

Showdown! Making Modern Unions by Rob Kristofferson and Simon Orpana

David Tough

Volume 109, numéro 1, spring 2017

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1039209ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1039209ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Tough, D. (2017). Compte rendu de [*Showdown! Making Modern Unions* by Rob Kristofferson and Simon Orpana]. *Ontario History*, 109(1), 151–152.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1039209ar>

Showdown! Making Modern Unions

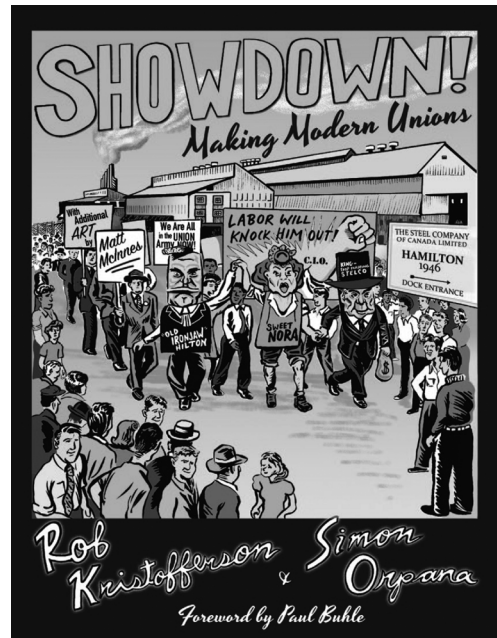
by Rob Kristofferson and Simon Orpana

Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016. 144 pages. \$29.95
paperback. ISBN 9781771132725
(www.btlbooks.com)

Hamilton has long enjoyed a starring role in Canadian labour history. From Bryan Palmer's *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (1979) to Craig Heron's *Lunch Bucket Lives: Remaking the Workers' City* (2015), the city of steel has provided rich fodder for scholars looking to analyze the development of an industrial working class. Now comes *Showdown: Making Modern Unions*, an effective graphic history of one very important story, the struggle for recognition of the first industrial union at the Stelco plant, the United Steelworkers (USW) Local 1005, in 1946.

A lot of the effectiveness of the book is owed to Simon Orpana's lively and loose illustration style which looks not unlike as if some classic noir comics (Chester Gould's Dick Tracy panels, maybe) were being re-drawn in haste by a fan. Figures look a bit shaky on their feet, their limbs a bit jelly-like, their faces a few mere squiggles, but they have an undeniable élan about them, even when they're standing around talking, that suggests the kinetic, uncertain pace of political activism. (Compare, for example, Chester Brown's justly celebrated Louis Riel graphic novel, an important milestone in the historical comic book genre, but one which uses a style so static and repetitive that even dramatic confrontations read like awkward monologues.)

The illustration style fits well with the story-telling, which is loosely episodic, creating a verisimilitude of daily life during the strike by interjecting anecdotes and side



stories around the main action. The central narrative is told through characters in panels speaking in speech balloons, but interviewees pop up in the margins to tell their version of the story, which is offset by transcripts of radio broadcasts and press commentaries, giving a wonderful scrapbook quality to the book. The sources of the story, and the role of archives, photos, and even funders in the production of the book are all given a place in the story, a decision which is very effective and entirely apt in a story about how things are made and by whom.

At the end of the book, the historical struggle is connected to current political issues—not just labour issues, but Idle No More and Black Lives Matter. This is effective, and I found it quite moving, but it felt a bit rushed, a bit perfunctory; the connections could have been deeper. For example, the book touches briefly on the prejudice experienced by Eastern and Southern European immigrants in the mid-20th century. Could that have been developed further

in a coda that linked historical to current racism? In any case, discussing in detail the actual resonances between historical and contemporary iterations of one movement or problem would have been more effective and instructive than the quick and general gestures, however powerful they are as solidarity gestures.

If there's a criticism that can be levelled at the book, it's that its institutional focus, its attention to unions specifically as opposed to the wider working class culture of Hamilton in the period, feels a bit limited, a bit old-fashioned as labour history. There is some discussion of food, fun, and music, but it's all pretty much connected to the success of the strike. Labour history is about more than unions, and while the story of how unions were made is important, changes in working class culture are probably more important to understanding the current political and social moment. And the institutional focus raises the further question of whether comic readers are being condescended to: like undergraduates presented with all-killer-no-filler course options, are they assumed

to only hunger for action? Will they only gain insight by stealth?

It's notable, in this respect, that the current issue the book draws attention to in connection with labour politics is the Harper government's attacks on unions, bills C-377 and C-525. The Harper agenda was destructive without a doubt, but it does little to explain the decline in effectiveness and energy on the part of unions over the last many decades. Strikes like the one described in *Showdown* are highly unlikely now because of changes in the culture of class, to say nothing of the state and the economy, not because of laws that affect unions, most of which are unchanged. Ignoring culture, in fact, drives a teleological current in the book (signalled in the subtitle *Making Modern Unions*) that underlines what we have that the people in the story lacked, rather than what we lack and they had: strong and effective bonds of class solidarity.

David Tough
Trent University

Mike: The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Lester B. Pearson, vols. I-III

by Lester B. Pearson

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015.

Volume I, 326 pages. \$32.95 paper, ISBN 9781442615649. \$32.95 ebook (EPUB format) ISBN 9781442668645.
Volume II, 372 pages. \$32.95 paper, ISBN 9781442615656. \$32.95 ebook (EPUB format) ISBN 9781442668669.
Volume III, 366 pages. \$32.95 paper, ISBN 9781442615663. \$32.95 ebook (EPUB format) ISBN 9781442668683.

Donald Creighton never forgave “the giggling bow-tied bastard,” later confessing to a journalist, “I feel positive hatred towards that man.” According to Creighton’s historical calculus, Lester Pearson had abandoned Great Britain during the Suez Crisis and later severed Canada’s symbolic connection to what used to be called its mother country when he insisted on the Maple Leaf over the Red Ensign. Even

worse, Canada’s fourteenth prime minister accepted the premise of bilingualism when he appointed the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. It cut both ways because Pearson didn’t think much of Creighton. When Frank Underhill sent him an offprint, he thanked him “for reducing some of Donald Creighton’s views to historical perspective and accuracy,” adding that he intended “to borrow from it shame-