

*Life along the Opeongo Line: the Story of a Canadian  
Colonization Road.* By Joan Finnigan

Alan G. Brunger

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an integral part of Australian convictism. Words used in narrative accounts written by four of these prisoners (Linus Miller, William Gates, Benjamin Wait, and Robert Marsh) are included in thirteen references. A selected bibliography of fifteen relatively current reference sources is provided at the start of the dictionary. One shortcoming is that there is no comprehensive bibliography of all resources used in compiling this book.

*Convict Words* is an essential reference work for all those interested in the broad study of Australian convictism. It is also a useful publication for Canadian historians and genealogists researching the episode of North American political prisoners who play a part in this bi-continental history. Along with *To the Outskirts*, both books are welcome new resources related to the 1838 Upper Canada Rebellion, North American political prison-

ers, transportation and convictism. They are worthwhile additions to your library.

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## *Life along the Opeongo Line: the Story of a Canadian Colonization Road.*

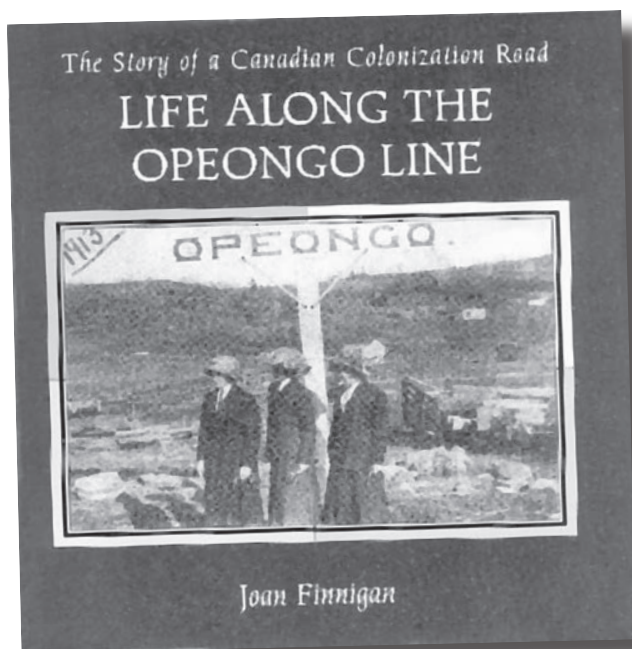
By Joan Finnigan. Manotick, Ontario: Penumbra Press, 2004. xvi + 271 pp. Illustrations. \$40.00 softcover. ISBN 1-894131-63-0.

In the 1850s the dramatic net-like grid of colonization roads that was laid down by the provincial government on the northeastern part of Canada West (formerly Upper Canada and subsequently southern Ontario) was an encouraging harbinger of settlements and farms throughout this large, relatively empty part of the province. One of the longest of these planned roads was that from Farrell's Landing on the Ottawa River near the village of Renfrew, thrusting westwards across the height of the Algonquin Upland towards Lake Opeongo.

Joan Finnigan has drawn on myriad

sources with painstaking research over many years to assemble the history of not only the Opeongo Road proper but also of the roughly parallel routes oriented in the same general direction both by land and by water. The book is focused on the years from the middle to the late nineteenth century, in the era of the construction of the colonization roads. But Finnigan provides a grand context for this specific episode by casting her research net broadly in both a regional and historical sense.

The story of the road is divided into three roughly equal sections of four chapters each. The first relates to the era before



the 1850s, prior to the construction of colonization roads, during which the Ottawa valley formed a natural routeway on both the river and its shorelines from the St. Lawrence estuary towards the west. Fur traders had used this route for centuries before the tide of lumbermen, immigrant settlers, and land-seekers arrived in Upper Canada in the early nineteenth century. Tentative individual pioneering led to some clearing for farms in the tributary valleys of the Ottawa River. The realization by the government that almost all the accessible, better quality land for farms in the rest of the province had been granted by 1850 led to the famous – if not notorious – colonization roads scheme. Chapters 5-8 cover the controversial political dealings and the eventual survey, construction, and farming settlement under government regulations. The last four chapters narrate the consequences of the Opeongo Road settlement in the struggle to overcome planning deficiencies, as well as the fleeting

“glory days” of specific settlements along the route in the lumbering era when hopes ran high for a sustained local economy.

Finnigan has amassed a superb collection of oral histories on which to base much of the narrative. Over many years she has visited and explored the road’s route and painstakingly conversed with “old-timers,” salvaged their fragile testimonies and unearthed long lost documents and records. Last, but by no means least, she has photographed the material legacy of settlement which has subsequently, in far too many instances, been demolished or allowed to deteriorate. Two portfolios of photographs – both monochrome and coloured – by the author and two colleagues occupy over sixty pages of

this book and provide vivid testimony to the efforts of those that ventured along the Opeongo Road as pioneers.

Most chapters combine narrative prose with other types of evidence such as interviews with individuals who had first-hand knowledge of the former landscape and society. By contrast, in Chapter 6 the diary of the surveyor Hamlet Burritt provides a series of excerpts encompassing the original survey of the Opeongo Road route. Chapter 7 comprises largely the verbatim text of a tract published in 1860 by one of the Crown Land Agents, T.P. French, entitled “Information for Intending Settlers on the Ottawa and Opeongo Road and its vicinity.”

*Life along the Opeongo Line* is well illustrated throughout with numerous captioned photographs, both contemporary and modern. Copies of documents and printed items are additional interesting embellishments. This excellent history might have been slightly improved by greater

attention to the clarity of the map (p. 50) illustrating the route and the various places on the Opeongo Road. The principal problem is its small scale, approximately twelve miles to the inch, which springs from its being squeezed into a single page. Had a double page been used here the lettering would have been more easily legible and more detail might have been included. Many places mentioned in the book are not labelled, frustrating for the keen reader who may wish to visit such spots. Another map (p.vii) is a monochrome copy of part of a federal government coloured topographic map, and it lacks a title, legend and scale-bar. Its complex content is almost a blur and the Opeongo Road is indistin-

guishable. I would have welcomed a fuller table of contents, listing chapter subsections. These are often quite diverse, and draw attention to the subjects of the oral histories or to specific localities. Also I note three different renditions of the Opeongo Road's starting point: "Farrel's Landing" (p. 50), "Farrell's landing" (p. 174) and, on the back cover, "Farrell's Landing!" Still, the entire book is very well researched and provides a fascinating history of one of the most famous – if not *the* most famous -- of Ontario's colonization roads. I can hardly wait to explore its byways.

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## *A Theatre near You:*

*150 Years of Going to the Show in Ottawa-Gatineau.*

By Alain Miguélez. Manotick, Ontario: Penumbra Press, 2004. 370 pp. Illustrations. \$39.95 hardcover. ISBN 1-894131-38-X.

Reading Alain Miguélez's *A Theatre near You: 150 Years of Going to the Show in Ottawa-Gatineau* put me in mind of a concept from urban planner Jane Jacobs. In her most recent work, *Dark Age Ahead* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2005) Jacobs refers to a kind of "mass amnesia" in which key aspects of culture and memory are irretrievably lost to a people. In attempting to understand the phenomena of Dark Ages, she asks "how and why can a people so totally discard a formerly vital culture that it becomes literally lost?" (p. 4) Much the same sentiment undergirds Miguélez's moving tome to the local cinema. A virtual rise and fall of going to the show, his work charts the changing course of movie-going from its early days in the Nickelodeons to its postmodern

incarnation in "big box" megaplexes. Spiced with the author's own stories of going to the show,

Miguélez justifies his present work as an effort to catalogue the remaining evidence of neighbourhood movie houses before, like the actual buildings themselves, they are lost completely under the wrecking ball of our society's tendency to dismantle the old. The reader cannot help but sympathize with Miguélez's lament for a lost culture.

The structure and organization of *A Theatre Near You* are straight-forward, if a little uninspired. It is divided into nine

