

# The Urban Development of Winnipeg, 1874-1914

## Part I – Purpose, Scope, and Theme

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THE URBAN DEVELOPMENT  
OF WINNIPEG, 1874 - 1914

Alan Artibise

PART I - Purpose, Scope, and Theme

In an effort to partially meet the long-felt need for urban biographies of Canada's major cities, this study examines the City of Winnipeg for the period 1874-1914. It attempts to provide a reasonably detailed social history of Winnipeg; to describe - or reconstruct - the evolution of an urban area. This description includes a characterization of Winnipeg during a particular time period and an analysis of the nature, directions, and magnitude of the changes occurring in the various facets of the City's social and physical structure. It also endeavours to identify and analyze the events, personages, trends, and movements which have played a key role in the development of Winnipeg. This "biography" of Winnipeg does not in any way attempt to be definitive; such subjects as economic development and metropolitanism, for example, are given but scant attention.

A second goal of this history is to provide useful material for other historians, enabling them to compare the development of Winnipeg with that of other Canadian cities. Accordingly, while Winnipeg's distinct character is examined in some detail, this history stresses sequential and comparative aspects. It deals with the beliefs, experiences, and problems that the residents of Winnipeg probably had in

common with other urban residents. To facilitate comparison, the study has been organized topically rather than chronologically. The various aspects of urban life in Winnipeg during the period - whether civic politics, population growth, public health, housing, or prostitution - are dealt with in separate chapters. But while each chapter deals with a distinct topic, the history does have a unifying theme for Winnipeg between 1874 and 1914 followed a particular pattern of development.

For the first forty years of its history as an incorporated city, Winnipeg's political, economic, and social life was dominated by a growth-conscious elite. This elite was made up almost exclusively of Anglo-Saxons, Protestants, and successful businessmen. These men had come to Winnipeg "to take part in the building of a newer and greater Canadian West." Accepting the challenge of a vast, underdeveloped domain, they saw themselves as agents of improvement. They were practical men; businessmen who were convinced of the desirability of material progress. Setting their sights from pervasive American examples - such as the rise of Chicago - they were optimistic, expansionist, and aggressive.

Committed to growth at any cost, and in full control of the municipal corporation, this commercial elite was able to implement its plans for making Winnipeg the "gem of the Canadian

Prairies." Large sums of public moneys were freely spent to attract railways, improve river navigation, develop hydro-power, and attract immigrants and industry. Not surprisingly, given this large expenditure of funds and energy, the commercial elite's plan to make Winnipeg the "Chicago of the North" was more than fulfilled. By 1914 Winnipeg was - and for sometime had been - Canada's third largest city. In terms of industrial output Winnipeg stood in fourth place, surpassed only by Montreal, Toronto, and Hamilton. Winnipeg accounted for one-half of the Prairie Provinces' manufacturing output in 1911, and was firmly established as that region's banking, jobbing, and shipping headquarters.

The commercial elite's overriding commitment to growth had severe effects on Winnipeg's social development. With so much of the elite's talent and energy, and the municipal corporation's resources, expended on growth producing schemes, programs that would have benefitted the vast majority of Winnipeg's citizens were ignored, or received only passing attention. The problems caused by the rapid influx of tens of thousands of immigrants - problems of accomodation, employment, assimilation, public health, and so on - were in large part left to private agencies. It was not until 1910 that the growth ethic was openly challenged by a few prominent Winnipeggers with the formation of a

City Planning Commission. But the Commission's plans for a more efficient, healthy, and attractive Winnipeg were ignored. The City's leaders were too devoted to development to accept stringent restrictions on private enterprise. As a result, after forty years of prodigious growth, Winnipeg in 1914 still lacked decent housing, good schools, adequate recreation facilities, and integrated neighborhoods. Above all else, Winnipeg lacked any powerful group which understood the City as a whole and who wanted to deal with it as a public environment; one belonging to and affecting all citizens. Although it was an outstanding success economically, the Winnipeg of 1914 was not, in the social sense, a vibrant community.

Unfortunately, the conclusions reached about Winnipeg's development from 1874 to 1914 cannot be put into a national or even a western Canadian context. Far too few cities have been studied and the time span is too full of gaps. Until such time as surveys of Canada's other major cities are undertaken it is impossible to say whether urban development in Winnipeg was unique or commonplace. It is hoped, however, that this history of Winnipeg will be a progressive step along the path to a general and comparative history of the Canadian city.