

# *This Colossal Project: Building the Welland Ship Canal, 1913-1932* by Roberta M. Styran and Robert R. Taylor

Brian Osborne

Volume 110, numéro 1, spring 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1044335ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1044335ar>

[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

Osborne, B. (2018). Compte rendu de [*This Colossal Project: Building the Welland Ship Canal, 1913-1932* by Roberta M. Styran and Robert R. Taylor]. *Ontario History*, 110(1), 124–126. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1044335ar>

succeed in both Indigenous and immigrant British North America.

Such quibbles do not detract from the overall high quality of *Travellers through Empire*. Cecilia Morgan has made some interesting Indigenous individuals better known to readers, usually in an engaging and informative way. Reversing the impe-

rial gaze has produced another fine piece of historical description and analysis from a historian who is obviously at the height of her powers.

J.R. (Jim) Miller

Professor Emeritus of History, University of Saskatchewan

### *This Colossal Project* *Building the Welland Ship Canal, 1913-1932*

By Roberta M. Styran and Robert R. Taylor

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. \$44.95

Hardcover ISBN 978-0-7735-2 (www.mqup.ca)

The principal objective in Roberta Styron and Robert Taylor's *This Colossal Project* is to recount the saga of men and machines, policy and practice, construction and operation of the fourth Welland Ship Canal from 1913-1932. This is effected in the context of the local, regional, national, and international significance of this corridor of canals from 1824 to the present. It is the second volume of what they declare to be a "little appreciated chapter of twentieth-century Canadian enterprise and achievement" and, as the title implies, "one of Canada's most spectacular technological accomplishments" (xv).

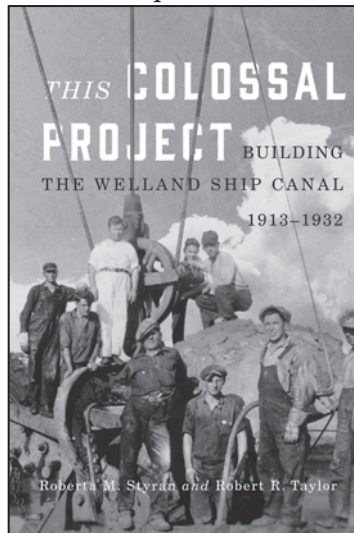
The official opening of the Welland Ship Canal in 1932 occurred in a period of an emerging sense of national identity marked by several developments: Canada's role in the "Great War"; its participation in the deliberations at Versailles

1919 and the League of Nations in 1920; the assertion of Canadian legislative independence by the Statute of Westminster in 1931; and the contribution of the "Group of Seven" and literary scholars to the growing

emotional connection to "our home and native land." For Styran and Taylor, the demonstration of Canadian technology and business acumen deployed in the building of the Welland Ship Canal was "further proof of growing national maturity" (xx).

In developing this thesis, successive chapters detail the bureaucratic and technological efforts behind the completion of the canal's spectacular prism and lifts, as well as

the measures taken to control the "natural, essential, but dangerous force" (104), the water, which the Welland's engineers and contractors exploited for the locks and power, and controlled for flood prevention.



An interesting dimension of the new canal and its route is that it had to contend with the region's increased economic growth and associated land-traffic. The result was the twenty bridges erected over the canal and the conflict they generated as shipping had precedence over land transport and "Ship captains, locomotive engineers, bridge operators and car drivers alike had to learn to co-exist" (157).

Undoubtedly, there was much pride in the construction. Styron and Taylor quote the *Maclean's* assessment of the 1932 official opening of the Welland Ship Canal that "it ranks with the great engineering triumphs of modern times, in some respects surpassing anything of the kind ever built by man" (236). It was the culmination of the nineteenth century's perception of the "technological sublime" that viewed modern engineering structures as an "inspiring, awesome beauty that was as stunning as that of rivers, mountains, and oceans" (237). This was the context of the reaction to the construction of the Welland as "as one of Canada's greatest accomplishments" (239).

And there was more. Influenced by the "City Beautiful" movement propagated at the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, the canal engineers had also concerned themselves with the beautification of the public space and the protection of some of the earlier canal sites as historic monuments. By 1929, it was reported that the Welland Canal would earn "world renown as a beauty spot and become a greater mecca for landscape lovers than it has been for connoisseurs of engineering *tours de force*" (228). Indeed, though cut-backs in this conservation and beautification priority occurred with the Depression and World War II, the Welland Ship Canal is still an iconic feature of the landscape of the Niagara region.

But appreciation of the "technologi-

cal sublime" aside, the authors declare that this book is dedicated to "those thousands of unsung heroes," the workers (244). A wealth of graphic material provided by the project's professional photographers documented the work in detailed images and this is accompanied by an abundance of maps, diagrams, and plans. Also, diaries and correspondence are used to produce insightful biographies of John Weller and Alexander Grant, the "dynamos" of the Welland Canal (31) as well as others who are representative of the men who designed, constructed, and supervised the project. The point is made that they, and their fellow engineers and contractors, were possessed of the strength, ingenuity, and often the "sense of the absurd" (32) as they encountered problems that were "as unexpected, disastrous, and occasionally ridiculous" (57).

However, the particular focus is on the "army of labourers" who worked on the "gravelly slopes of the prism and in the deep and perilous lock pits" and who "took orders" from engineers and contractors (158). This military analogy continues as these workers are said to have "soldiered on" on this "technological battleground" and while "none were decorated" many were "injured," some "mutinied," and "scores died" violent deaths (158). Ironically, the very term "navvy" now refers to manual labourers in general but is derived from the label "navigational engineers" applied to those employed in the construction of canals in the nineteenth century. The working and living conditions of the thousands of navvies employed on the Welland Ship Canal between 1913 and 1932 are documented in the details of their work, compensation, hazards, and emerging radical organizations. Of particular note, the "Welland was characterized by a cacophony of accents and languages" (180), and the evolving po-

litical climate is considered in this context too. One of the verities was that these new-Canadians are over-represented in the 118 deaths in the 1913-32 construction period. But, other than a small plaque at the Seaway headquarters in St. Catharines, there is no public memorial to those killed on the Welland Ship Canal.

For Styran and Taylor, however, even the “most impressive monument in the world” cannot capture the working life of

the ordinary ‘navvy’ and so, “To those thousands of unsung heroes who worked ‘on the ground’ this book is dedicated.” (244). Further, Robert Taylor and I add that given Roberta Styran’s passing in 2015 prior to the publication of this book, it should be dedicated to her in memory of her decades of scholarship on the Welland.

Brian Osborne  
Queen’s University

### *Trance Speakers*

*Femininity and Authorship in Spiritual Séances, 1850-1930*

By Claudie Massicotte

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017. 280 pages \$110.00

Hardcover ISBN 9780773549920 ([www.mqup.ca](http://www.mqup.ca))

Séances conjure up images of darkened rooms, strewn with cloaks and blankets, people gathered in a circle awaiting with baited breath the transmission of a message from a dear departed family or friend through a spiritual medium. While such events certainly engage the imagination, Claudie Massicotte argues that séances and how we “read” them provide so much more valuable insight into gender identity and how women understood their place in turn of the century Canadian society.

In *Trance Speakers*, Massicotte engages readers to understand séances led by women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a means by which women asserted control over their bodies, gained entrance into the political sphere, and negotiated their place in the social order of Canadian society. As suggested in the title, the place of authorship provides a strong thematic backbone to a work that focuses on the way mediums challenged and even

subverted the ideology of separate spheres.

The structure of the book helps to reinforce its analytical focus. The first part examines the historical context of mediumship in Canada, and differentiates the experience in Canada from the United States. Massicotte relates the popularity and cultural relevance of mediumship to ideas about proper and modern womanhood and to the growth of spiritualism as a religious movement. Further, it outlines the framework in which Massicotte interprets the work of mediums in order to assess how these women responded to the prevailing historical context, and establishes how authorship provides a vital way to understand the experience of séances as opposed to more established interpretations of the cultural effects of séances.

The second part of the book is divided into four chapters: Healing, Writing, Speaking, and Performing. “Healing” charts the interconnection between