

O'Neill, Paul. *The Oldest City: The Story of St. John's, Newfoundland*. Volume I. Press Porcépic, 1975. 432 pp. \$17.95

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Numéro 1-76, june 1976

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019558ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019558ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Hiller, J. K. (1976). Compte rendu de [O'Neill, Paul. *The Oldest City: The Story of St. John's, Newfoundland*. Volume I. Press Porcépic, 1975. 432 pp. \$17.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, (1-76), 38–40.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1019558ar>

BOOK REVIEWS

O'Neill, Paul. The Oldest City: The Story of St. John's, Newfoundland.
Volume I. Press Porcépic, 1975. 432 pp. \$17.95.

The urban history of Newfoundland has, until recently, been almost totally neglected. Those of us concerned with Newfoundland history have therefore been awaiting Mr. O'Neill's history of St. John's with some impatience. The first volume has just appeared; the second should be published next year.

The academic reader will be somewhat disappointed, however, for this is a history of St. John's by a St. John's man for St. John's people; and this is precisely what Mr. O'Neill, a well-known local historian, had in mind. The local audience will derive great pleasure from this book. Based on wide reading and diligent research, this well-produced, profusely illustrated volume is replete with anecdote and detail, and contains a mass of information. Those readers who do not know St. John's may well find it less interesting, and wish that more adequate maps had been provided; the academic is likely to find it frustrating, and in places tedious.

Mr. O'Neill begins with a brief chapter chronicling the growth of St. John's from its early days as a summer fishing village to the great fire of 1892 which levelled most of what is now known as the old city. He then switches to a topical approach, dealing, in this volume, with military affairs from 17th century raids to World War II; sketches of various governors, few of whom had any direct impact on the city's development; communications; pastimes; medicine; sport; and short biographies of a rather arbitrary selection of local 'characters'. The second volume will deal with politics, crime, the harbour, ships, churches and so on. Mr. O'Neill writes that a chronological approach would have been very difficult, given the absence of any previous history and "the mass of information and detail which these volumes should contain." I am sure he is right; but the result of this method of

organization is that the mind receives a blurry image of old St. John's, which a chronological approach would surely have brought into sharper focus. However, it would have forced the author to construct an interpretive framework, and Mr. O'Neill states that it was his purpose to "compile rather than interpret." Thus the chapters are somewhat indigestible compilations of related facts rather than topical essays; like the volume as a whole, they lack that skeleton of argument which gives history form.

The reader gains no idea of why St. John's developed in the way it did, of its place in the Atlantic economy, of its dominance over the colony's economic, administrative and political systems. Basic questions are neither asked nor answered. This treatment of the city in vacuo is a weakness of the antiquarian approach; its strength is shown by the impressive array of facts, raw data which we must be thankful to have recorded. But one wishes that Mr. O'Neill had not so limited himself, and further, that he had not neglected the recent work on Newfoundland history which lies embedded in an array of theses in Memorial University Library. In these works and others Mr. O'Neill might have found a framework for his material. He might also have avoided a few inaccuracies, and the repetition of now out-moded views. It is distressing, for instance, to see attitudes to 17th and 18th century Newfoundland, exploded several years since by Dr. Keith Matthews, repeated once again.

Mr. O'Neill has a very traditional local view of Newfoundland history, which seeks to make the British (and sometimes the Canadians) the scapegoats for the colony's real and imagined misfortunes. Thus he sees Newfoundland's final entry into confederation as the result of a British plot, the culmination of "nearly five hundred years of neglect and maltreatment by Britain." (p. 152) The political fights of the 1830s are seen as the consequence of "The bitter years of English oppression, the denial of human rights to settlers, the inequalities faced by servile Irishmen, the harsh penal laws" (p. 186) The withdrawal of the garrison in 1870 is said to be an Imperial punishment for Newfoundland's failure to confederate (p. 107). This type of commentary, very Irish in

character, is unfortunate and simplistic, and demonstrates the necessity for improved relations between amateur and professional historians.

As Mr. O'Neill says, St. John's is a truly interesting city, with a very definite character. It has long needed an historian, and even if Mr. O'Neill fails to satisfy he has performed a valuable task. One hopes that this book will help awaken in the citizens of St. John's an awareness of their heritage, and a determination to save it from the ravages of arterial roads and Trizec.

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Nader, George A. Cities of Canada, Volume One: Theoretical, Historical and Planning Perspectives. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1975. Pp. ix, 404. Maps, illustrations. \$15.95.

Nader, George A. Cities of Canada, Volume Two: Profiles of Fifteen Metropolitan Centres. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976. Pp. xii, 460. Maps, illustrations. \$18.95.

Although these books are certainly a valuable contribution to the growing field of Canadian urban studies, they are also a disappointment. Their value lies in the sweep of the subject covered in two volumes, making them strong candidates for use as textbooks in a wide variety of urban study courses across the country. It is disappointing, however, that such a major effort should yield only this limited dividend and not break much new ground in terms of approaches to the study of the Canadian city.

As the title of Volume One suggests, this book is divided into three equal parts reflecting the goals Professor Nader had in mind in preparing this study. Part I is a description of the major forces which