

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Baskerville, Peter A. *Sites of Power: A Concise History of Ontario*. Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. vi, 296. Maps, illustrations. \$46.95 paper

Sara Z. Burke

Volume 34, Number 2, Spring 2006

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016024ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016024ar>

[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

Burke, S. Z. (2006). Review of [Baskerville, Peter A. *Sites of Power: A Concise History of Ontario*. Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. vi, 296. Maps, illustrations. \$46.95 paper]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 34(2), 68–68. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016024ar>

addresses is not meaningfully explored. These books take us up to the end of the Second World War. But what happened afterwards? How has the welfare state evolved? What kinds of activities were displaced and why? When exactly did the secularization of social services occur? What were the effects on women? There was enough evidence in these essays, many of which are excellent, to daringly engage with these debates. A conclusion, if not a bolder introduction, would have helped.

Although not as ambitious as it might, and arguably should, have been, this collection will nonetheless be a useful resource for historians of urban Canada, gender, the welfare state, and the postwar years.

Christopher Dummitt
University of London

Baskerville, Peter A. *Sites of Power: A Concise History of Ontario*. Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. vi, 296. Maps, illustrations. \$46.95 paper.

Finding a good textbook that adequately covers both the pre- and post-Confederation periods has long been a disappointing task for those teaching a survey course on the history of Ontario. *Sites of Power* is well suited to meet this need, as it skilfully incorporates a range of available scholarship on the history of the province into a coherent synthesis accessible to undergraduates. Over ten chapters, Baskerville manages to examine a wide sweep of social, economic, and political history, starting with pre-contact relations among Ontario's First Nations after 9000 BC, and ending with the premiership of Mike Harris and the Walkerton tragedy of 2000. Although the book often hurries through time—the final chapter, “Modern Ontario,” discusses the period from the 1940s to the present in less than forty pages—from a teaching perspective, *Sites of Power* is clearly organized and ideally structured to serve as a text for a one-semester introductory course.

Baskerville has written a historical overview of the region known as Ontario, yet he warns us in his introduction that this region is essentially a fluid construction of identities, “a moving target” rather than a fixed geographical reality, and one in which the central determinant of power shaped the varied experiences of its peoples. Describing the easily romanticized pioneering era in Upper Canada, for example, Baskerville is careful to point out that our understanding of progress must be tempered by the recognition that the colony's development affected its inhabitants in profoundly different ways; that the physical process of settlement meant the displacement of Native people and the despoilment of the environment. “To a large extent,” he writes, “birthplace, ethnicity, gender, colour, wealth, and class determined individual expectations, behaviours, and rewards” (53). Similarly, Baskerville reminds us that the physical dangers of urban life, such as infectious diseases, fire, or impure water, were far greater for the poor than for the well-off residents of Ontario's growing cities. In *Sites of Power*, any nostalgia for a

simpler past is challenged by Baskerville's portrayal of a harsh, inequitable society, deeply divided by race, class, and gender.

Central to this line of argument is the significance that Baskerville gives to the role of Upper Canada's regionally focused business elite. Even though the great majority of the colony's people continued to live in rural areas throughout the nineteenth century, those who aspired to power quickly gravitated to emerging urban centres like Hamilton, Toronto, and Kingston, bestowing a degree of political and economic importance on the new cities that was entirely out of proportion to their size. Baskerville writes, “While most Upper Canadians farmed, their political leaders were more representative of an urban-centred, business-minded, capitalist society” (103). It was the members of the business elite at the regional level—the investors, entrepreneurs, and bankers—who increasingly dominated the Legislative Assembly, who lobbied for a stable political structure, and who benefited most from the granting of responsible government. The new political leaders all had vested interests in the commercial development of the colony, and the political alliances of the 1850s resulted from the recognition of business-oriented, urban politicians that their economic concerns should outweigh their religious or cultural differences. These same men, Baskerville argues, became the moving force behind Confederation and permanently shaped the political culture of the powerful new province.

Sites of Power is a revised version of Baskerville's earlier publication, *Ontario: Image, Identity, and Power*, published in 2002 as part of Oxford University Press's illustrated history of Canada series, and by including a variety of maps and arresting images, the new book keeps some of the visual strength of the original. While the content of the two versions remains fundamentally the same, *Sites of Power* has been designed for use in the classroom. It possesses the physical apparatus of an undergraduate textbook, integrating sidebars, subheadings within chapters, and helpful appendices with historical information on Ontario's population, governments, and economy. The sidebars, in particular, effectively enhance the text and provide opportunities for class discussion by highlighting specific historiographical issues, primary documents, or recent research. Baskerville's *Sites of Power* offers students a thought-provoking interpretation of the history of Ontario, prompting readers to explore the complex and often artificial representations of the province's regional identity, and to assess the disparate impact of economic growth both on those it empowered and those it marginalized.

Sara Z. Burke
Laurentian University

Ogbar, Jeffrey O. G. *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2004.

When I began graduate school in 1990, black power in American historical scholarship was a chimera: largely dismissed as a chaotically anarchic, pathologically violent, and/or superficial