchin, Goodman, Thompson).

Having said all of this (undoubtedly far too much, but clarifying both my expectations and sympathetically considered limits of this kind of undertaking) there remain areas of questioning. This is not the place or the space to launch into a general critique of the Metropolitan approach which owes so much to *Careless'* work as a scholar and teacher. However, the present text is a work not about urban systems or metropolis-hinterland. The questioning here is to what extent the author has expressed a balanced sense of Toronto, its historical essence, descriptively and analytically. What kind of metropolis and why? The overall impression of this carefully prepared, well presented work is of a sympathetic, if occasionally sardonic account, of how indigenous elites (primarily business) built Toronto via a quick leap from feudal-colonial remnants of capitalism, with support from the external economic structure. The documentation of their role and their works fills most pages of text, photographs and other illustrations. It is the culture of the elites which is portrayed as the culture of Toronto. Beyond the most brief reference, there is not much sense of class differentiation, of varying culture within classes save one, of class animosity, and indeed of class opposition.

If one were to place *Careless'* schema within standard social science approaches to the city, he seems clearly to fall into the Chicago ecological school, highly limited in explanatory power and tinged with a definite liberal dismissal of the possibility of conflict. The overall impression then is an untroubled, rarely disturbed (if occasionally corrupt and mildly scandalized) condition of elite domination and elite

history. But who can blame the author? The lives of the working class and indeed the middle class are commonly portrayed as either relatively undramatic, unnoticed and uncreative or as repressed by dominant forces. The skyscraper, the mansions, the universities, the roads, the sewers, those grand or simply instrumental hallmarks of the city are after all created by elites and merely built by other classes. They in turn are rendered virtually anonymous in function, in context. When you have displayed one working class home you have shown them all. Or why provide an account of the distinct and diverse culture of the ethnic community — practised and enjoyed by the masses, when one can display the grandeur of the opera, the concert hall, and wax eloquently, almost lovingly, about the dominant newspapers, the leading literati and so on. History is the history of one group, one sector, one culture, secure and unchallenged in its domination — and the city is its exclusive product.

This kind of abstracted historicism can be illustrated with reference to a major process (among others). Public intervention into the socio-economic order under the general rubric of “urban planning” (a fundamental factor in defining a city) has but scant reference to factors such as public health, bourgeois aesthetics, and separation of land use. No serious reference is made to zoning as a function of upper class residential enclosure and protection of their habitat and land values. In fact since the mid-1800s successive Toronto councils, dominated by elite interests, had made use of provincial legislation permitting municipal regulation of land use, regulation which was largely promoted by private interests. Forms of planning and zoning, a key municipal function, had a long use in the service of elite interests throughout the period covered, culminating in Ontario's first general planning act, the Planning and Development Act of 1917.

The reference in the final chronological period to the tendency to reformism, emergence of collective intervention and startling interference with private rights, the revival of public planning and real designs for land use, is devoid of critical content. Ample evidence exists to show that so-called collective intervention was in defence of rights in property of those who held them, that a revived public planning was an attempt to control “nuisance,” but hardly to dispense environmental equity, and that real designs in land use were discriminatory, favouring the habitats of dominant classes, the spatial needs of capital and the efficient (for capital) location and transport of labour force and goods. Marxist interpretations point to the minimal conditions for reproduction of labour as the sole concern of capital in its support for planning and most urban services. The text, in contrast, leaves the impression of planning as a general good, (but encountering resistance from some elite dissident, because of its interference with property rights and its collective authority character), prompted by reformist tendencies amongst the elite, and reformism in turn as a type of generalized political good, albeit explicitly paternal.

Ultimately, then, what is sought in this type of work is not necessarily the pursuit of additional complexities, or specific elements in greater depth, or a novel or a social science study, but a history with more balance, more critique and less exclusion of people and groups from their own history. Furthermore, if *Toronto to 1918* is indeed defined by the omnipotence of business and related elites, more needs to be recorded even in a general history about the underlying conditions, relations, and strategies. There is every indication that Toronto has hardly emerged from its particular historical burden, and citizens, perplexed by the continuing phenomena of business and elite domination, civic corruption, and the neutralizing of public participation, need the deeper understanding of historical roots as a basis for meaningful critique and interaction. The muting of opposition, the absorption of protest, the marginalizing of nascent political formation and competition all historically derived and patterned, deserve exposure. Although Toronto emerges as a metropolis it also emerges from its history perhaps more in the dystopian imagery of Fritz Lang and Orwell, than as simply the triumphant transformation of "a Lake Ontario locality into a world-scale city."

Meyer Brownstone
Centre for Urban and Community Studies
Department of Political Science
University of Toronto

Lyon, Deborah and Robert Fenton. *The Development of Downtown Winnipeg: Historical Perspectives on Decline and Revitalization*. Report No. 3. Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, 1984. Pp. viii, 200. Maps, tables. \$16.00 paper.

An increasingly common view is that cities, as products of time, must be analyzed historically if they are to be properly understood and if urban interventions are to occur with not only a social and situational sensitivity, but also to have a long term effectiveness. Following this view, modernist notions such as universalism, a future orientation, and *tabula rasa* are being replaced by contextualism, historical analyses and sensitive infill.

This report, one in a series of studies conducted and published by Winnipeg's Institute of Urban Studies regarding the social and environmental condition of that city, exemplifies such view. Following an explicitly historical perspective, and utilizing predominantly secondary information, the report attempts to assess the effects which a variety of social, economic and policy "forces" have had on the decline and revitalization of downtown Winnipeg since its founding more than 125 years ago. Six major phases are used to analyze Winnipeg's development and to provide an organizational framework for the study: origins; pre-confederation to 1870;

early post-Confederation, 1870-96; pre-World War I, 1897-1914; wars and depression, 1915-45; and the post-War period, 1946-84. In addition, the authors characterize the pre-1914 periods as ones of rapid growth, leading Winnipeg to its peak of power and affluence in Western Canada. From 1914 to the present, Winnipeg's rate of growth has gradually diminished along with its commanding dominance over the prairie hinterland. The report deals with these processes in some depth and detail.

An unquestioned assumption that "a vibrant city contains an active heart" begins and underlies the entire report. The analysis consistently attempts to demonstrate the ways in which Winnipeg's "heart" is less socially and economically active than it should be and to clarify the various local and regional factors which caused or ameliorated this inactivity. The resulting malaise is attributed to three main factors: the diffusion of economic activity over too broad a region; dispersion of central business district activity over too large a core area; and failure of the redevelopment process in the downtown. Three main policy areas — housing and residential development; central business district activities and facilities; and urban and municipal planning, an activity in which Winnipeg has a long and highly regarded tradition — receive special attention, purportedly because they contribute the most toward explaining the deterioration of Winnipeg's downtown core and the ineffectiveness of its redevelopment processes. The study concludes, somewhat ambiguously, that to resolve the issue of Winnipeg's central city deterioration will require that "... the behaviour patterns stimulated by these historic forces be altered to reflect changed times."

Placing history in the service of urban understanding which leads to a more informed public policy, as this report attempts to do, is, however, no easy task. Neither does it necessarily entail, as the report seems to suggest, a singular, or even a convergent, vision of the city, or a commitment to particular social and urban issues. As students of urbanism quickly discover, history is utilized in various ways and for often contradictory purposes: as a purely descriptive, intellectually detached endeavor; in an interpretive manner, where a discovery of the urban "essences" and a more profound understanding are the central intentions; as a search for continuities, which can then be used projectively to maintain or reinforce the status quo; or even to serve a revisionist stance, where the episodes of history are selectively chosen and manipulated for preconceived and often self-serving purposes.

Neither the substantive domain nor the methodological constraints of the historical pursuit, in themselves, determine how and why history will be utilized or what effect it will have. Rather, underpinning historical analyses are theoretical and philosophical bases and ideological commitments