

**Burley, David G. *A Particular Condition in Life: Self-Employment in Mid-Victorian Brantford, Ontario.* Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994. Pp.309. Tables. \$39.95 cloth**

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and fluidity as the most compelling characteristics of the historical record, Ryan's kaleidoscopic account might seem satisfyingly apt. Ryan herself, however, is not one of those people. Or not entirely. Ryan welcomes the "elaboration and diversification of our history" and the "larger, infinitely improved ... picture of the past(3)" it has encouraged. But Ryan also regrets that it has also brought a "more splintered" picture while generating "unease" and "disarray" among historians.

Rejecting traditional narratives of American development, and skeptical of many recent syntheses that often reject the richness of the new history in favor of finding "the easiest point of unity among the powerful and the prominent," Ryan conducted her own "search" for "some way of bringing America's diverse peoples together on one plane of analysis, but without subjecting them to the brute authority of a central government or the cultural tyranny of national character(4)." Her search brought her to "the idea of the public(4)." Thus Ryan sees "the public" not only as a variety of locations in which social and political change can be observed in the interaction of the people, but also a conceptual framework capable of advancing the necessary and desirable work of allying the fluctuating, fragmented world of nineteenth century urban life to a coherent narrative of the nation's democratic development. Nor is this just an "academic" quest for Ryan. *Civic Wars* was "[u]ndertaken as both a historian's project and a citizen's mission(3)," in the belief that the public life of the past has much to teach about democracy and citizenship in contemporary America. In particular, Ryan rightly insists that diversity and conflict do not represent declension from a better world of peace and consensus. On the contrary, such "civic warfare" needs to be understood and "embraced" as an intrinsic component of modern democracy.

Ryan herself largely assumes the validity and value of the two debatable premises underpinning her book: the desirability of writing as both historian and citizen, and the need to find new forms of "narrative coherence" that will accommodate multiple American stories. Perhaps the idea is that the narrative itself will do the talking as to their wisdom and desirability. Ryan's narrative, however, is often characterized less by the coming together of detailed diversity and big-picture coherence than by an uneasy co-habitation of language and metaphors drawn from both recent historiography and traditional explorations of American development. Constant metaphorical reminders of the kaleidoscopic, contingent nature of a multitudinous and multifarious public world, sit uneasily beside (or beneath) teleologically-loaded terms like "Infant democracy", "the democratic experiment," and the "democratic project." Rather than providing a larger narrative framework for the street-level practice of democracy that Ryan describes, such ideas and assumptions are in fact strikingly at odds with the rich evidence Ryan offers to show that groups seldom saw their own drive for participatory power as another successful step towards "democracy." Nor did they view the exclusion of others as a "lack" or "flaw" in definitions of democracy. As Ryan presents

them, the nineteenth-century urban "public" came to understand that the pursuit or denial of power could be as effectively, even more effectively, achieved through control of the fluid, partial, supposedly inclusive identity of "citizen" as through appeals to more explicitly particular identities rooted in past countries or present occupations. On one level, therefore, Ryan's work vividly reveals democracy's character as an historically directionless weapon in the practical pursuit of power. On another, she seeks to accommodate democracy as practice to the language and assumptions of democracy as providence.

That an historian as careful and inclusive as Ryan so readily lapses into the language and assumptions of the master narratives she seeks to supersede suggests that it is not only the inevitability of "civic warfare" that the modern citizen should recognize. He or she might also take from Ryan's account the understanding that terms such as "public" and "citizen" remain as loaded and as potentially dangerous today as they were in the nineteenth-century city. As such, they and their users deserve the kinds of close scrutiny that Ryan gives to her civic predecessors. There is also, perhaps a possible, if unintended, lesson to be drawn by historians from this particular account of what Mary Ryan tellingly describes, in another phrase redolent of traditional "nationalist" narratives, as "our history." Contrary to her hopes and assumptions as a citizen-historian, maybe historians should not be so quick to wrap all those recently uncovered historical fragments in the citizen's comfort blanket of narrative coherence.

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**Burley, David G. *A Particular Condition in Life: Self-Employment in Mid-Victorian Brantford, Ontario*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994. Pp.309. Tables. \$39.95 cloth.**

For some time now social historians have focused on the formation of a Canadian working class during the industrialisation era of the mid and late nineteenth century. In this clever and well-researched study historian David Burley changes this focus to explore the "making of the middle class" — surprisingly, a rather under-studied topic in Canadian history — in the urban setting of Brantford, Ontario. Concentrating his inquiry on one segment of the middle class, Burley explores how the economic restructuring brought about by industrialisation affected Brantford's self-employed in both structural and subjective terms. The result is a successful book, rich both in evidence and analysis about the process of middle class formation during Canada's industrialisation era.

The author makes excellent use of census data from the 1830–81 period to chart the rise and fall of a golden era of self-employment in Brantford. Until the late 1850s self-employment

was common; it was also deeply cherished by many immigrants who were accustomed to the artisanal shop cultures of their native countries. Newcomers found in the relatively isolated town a "frontier" of self-employment opportunities no longer available in Britain or the northeastern United States. In Brantford, young men — and a few women — could realistically aspire to working for themselves in a modest enterprise at some stage in their life, a circumstance that permitted strong community cohesion both politically and socially. This consensus began to break down in the 1850s and 1860s as industrialisation took hold. As better transportation links drew the community into the industrialising national economy, small single person businesses and partnerships that served the local area gave way to larger, better capitalised industrial enterprises financed by the most successful local businessmen and outside capital. This trend was facilitated further by a tightening of credit that followed a major economic collapse in 1857. Successful local businessmen, who used to loan money to self-employed individuals on the basis of good character alone, increasingly invested in large, secure industrial enterprises that promised a return. Although modest self-employment opportunities continued to exist (particularly in the commercial sector), industrialisation significantly altered the structure of wealth in Brantford, putting more of it in the hands of those at the top at the expense of those in the middle. Increasingly one needed the received advantage of family wealth or an established business in order to be successfully self-employed, a circumstance that reduced social mobility, turned many self-employed into proletarians, and ultimately increased social and political conflict between the town's haute bourgeoisie and the working and lower middle classes.

Class membership in mid-Victorian Ontario was changeable and Burley is careful to define his focal group by their *persistence* in self employment over time rather than by their occupation at any one point. He notes that "[a]s a social boundary, self employment was permeable to crossings in both directions several times in a man's life, and so probably conformed as much to a stage in life, another manifestation of social maturity, as to class division." Indeed, an important theme of this book is that, during the mid-nineteenth century, self-employment was valued less for its financial possibilities than for the independence — and, thus, maturity — it gave an individual. Diminishing self-employment opportunities and the demotion of formerly self-employed tradesmen to the working class during the post-1860 period was thus socially disruptive less because it reduced standards of living — indeed, in many cases these standards rose — but because it reduced a man's independence, or at least the opportunity of becoming independent. Recognizing how industrialisation altered this important benchmark of male maturity, Burley argues, goes a long way to understanding what some have characterized as the mid-nineteenth century's "crisis in masculinity".

Historical memory plays an important role in Burley's understanding of the particular process of class formation and con-

flict in mid-nineteenth century Brantford. Memories of a pre-industrial economy and society — in which self-employment and social mobility were common — shaped industrial relations. Disputes during the 1860–80 period were as much about negotiating "the social meaning of wage labour in a community previously characterized by pervasive self-employment" as they were about wages and working conditions. Relations between formerly self-employed tradesmen — whose work background led them to believe that wage labour would only constitute a stage in their career — and their bosses involved elements of both explicit class conflict and a "negotiated paternalism" borne in a common craft culture experience.

Memory is also central to Burley's analysis of the evolution of a middle class consciousness based on the liberal ideology of the self-made man. This "success ideology" was a response by those who had succeeded under the new industrial order to the contradiction between their memory of a pre-industrial Brantford in which social mobility was common and the reality of the town in the 1880s when opportunities were limited. Struggling to understand the failure of so many other self-employed men in the 1870s and 1880s, Brantford's middle class attributed their own earlier success to individual character and self-help, an analysis that ignored structural changes created by industrialisation. Although Burley devotes an entire chapter to this important topic, his argument relies on limited evidence. His analysis of the middle class's "success ideology" is based almost exclusively on a biographical dictionary written by "Brantford's leading intellectual".

For the most part, though, Burley's evidence is strong. He makes interesting use of the records of the Mercantile Agency of R.G. Dun and Co. to argue that, during the mid-century period, the measure of credit worthiness transformed from an individual's character to his material assets. Moreover, Burley's generalisations regarding important conceptual issues are cautious and always stress the particularities of place. The book interacts nicely with the Canadian and international literature on class formation and offers important qualifications to existing wisdom. For instance, Burley shows that Brantford provides an exception to Ben Forster's thesis that pro-tariff businessmen formed an "ascending" and dominant elite during the 1870s. Brantford's leading businessmen remained "uncommitted to tariff protection" during this time and, indeed, many saw their interests best served through reciprocity.

If there is a weakness in this book it may lie in Burley's somewhat romantic portrayal of a golden pre-industrial age filled with opportunity and lacking in social conflict. His census evidence certainly reveals that self-employment opportunities existed and that social mobility was not uncommon. But much of the book's subjective and documentary evidence tends to focus on the transition to industrialisation, leaving one wanting to know more about social relations during the earlier period. Would a closer look at this period reveal more conflict than Burley suggests? On a more stylistic note, the volume would have been enhanced by the inclusion of maps and illustrations or

photographs of the town and some of the individuals discussed. Urban historians might also be interested in a discussion of how industrialisation and middle class formation affected the spatial patterns of class-based residency within the town.

Despite these criticisms, this is an important book that offers a fresh look at class formation and business culture during the industrialisation period.

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**Thomas F. McIlwraith, *Looking for Old Ontario, Two Centuries of Landscape Change*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. xiv + 400 pp. b&w illus., appendices, index.**

Thomas McIlwraith has been observing, and reflecting on, the rural landscape of southern Ontario for several decades. In a contemplative style, and using about two hundred of his own photographs, he has now summarised the results of his extensive reading and field work. *Looking at Old Ontario* interprets the ways in which European, and especially British, settlers shaped rural Ontario up to the early twentieth century.

McIlwraith's book invites and bears comparison with the work of W. G. Hoskins whose masterly *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955) has inspired several generations of scholars. Like Hoskins, McIlwraith is fascinated by the quotidian scene. He writes about, and illustrates, some 'historic' houses and communities, but it is the typical dwelling, farm, fence, barn, and road that usually catches his eye, and which he especially commends to our attention. It is these landscape elements that tell us most about the lives, skills, living standards, and tastes of the majority of people. For the most part Hoskins organised his original narrative chronologically; in later work he constructed vignettes using specific places, a Devon lane, a Northumberland castle, and so forth. McIlwraith prefers a more systematic treatment. An opening cluster of chapters deal with general themes, including place names and building materials. This cluster is followed by a group of chapters each of which describes specific landscape features (houses, 'revealing details', community buildings, barns, fences, power and mills, graves and monuments), and then a smaller group that discusses landscape assemblages (farms, roadsides, transport systems, and townscapes). Rounding these out are some reflections on boundaries, and on historic preservation. As a general framework, this approach makes sense in a region with less visible history than England, and with fewer regional variations. Still, regions do differ, notably in building materials and agricultural land use, and it is a pity that McIlwraith did not include a chapter that sketched them out. In a similarly comparative vein, the book is also limited in that it rarely makes explicit the differences among the landscapes of southern Ontario and adjacent parts of Quebec or upstate New York.

The glory of the book is the wealth of observation, reflection, and information contained in each chapter. McIlwraith has an eye for telling juxtapositions, a taste for thoughtful asides, and a cast of mind that has encouraged him to accumulate interesting details. In the chapter on graves and monuments, for example, I learned about "doddy-house" extensions on nineteenth-century homes built to accommodate elderly parents and also discovered that one of the reasons thirsty weeping willows are popular in graveyards is that they soak up moisture, thereby extending the digging season. In a rare comment about a modern landscape feature, he points out that since most of North America's communications satellites are positioned over Chicago, the orientation of satellite dishes provides a good indicator of direction (69). Familiar with the history of nineteenth-century Ontario, McIlwraith has the knack not only of interpreting landscape features but also of bringing them alive. Speaking of roadside trees, for example, he notes how from the 1880s farmers were encouraged to plant hardwoods. Apart from the beneficial effects of trees on soil erosion, "shade benefitted churchgoers, weary travellers, and sweaty kine on sultry August afternoons" (251). One can imagine the scene.

McIlwraith, again like Hoskins, is mostly interested in those features of the landscape that pre-date World War I. In both cases the focus reflects a personal preference. Hoskins was repelled by the urban landscapes of the twentieth century. He was blunt: "especially since the year 1914, every single change in the English landscape has either uglified it or destroyed its meaning or both." McIlwraith seems to feel much the same. The most urban of settings that he considers is the country town, the edges of which, he suggests "are among southern Ontario's least attractive places today. Fringed with fast food restaurants, propane fuel depots, 'garden centres,' lumber stores, and the local Ontario Provincial Police detachment, they are ragged places. ..." (280). It is difficult not to sympathise with his judgement, but the fact remains that most of us live in landscapes that are largely, if not entirely, a product of the twentieth century. To make sense of them we must turn elsewhere, for example to the work of McIlwraith's colleague at the University of Toronto, Ted Relph. Relph has written — in an unusually open-minded way — about those generic modern landscapes that can make Toronto seem more like Melbourne, Australia, than Milton, Ont. (Though these days Milton itself is looking increasingly like Melbourne, too.) Together, *Looking at Old Ontario* and Relph's *The Modern Urban Landscape* provide an excellent primer on how to read almost any landscape in the province.

The chief limitation of *Looking at Old Ontario* is that McIlwraith does not try to make strong connections between his reading of the landscape and the work of other observers and historians of rural and small-town Ontario. Statistical evidence of property ownership, and social inequality in nineteenth-century Ontario has been provided by writers such as David Gagan and Gordon Darroch. These could usefully inform our reading of these first European landscapes in Ontario. Similarly, more recent changes in the appearance of many rural Ontario communities