

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Morton, Suzanne. *Ideal Surroundings: Domestic Life in a Working-Class Suburb in the 1920s*. Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1995. Pp. 201. Black and White photographs. Index. \$40.00 hard. \$17.95 paper

Wendy J. Atkin

Volume 24, Number 2, March 1996

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016604ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016604ar>

[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

Atkin, W. J. (1996). Review of [Morton, Suzanne. *Ideal Surroundings: Domestic Life in a Working-Class Suburb in the 1920s*. Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1995. Pp. 201. Black and White photographs. Index. \$40.00 hard. \$17.95 paper]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 24(2), 63–64. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016604ar>

All Rights Reserved © Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine, 1996

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/>

Morton, Suzanne. *Ideal Surroundings: Domestic Life in a Working-Class Suburb in the 1920s*. Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1995. Pp. 201. Black and White photographs. Index. \$40.00 hard. \$17.95 paper.

In *Ideal Surroundings* historian Suzanne Morton offers a comprehensive study of the Halifax suburb of Richmond Heights. This community was built after much of the north end was destroyed by the explosion of a munitions ship on 6 December 1917. In the evocative words of one contemporary, this tragic event "blew Halifax into the twentieth century". (15) The Halifax Relief Commission employed British garden city expert Thomas Adams to build houses for the working class, promoting the suburb as a "Healthful location, [with] excellent transportation facilities, close to churches and schools" and with "ideal surroundings especially suited to householders with children." (67) Richmond Heights was as experiment in modern urban planning. By refocusing current historical interest in suburbia onto the working class in the interwar period, Morton reveals how living space was a forum for class and gender contradictions to be played out.

Morton's research is as thorough as it could be without access to the manuscript census and school records for the period. She studied leases, voters' lists, telephone and city directories, evening newspapers, and the rich trove of records from the Halifax Relief Commission. The printed sources along with oral history interviews provide a vivid portrait of life in this working-class district. Morton reconstructs the Richmond Heights community capably, holding the reader's attention at a variety of different windows into the time and place: class, gender, region, and family.

Lacking in this book is a strong sense of Richmond Heights residents as Haligonians. Although Morton provides a street plan, it needs to be accompanied by a good map situating the suburb in its awkward location in relation to the city centre. This 'ideal' working-class neighbourhood was located, in the words of another historian, close to "a number of unattractive industries and institutions: the City Prison, city dump, Infectious Diseases hospital, an abattoir, fertilizer plant, and two cemeteries."¹ Morton wrestles with just a few of these geographical details, noting an aroma from north end industries, the difficulty in attracting boarders to a less desirable location in order to make ends meet, and the virtual isolation from the new railway transportation line as well as the rest of the city. How did the railway, factory, and shipyard workers travel to work each day?

The author of this book, however, appears to be less concerned with urban geography and more with identifying class and gender experiences in a community study. The uniqueness of Morton's contribution to Canadian labour history is, in her own words, "[redirecting] the attention of the historian away from the workplace and the union hall into the world of the family and the home." (4) What are the implications of this shift for identifying worker radicalism in the context of an era that working class historians have argued brought changes tolling the death of a unique working class culture?

Morton argues that the people whose homes were destroyed in the 1917 explosion returned to familiar terrain, bringing some prewar customs and traditions along. Although Richmond Heights attracted the so-called 'respectable' working class, who could afford the higher rents charged for quality homes, "tradi-

tional tenancy patterns" (29) were replicated in this modern setting. Mobility was "an important survival strategy" (29) and regulations were tested by keeping farm animals even where the practice provoked conflicts with neighbours. In spite of the residents' quest for respectability, through means such as maintaining good credit and keeping a neat living room for visitors, many people still had problems fulfilling tenant obligations to the Halifax Relief Commission. Perhaps pride of place could only be afforded by middle class home owners. The nature of the Maritime labour market guaranteed a degree of transiency; limited personal resources made it difficult to partake in the new consumerism.

Suzanne Morton identifies herself as an historian of gender rather than sex. She uses a life cycle analysis in reverse, inserting the elderly into the beginning of her story. Chapters on single mothers, married life, and the construction of masculinity reveal the different facets of family life. Morton deliberately excludes children from her analysis, but it is notable that they appear repeatedly in their parents' and grandparents' lives. As crucial sources of support for aging or infirm parents, exhibiting behaviour that helped the community measure their parents' respectability, participating in leisure activities with fathers forging new forms of masculinity, and helping single mothers through labour or child care of younger siblings, children are significant social actors in this story.

Ultimately, we need to ask whether these surroundings were "ideal" for working-class Haligonians in the 1920s. Regardless of whose vantage point we take—the ageing shipyard worker turned sweeper, the widowed mother of two, the seasonally-employed railway worker, or the young woman trying to live up to the twentieth century models of 'good'

mother and companionate wife—the answer, according to Morton, is a resounding 'No'. She concludes the book with a Community Party activist's portrait of imaginary working men and women conversing across gender lines. At the end of a long day, in the relative isolation of suburban life, "it was possible only for a poet to grasp the revolutionary potential of men and women's sitting and talking together." (156) *Ideal Surroundings* is a timely reminder of how urban space can disunify even as it brings people closer together.

References

1. Jay White, "The Homes Front: The Accommodation Crisis in Halifax, 1941–1951," *Urban History Review* XX/3 (Feb. 1992), 119.

Wendy J. Atkin, Department of History,
Carleton University.

Thorold J. Tronrud. *Guardians of Progress: Boosters and Boosterism in Thunder Bay, 1870–1914*. Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 1993. Pp. 74. Black and White Illustrations, index. \$9.95 (plus \$2.00 postage).

This is a well written and designed publication of particular interest to those of us concerned with the history of Northwestern Ontario. We must wonder, however, whether the world needs yet another local study of boosterism. Does Thorold J. Tronrud add anything new to what Alan F.J. Artibise, Elizabeth Bloomfield and many others have already written about this phenomenon? After reading this compact work, I must answer the question with a qualified yes.

In *Guardians of Progress*, Tronrud examines the ideas and techniques of boosters at the Lakehead from 1870 to 1914. In doing so, Tronrud recreates the super-

charged atmosphere that drove businessmen and land promoters to ever greater heights of rhetorical excess. Readers familiar with Ontario's North will undoubtedly be amused by promotional literature that promised newcomers a mosquito-free environment! In contrast, Tronrud's depiction of boosters themselves is more conventional, reflecting accounts found in other monographs. Tronrud's finding that over one-third of Port Arthur and Fort William's elected municipal officials were involved in land development mirrors what other urban historians have discovered. Tronrud argues that a philosophy of growth did not extend beyond the elites of the two towns. Boosterism was therefore a destructive force because it exaggerated class conflict and failed to achieve, at enormous public expense, industrial growth.

The most innovative dimension to this study is Tronrud's exploration of boosting techniques such as lobbying, exhibitions, films, advertising, publications, and bonusing. The imagination of the boosters matched the vigour they brought to their lobbying efforts. Each spring, to cite one example, large delegations descended like locusts upon unsuspecting politicians, businessmen and reporters in Toronto. These brash delegations of over thirty people gave way, by the turn of the century, to professional lobbyists. Tronrud's analysis of the content of booster publications is also noteworthy. Although facts, figures and slogans dominated the text of these publications, boosters appealed most frequently to the visual sense through the use of colour, photographs and drawings. Besides the portraits of prominent local men and the occasional photograph of Amerindians (to add a touch of the exotic no doubt), people were largely absent from these visual representations of the Lakehead.

Although boosterism was a product of inter-urban rivalry, Tronrud treats Port Arthur and Fort William as a single community. Tronrud's approach mutes the dynamic rivalry between the two towns, leading to an inaccurate generalization regarding social relations at the Lakehead. Namely, social conflict is emphasized at the expense of communal solidarity. Boosters acted in their class interest and not on behalf of the community's welfare as a whole. In taking this stance, the author overlooks a remarkable record of inter-class cooperation in Port Arthur. Despite the suggestion that boosters felt politically threatened by the working-class, the *Daily News* (the voice of boosterism in Port Arthur) endorsed a labour slate in the 1910 municipal election. Far more surprising, was the decision by almost two-thirds of Port Arthur's ratepayers to subsidize the construction of the Finnish socialist hall! These two examples, not cited in the monograph, suggest that residents were bound by a sense of community. Working people were not immune to the appeal of boosterism. In the dispute over bonusing arrangements, the objections raised by organized labour revolved around the question of boosting techniques, and was not necessarily the rejection of boosterism itself.

In reconstructing the public image projected by the elite in booster publications and local newspapers, Tronrud sometimes confuses their public pronouncements with what they actually achieved. Although boosters wanted to control the municipal governments at the Lakehead, Tronrud takes them at their word. A survey of Port Arthur's municipal government records suggests a great deal more political accommodation than Tronrud acknowledges. In fact, Port Arthur and Fort William were at the forefront of municipal innovation during these years. The creation of municipally owned