

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Lindsay, John C. *"Turn Out the Stars Before Leaving": The Story of Canada's Theatres*. Erin, Ontario: Boston Mills Press, 1983. Pp., 176. 97 black and white plates; 22 colour plates. \$35.00

Karen D. Haines

Volume 15, Number 1, June 1986

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018911ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018911ar>

[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

Haines, K. D. (1986). Review of [Lindsay, John C. *"Turn Out the Stars Before Leaving": The Story of Canada's Theatres*. Erin, Ontario: Boston Mills Press, 1983. Pp., 176. 97 black and white plates; 22 colour plates. \$35.00]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 15(1), 108–109.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1018911ar>

The book is divided into four parts. Part One discusses the design and construction of bridges, including form, materials and the building process. If these topics do not seem particularly exciting they are still of utmost importance in helping understand the vocabulary of bridges. Similarly, Part Two "A Brief History of Road Bridge Building in Ontario" is straightforward and factual. Here, the author delineates three phases in the history of Ontario's bridges. The first phase lasts from 1780 to 1880, and includes some of the earliest public works in Upper Canada. This hundred-year period is characterized largely by simple devices but, coinciding, as it did, with the Industrial Revolution in Europe, it saw the introduction of wrought-iron structures. The second phase, from 1880 until 1914, witnessed the development of steel and concrete bridges in Ontario. It was also a period in which mass manufacturing techniques made possible standardized materials, parts, and even entire prefabricated structures. The third phase from 1914 to the present, includes many feats of modern engineering, not only in concrete and steel as one might expect, but in wood as well. Cumming describes the Sioux Narrows bridge of 1935, evidently the world's largest single-span wooden bridge at 210 feet in length. The author presents a fascinating juxtaposition of this quintessentially Canadian solution to bridge building and the influence of the German Autobahn on Ontario road and bridge building in the Thirties.

Part Three of *Discovering Heritage Bridges* describes the subtlest yet, to my mind, the most intriguing aspect of heritage bridges: appreciating them. Here, the author talks about "reading" a bridge, and understanding the symbolism of bridges. In the literal sense one can read bridges by looking for makers' plates and incised inscriptions, thus discovering much about them. The author presents some excellent examples. He does not, however, explore in depth the importance of bridges as civic monuments. One could elaborate greatly on another type of "reading," looking upon such structures as the Henley Bridge near St. Catharines or the masterpiece at Hamilton (both of which are introduced by the author) as metaphors of civic authority. As a result of the municipal reform movement and the advent of the City Beautiful planning movement in the first decades of the twentieth century in North America, engineers and planners gave significant institutional prominence to public works. Far beyond their utilitarian value, such works became associated with "civic art," and many examples, especially bridges, may be found throughout Canada: those in Vancouver, Calgary and Saskatoon are particularly fine.

Part Four, entitled "Caring for our Heritage" is of vital importance to preservationists everywhere. The author faces the problems of redundancy and obsolescence in a direct way, and provides a sound methodology for reaching solutions. Nor is the entire problem of bridge preservation abstruse. As I write this review, an unusual but disturbing advertisement in the "Historic Properties" section of the U.S.

Preservation News leers at me: "Greenwich, N.Y. Hegeman-Hill Bridge. Historic 162' Baltimore truss, iron and steel members. Built 1901. Architectural ornamentation well preserved. Free to preservationists. . . ." Cumming's book indeed provides a timely response.

Douglas Franklin
The Heritage Canada Foundation
Ottawa

Lindsay, John C. *"Turn Out the Stars Before Leaving": The Story of Canada's Theatres*. Erin, Ontario: Boston Mills Press, 1983. Pp., 176. 97 black and white plates; 22 colour plates. \$35.00.

There is no romance in standing outside your local movie theatre waiting for the second show to be admitted. John C. Lindsay's *"Turn Out the Stars Before Leaving": The Story of Canada's Theatres* is written with an enthusiasm for the subject that recalls the romance of a bygone era, a time when a patron could retire to a theatre's writing room, or a plushly upholstered couch in the lounge.

Lindsay has taken on the monumental task of recording the development of Canadian Theatres. He takes us from their makeshift beginnings in rented storefront property through the grand palaces of the early 1900s to the construction of the functional multiplexes of the 1970s and 1980s.

As a history of Canadian theatres, it is made fresh with lavish illustrations, reminiscences of theatre personnel, assorted theatre trivia and an informative and lucid account of show business at the time. Indeed, the subject lends itself to the glossy treatment and fanfare associated with the entertainment business. Ironically, this is where the history periodically falls short. Save for a couple of post-card street scenes, Lindsay tends to concentrate on the awe inspiring details of theatre construction or the humorous backstage mishaps. Seldom are the theatres placed in a larger urban or social context. The buildings, by and large, stand apart from their environment. The development of theatres designed for mass entertainment cannot be separated from the social concerns of the period in which they were built.

In the early 1900s moving pictures were accorded little prestige by an educated public. Movies were not given a prominent place on the programs of existing theatres; and more often than not were shown at the end of vaudeville acts, as "chasers." Movies were, for the most part, shown by entrepreneurs in transient storefront nickelodeons.

Lindsay points out that by 1920 vaudeville's popularity began to wane. Audiences were becoming more attracted to the movies. "The theatre owner felt that his building must

have something different, something more exotic than the vaudeville theatre could offer. It was from this point that the escapist architecture of the movie theatre evolved and went hand in hand with the escapism in the silver screen."

There is no denying that the grand movie houses structured the viewing process and allowed patrons to abandon themselves to the fantasy on the screen. As the popularity of the movies grew, however, so too did social concern. More work should be done to determine the extent to which the concern of city fathers affected the first designs of theatres.

At the turn of the century city aldermen began to introduce stiff license fees and impose safety regulations on the buildings where movies were being shown. Church leaders printed sermons in local newspapers warning the youth away from these halls of ill-repute. In the early 1900s, in Quebec, a Board of Public Morality was established to determine the effects of the moving pictures on society.

Although Lindsay has incorporated some of the information into his history, he tends to downplay the effects of social pressure on the development of the movie theatre. Essentially, audiences were seduced by the glitz, glamour and democracy, their fascination finally over-riding any moral quandry. The movies were for the masses.

Opening programs and advertisements reprinted in *"Turn Out the Stars Before Leaving"* speak to the theatre owners' attempt at securing a loyal clientele. The Allan Policy, for example, promises "lovers of artistic and refined film production . . . a painstaking and courteous service." As one browses through the old program notes it is clear that the main consideration of most theatre owners, aside from money, was that they be considered as "refined and respectable entertainment venues."

The chief consideration of the theatre owners was that of ongoing prosperity. Entertainment was a business. The more people that could be seated in the theatre during the course of a day, the more return at the box office. It is in Lindsay's discussion of the theatre circuit and the competitive nature of show business that the book shines.

Lindsay dedicates forty pages of *"Turn Out the Stars Before Leaving"* to the development of Bennett's vaudeville theatre circuit at the turn of the century to the 1978 sale of Odeon Theatres of Canada Limited to an all-Canadian company, Canadian Odeon. It is interesting that since the publication of this book, Canadian Odeon was sold to another all-Canadian company, CinePlex.

Lindsay points out that our nation's theatre business is spotted with colourful characters like Alexander Pantages. Pantages was known to steal actors' trunks from the train station and take them to his theatre. On claiming his trunk "an apologetic Alexander Pantages would then convince the

actor that he would be better off to perform at Pantages' establishment, actually stealing the actor away from the rival theatre."

"Turn Out the Stars Before Leaving" also touches base with the first Canadian film production company, started in Cobourg, Ontario. Canadian competition, however, regularly proved to be too much for the Americans; as was the case with the Canadian colour film process called "chroma-colour." "American movie companies had their own process, they were not pleased to have a rival. The message was sent out to the movie theatre exhibitors. . . . If you show chromacolour shorts in your theatre we will not send you our full length feature films." A boycott could have effectively shut down the grand movie palaces before their time.

After reading John C. Lindsay's *"Turn Out the Stars Before Leaving": A History of Canada's Theatres* one might well agree that the movie palaces turned out their stars too early. These grand theatres have been torn down or broken up to house smaller theatres. The romance remains in the pages of Lindsay's book, in the few theatres that have been reconstructed and of course, the movies.

Karen D. Haines
Department of Film Studies
Carleton University

Gerson, Carole, ed. *Vancouver Short Stories*. Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1985. Pp. xvii, 166. Map. \$9.50 (paper).

Carole Gerson, in her introduction, says that "the occasion of this book is the one hundredth anniversary of the incorporation of the city of Vancouver. Hence its publication is a celebration of the past. . . ." But the selected overview of stories is so bland that there are none of the fireworks associated with a celebration, and very little sense of Vancouver's past. Oh yes, there is a story of the fire that almost destroyed the city in 1886, selections to show Vancouver's ethnic diversity, fiction from some of the major writers who have lived in Vancouver for a few years, and though the collection gives a chronology of the story as it developed in Vancouver, there is little sense of the city as it was growing, little of the place that has flourished on the fringes of civilization of the Pacific rim, even little of its myth as the lotus land of Western Canada.

Earle Birney, whom Gerson refers to in her introduction as one who in his poems, "Vancouver Lights" and "November Walk at False Creek Mouth" "enhanced the literary identity of Vancouver as a complex city whose symbolic dimension is enriched by its proximity to the mountains and