

**Kealey, Gregory S. *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1980. Pp. xviii, 433. Tables, appendices**

**Christopher Armstrong**

Volume 10, Number 1, June 1981

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019157ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019157ar>

[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

Armstrong, C. (1981). Review of [Kealey, Gregory S. *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1980. Pp. xviii, 433. Tables, appendices]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 10(1), 55–56. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019157ar>

## Book Reviews/Comptes Rendus

Kealey, Gregory S. *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1980. Pp. xviii, 433. Tables, appendices.

*Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism* is the second monograph to be produced in the past year or so by practitioners of the self-styled "new" working-class history in Canada, along with Bryan Palmer's *A Culture in Conflict* dealing with Hamilton. These books share many of the same strengths and weaknesses, although the latter are less irritating in Kealey's case than in Palmer's; Kealey displays fewer pretensions about the theoretical significance of his work. Both authors attempt to demonstrate that the experience of industrialization in a late nineteenth-century Canadian city forged a sense of identity, "made" a working class aware of its separateness from the rest of society.

The most interesting and valuable sections of Kealey's book are those chapters which describe the way in which workers responded to the mechanization of their crafts and the upheavals created when machines replaced skills. Although most of this material will be familiar to readers of scholarly journals in Canada since much of it has already been published in article form, it is useful to have it gathered together. Kealey looks first at two groups of workers who battled unsuccessfully to retain their jobs and skills in the face of changing conditions: shoemakers and coopers. In 1871 the head of the Coopers International Union could argue that, "Many of our members place far too much significance on machinery as a substitute for their labour.... [W]hen the friends of barrel machinery succeed in inventing a thinking machine they will succeed in making a success." (p.60) Within two years Standard Oil had done just that, and by the end of the decade the cooper's craft was dead. Similarly the McKay machine could sew heavy sole leather at a speed eighty times faster than a shoe could be bottomed by hand. While the Knights of St. Crispin organized themselves to try to retain some of the control of production possessed by the skilled artisan, they largely failed. The extent of the frustration and resentment felt by the workers is evident in a machine-breaking incident in Toronto in the spring of 1871, widely blamed upon the Crispins. But they, too, failed to turn the tide.

More fortunate were the iron-moulders and printers. Kealey reminds us that the introduction of machines to replace skills was by no means a continuous or automatic process. In many instances craftsmen retained much independence in areas as basic to industrial development as iron foundries. Much of the effort of unions was directed at preserving this traditional freedom in the face of management's efforts to assert more and more control over the shop floor. Iron moulders tried to control production and retain the right to pay out of their own pockets semi-skilled "bucks" or "berkshires" to assist them. Even more interesting were the printers, whose fate might have mirrored the coopers

when their skills were undermined by the introduction of the linotype machine. But tactical shrewdness in coming to terms with mechanization and imposing limitations on productivity through a strong union enabled them to emerge from the conflict stronger than ever.

Another commendable aspect of this book is that, unlike so much else written by working-class historians recently, it pays some attention to the employers of labour. Kealey devotes the first two chapters to a useful, if rather too brief, look at the impact of industrialization upon Toronto business. He examines the rise of protectionist sentiment from the 1850s and describes the types of plants which were established. One interesting point is his calculation that by 1871, thirty-six per cent of Toronto workers already were employed in establishments having over one hundred hands while fully two-thirds of them worked in shops with thirty or more employees. Clearly, comparatively big business arrived in Toronto at an earlier date than we might imagine. He also supplies some valuable tables on each of the major industries in the city outlining the size, composition, and distribution of the workforce up to 1891.

The second half of the book is much less satisfactory. There is an interesting chapter on the Orange Lodge in which Kealey argues that its importance declined as ties of ethnicity were eroded by growing class consciousness. He seems to strain too hard to show that Orangeism was basically a working-class movement, and in his eagerness to emphasize the fraternal and benevolent side of the Lodge, its role in sectarian bitterness becomes almost a sidelight. But for the rest we are treated to an account of the political activities of organized labour which seems largely familiar except for details. The nine-hour movement of the early 1870s, the arrival of the Knights of Labour, the persistent efforts of both Grits and Tories to capture the working-class vote, the participation of organized labour in the civic reform movement of the later 1880s have all been dealt with elsewhere. Here, it seems to me, the practitioners of working-class history demonstrate a failure to deliver on their more ambitious promises, a failure evident in Palmer's book on Hamilton as well.

What strikes one upon reading these chapters is the degree to which the leaders of organized labour failed to rally most workers solidly behind them, failed to express the will of the newly-conscious working class for whom they are here alleged to have spoken. Sir John A. Macdonald, that skillful 'cabinet-maker,' was neither the first nor the last politician to win a large amount of support from working-class voters for his party, surely the party of Canadian capitalism. Indeed, the very definition of who can properly be described as a working-class leader seems to be put in doubt on occasion by Kealey. Take the case of Edward F. Clarke, four-time mayor (1888-91) of Toronto, MPP (1886-94) and later MP. Kealey tells us that the choice of Clarke to contest the provincial seat in 1886 represented, "The Tory

nomination of their first Toronto workingman...." (p.243) True, Clarke *had* been a printer at the *Globe* and got arrested for his role in the 1872 printers' strike for the nine-hour day, a fact he never allowed the electors to forget. But here is what Henry J. Morgan's *Canadian Men and Women of the Time* (1898) has to say of Clarke:

In 1877 he was chosen managr. and ed. of *The (Orange) Sentinel* and subsequently became sole proprietor of that journal.... He is a High Sch. trustee, and President of the Gold Ring Consolidated Mining Co., and of the Excelsior Life Ins. Co.

A representative Toronto workingman, this?

Kealey has a good deal of interest to tell us about the origins of organized labour in Toronto, but we are far from receiving any demonstration of the emergence of a clear and distinct sense of class consciousness amongst the mass of workers. Evidently they were still ensnared by the ties of lodge, party, ethnicity, and religion which often crossed the class divide in nineteenth-century Canada. His case is all the less persuasive because of the abrupt and unnatural ending of the study in 1892. He argues that the period was chosen "in order to capture the working-class at its conception," (p. xiv) but even in the history of organized labour, 1892 is a year without evident significance. Why not carry the story forward to 1902 when the American Federation of Labour captured the allegiance of most skilled workers with a political programme very different from that of the Knights of Labour? Much still remains to be written on the history of the Toronto working class.

Christopher Armstrong  
Department of History  
York University

Dale, Edmund H., editor. *Regina: Regional Isolation and Innovative Development*. Western Geographical Series, Volume 18. Victoria: University of Victoria, 1980. Pp. xx, 238. Maps, illustrations, tables. \$4.00.

Few historians would dispute the utility of thoughtful collections of articles about our urban centres. Cities are too complex for proper consideration in traditional monograph fashion, and most historians are ill-equipped to deal satisfactorily in narrative form with the multiple aspects of urban development. Still fewer historians would dismiss as unimportant a collection of essays about Regina, whose place in the historiography of the urban west is as isolated as its geographical location. Yet even those who are accustomed to receiving their urban history piecemeal, and who are attracted to an article or two in this new gathering, will find the volume as a whole to be unimpressive. Its theme (as expressed in the subtitle) is forced, its organization plainly careless, and its purpose ambiguous.

In a short preface, the editor exhibits a serious case of geographer's distress as he notes that Regina "has no recognizable nodality, none of the site factors that geographers associate with the early development of urban places." Instead, Regina has "revealed an innovative spirit that has sought to compensate for its [sic] small size, geographical isolation and monotonous terrain," and thus the volume "emphasizes, not exhaustively and

not so much urban structure [sic] as the continuing successes of local attempts to carve a city out of an area deficient in those site factors that are conducive to urban growth, except for an agricultural hinterland of rich, but flat, clayey soil." This said, and with a title in hand, the editor confusingly confides that "even if all the essays are not comfortably linked by the central themes, their [sic] subject matter should at least add their contribution to the study and appreciation of Regina." A less ingenious apology for this motley assemblage is difficult to conceive. The real tragedy, however, is that some essays of importance in their respective fields will realize only obscurity because of their inclusion in this mixed-blood collection.

Many of the essays do pay homage, however uncomfortably, to the tenuous link between geographical isolation and the spirit of innovation. In too many instances, this faithfulness to a debatable slogan plays havoc with the evidence presented and seems to betray an ignorance of comparative works. For example, in an otherwise serviceable introduction to the history of the city, J. William Brennan writes that "its very isolation fostered a spirit of innovation in Regina. Streets and sidewalks, banks and shops, newspapers, professional services, churches, schools, parks and entertainment all had to be created." Since when have these ubiquitous features of urban development been seen as "innovations"? What we have here is what one of my mentors used to call a 'semantic swindle' and similarly spurious comments that can be found in other essays add nothing to the worth of the volume.

Inept organization is far and away the book's worst failing. After beginning correctly with Brennan's overview, the editor pays little attention to thematic or chronological consistency. Had he followed Brennan's article with J.L. Moser's laudatory examination of town planning in the period 1903-1946, and then with R.S. Clarke's damning piece on the same theme in the post-war years, he would have provided the reader with a much-needed historical perspective and a fine debate on the true significance of innovation in Regina's development. When read back to back, the Moser and Clarke essays form the volume's single most redeeming feature.

The remaining essays, dealing as they do with case studies of unrelated aspects of Regina's growth, might have formed a second section against which to test the Moser and Clarke arguments. In these articles, Laretta Roset deals with student perceptions of the rest of the nation and uncovers an appalling parochialism; Cesar Caviedes details the modern functional structure of the city and reaffirms its dependence on agriculture and government; R.D. Cullimore discusses the water supply problem of this semi-arid area and offers suggestions for future supply strategies; and Edmund H. Dale documents the history of Wascana Centre, whose greenery does much to enhance the city's appearance and desirability as a place of residence.

In the final analysis, the book lacks focus. While there is nothing wrong with, and much to commend, an inter-disciplinary study of a single theme, a hodge-podge like this serves only to diminish the integrity of the series of which it is a part. Even though reasonably priced, this volume is no bargain.

Barry Potyondi  
Director of Research  
Great Plains Research Consultants  
Winnipeg, Manitoba