

## *Toronto's Poor: A Rebellious History* by Bryan D. Palmer and Gaétan Héroux

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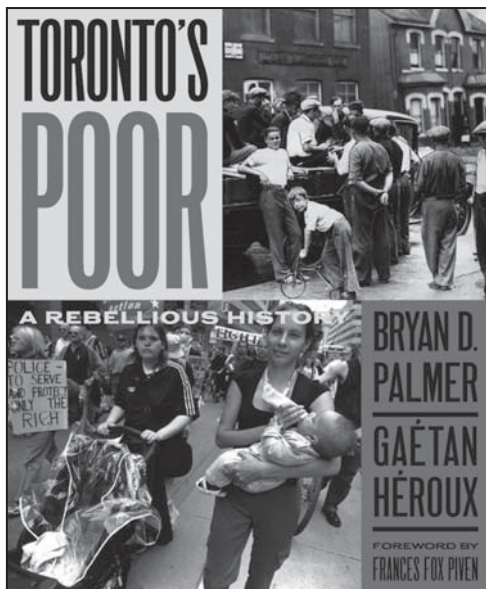
historians, but to many other disciplines and the general reader as well who will find the book to be well-written and easy to follow. The book is detailed, objective, and provides the much-needed historical context for reconciliation. *Residential Schools and Reconciliation* shows us that time and time again Indigenous peoples have been excluded from decisions that have in turn had a profound and often damaging impact and that there is potential for reconciliation efforts to be equally flawed. Miller stresses that “Canadians cannot approach reconciliation thinking that fine words, amicable gestures, and a few measures in line with TRC calls to action are enough” (268).

The book would benefit though from an exploration of this argument in more detail. We hear very little in *Residential Schools and Reconciliation* from the critics and skeptics of reconciliation. Many would argue that reconciliation is going to be a much rougher ride than is depicted here

and that reconciliation is not just an Indigenous issue, but a Canadian issue (something not always obvious in the book), that extends far beyond addressing the legacy of residential schooling. The difference between reconciliation and decolonization is also not fully explored, a missed opportunity in a conclusion that largely repeats previous material. These shortcomings, however, do not take away from the important contribution that *Residential Schools and Reconciliation* makes toward an understanding of how Canadians have evolved from clinging to the myth of a benevolent past, to a more nuanced view of how Canada may be able to move toward “true reconciliation” in which “economic and social equality is accorded to Aboriginal people” (269).

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### *Toronto's Poor* *A Rebellious History*

By Bryan D. Palmer and Gaétan Héroux

Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines, 2016. 544 pages. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN 9781771132817  
([www.btlbooks.com](http://www.btlbooks.com))

In this ambitious and comprehensive book, Bryan Palmer and Gaétan Héroux have undertaken a mammoth effort to tell the story of Toronto’s poor, a population understudied in both a historical and contemporary sense. The title of the book—*A Rebellious History*—is thus doubly apt, both because it outlines in painstaking detail the long tradition of resistance by the economically marginalized in Toronto,

but also because the authors have an unabashed commitment to a political vision that challenges capitalism and abhors the inequality, precarity, indignities, dispossession, and suffering that has been a constant in the lives of Toronto's poor since the early nineteenth century. After all, the authors are clear in noting that a key aspiration is that this book will "inform future activism" (6). Further, the partnership between the authors is a relatively uncommon one in scholarly circles. Héroux is an activist with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP), while Palmer is a renowned labour and left historian within academia. Their cooperation is vital, because without one another the project would be deeply incomplete. This is especially the case because Palmer—like most historians of labour and socialist movements—tended to examine people with jobs and formal roles within established organizations, meaning that those without employment and channels of influence often went underexamined. *A Rebellious History* is such a successful effort precisely because Héroux, through his own research and activism, brings this perspective.

From the onset, Palmer and Héroux reject an analysis from "the liberal mainstream," endeavouring to show "how the destitute, the homeless, and the unemployed were socially constructed and characterized," but also how those very same people "fought against their subordination and the often worsening conditions of their lives" (3). With this in mind, the broad strokes of the book can be outlined by three basic statements. The first is that the capitalist order systematically causes suffering, insecurity, crisis, and dispossession in order to divide the working-class between the waged and unwaged, use the latter's existence to discipline the former, and ensure that existing patterns of ine-

quality are not fundamentally questioned. Put another way, poverty exists not because the poor are technically, socially, or morally deficient, but because the presence of poverty "helps to sate the craving of the few for unbridled accumulation" (430). Leading from this, Palmer and Héroux argue that, as a means to fight back against this state of affairs, both scholars and activists must begin to see the working class not simply as those earning incomes, but rather include all those people—with jobs or without—that "have been dispossessed of fundamental control over their lives" (6). Finally, the authors are firm in their belief that any study of these processes must include diverse perspectives of agency. The story must be told with an eye to the role of important figures and organizations, but without excising the consistent and meaningful contributions of regular poor people's resistance, successful and otherwise.

Indeed, this is a history that needed to be told from the hybrid scholar-activist perspective, because, while the events in the book are related to more frequently-studied groups like parties and trade unions, the experience of the poor in many of these instances is distinct enough that traditional histories often fail to capture the complexities therein. For instance, the authors note that while all segments of the working class—waged and unwaged, unionized and non-unionized—have been attacked by capital and the state, the nature of those attacks differ in both type and intensity. Likewise, while Palmer and Héroux hope this book helps to drive forward a more all-encompassing definition of the working class, they don't shy away from the many instances in which trade unions, intellectuals, and left-of-centre parties failed to champion—and too often acted in opposition to—the causes, perspectives, and needs of the poor. Overcoming this failure

is in the authors' mindset absolutely essential if we are to see a post-capitalist future: "A politics of class that speaks directly to the betterment of humanity through insistence that the expropriated are as one in their ultimate needs has never been more necessary" (21).

All in all, this is a fantastic project, and while many of the particular issues covered in the book have been addressed by other scholars, the distinct lens surrounding this manuscript gives a unique spin to how those events are examined and those stories are told. Additionally, the book's coverage of the recent past offers a fresh take on campaigns, policies, and developments which may have been studied in other disciplines, but which are only just now falling into the historian's gaze. It would not be a gamble to say that this book's final section, which focuses largely on the efforts of OCAP over the past 35 years, will be a formative read for young scholars looking to study social and political movements in

the information age.

*A Rebellious History* is a must-read for anyone interested in the theoretical issues employed in the book, as well as anyone with a curiosity in the history of the Canadian working class, or in a history of Toronto that includes an oft-understudied population. The sheer length of the book may limit its accessibility to some readers beyond core academic spaces, but the conviction and passion of the book offers a style that is rigorous in its research, yet aimed at readers who want to change the world, and not merely interpret it. Such a project—either as a whole or in parts—should be on the reading list for activists, trade unionists, students, educators, civil servants, and any politician even half-heartedly claiming to represent the interests of the poor, the working class, or progressive causes more generally.

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***Power through Testimony***  
***Reframing Residential Schools in the Age of Reconciliation***

Edited by Brieg Capitaine and Karine Vanthuynne

Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017. 252 pages. \$32.95 paperback. ISBN 9780774833905. ([www.ubcpress.ca](http://www.ubcpress.ca))

The ink had barely dried on the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) when, in March 2017, Conservative Senator Lynn Beyak from Northern Ontario publicly criticized its findings and defended Canada's Indian Residential Schools as being "well-intentioned." Instead of dwelling on horrific incidences of abuse and neglect in the schools, Beyak insisted that Canadians

focus on all the "good" residential schools accomplished in terms of assimilating Indigenous children into Canadian society. When asked by reporters if she had even read the TRC's report, Beyak responded by saying, "I don't need anymore education." As a result of her comments, Beyak was dismissed from all senate committees and kicked out of the Conservative caucus; however, she is still a senator and she is re-