

Cities and Sights: Urban History Through Pictures

Bruce C. Daniels

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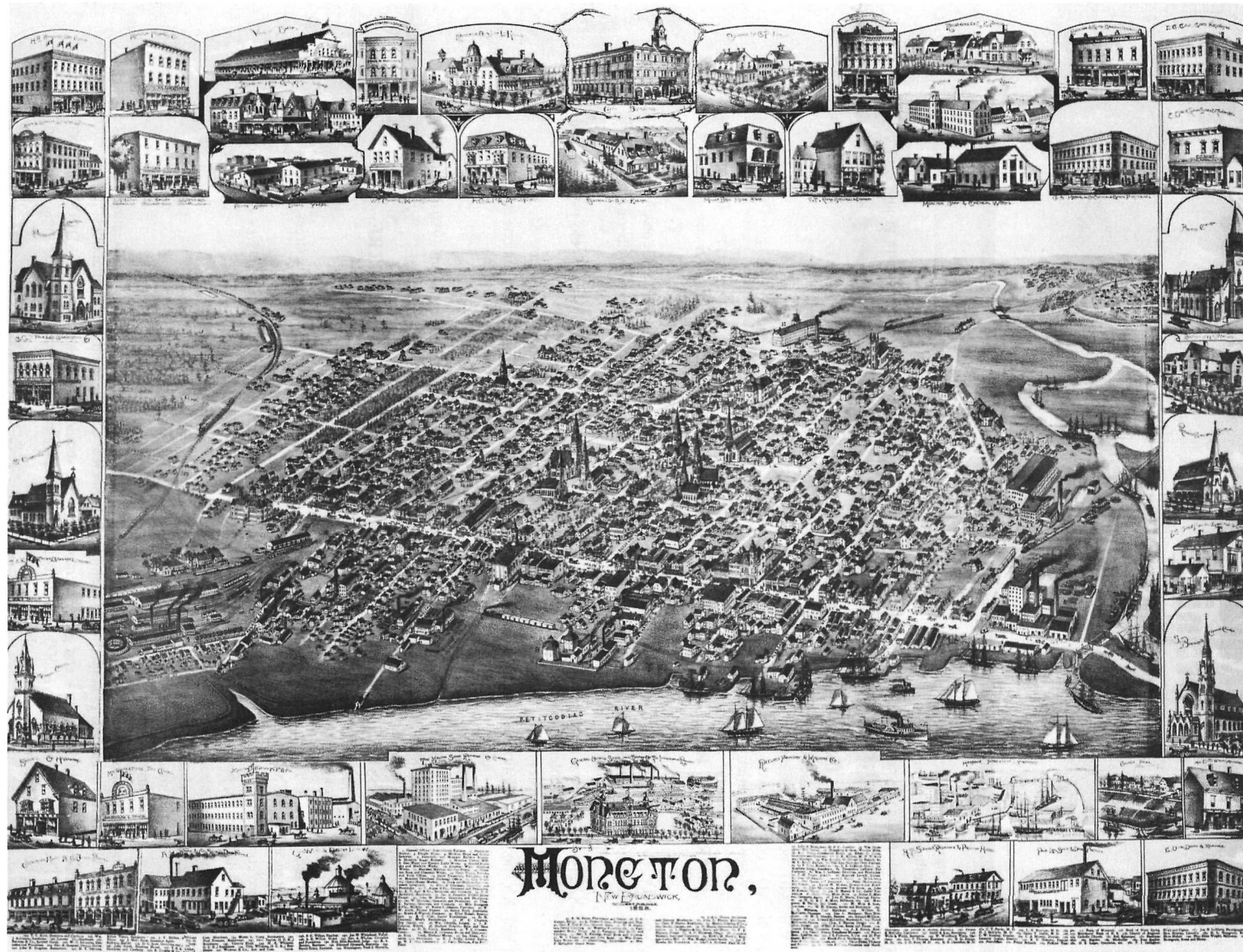
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Bird's-Eye View of Moncton, N.B., 1888.
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Vue à vol d'oiseau de Moncton, N.B., 1888.
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Book Notes/Notes bibliographiques

Cities and Sights: Urban History Through Pictures

Whoever said "a picture is worth a thousand words" would have heard a chorus of nays at a conference of urban historians. Since the emergence of urban history as a separate and legitimate field, too many photographs in a city biography placed it outside the realm of serious scholarship and on top of the coffee table in a parvenu living room. Serious scholars used only an occasional photograph to illustrate (literally) the points made by rigorous analyses of hard data on population, housing, business activity, municipal engineering, and so forth: a picture was an addendum to several thousand words.

Recently, professional historians have begun to reassess the value of visual urban history and its ability to inform scholarship. Pictures are no longer viewed almost solely for their charm: they constitute a body of evidence to sustain as well as to illustrate principles and patterns of development. Canadian historians have been at the forefront of this confluence of urban and art history. The *Visual History of Canada* and *The History of Canadian Cities Series*, published by the National Museum, are major examples of the new seriousness being accorded the sights of the past. Just as community studies, long the past-time of filial-pietistic boosters, managed to escape their antiquarian label, so also have picture books begun the climb to academic legitimacy. In American history, several recent books of or about pictures significantly expand our knowledge and appreciation of the urban past.

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Reps, John. *Views and Viewmakers of Urban America: Lithographs of Towns and Cities in the United States and Canada, Notes on the Artists and Publishers, and a Union Catalog of Their Work, 1825-1925*. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1984. Pp.xvi, 570. 90 black and white plates; 13 colour plates. Tables, maps, illustrations, index. \$90.00 U.S.

John Reps's magnificent *Views and Viewmakers of Urban America* is four books in one. The first, a monograph on the process by which the views were drawn, printed, and marketed could easily stand alone. It identifies publishers, examines purposes, and evaluates the views for reliability. The second, contains prints that would charm the most die-hard foe of urban life. The third, a biographical dictionary of 51 of the most prolific view-scape artists, provides two or three pages of commentary for each artist, most of whom were relatively unknown

previously. The fourth, lists 4,480 of the views and gives their location, date, size, artist, lithographer, publisher, and printer.

Views of towns and cities were probably the most popular form of printed pictures in the nineteenth-century United States: Americans loved pictures — of leaders, battles, railroads and ships, sports, birds and animals — but especially they loved pictures of urban glory or the old home town. Although invariably done for commercial purposes, many of the views are artistically pleasing and the majority are surprisingly faithful to reality. Reps tested a number of them against a variety of other evidence and found only a few contained serious distortions. A few artists pumped up the skyline or whitewashed less sightly parts, but for the most part accuracy rivalled beauty as a criterion in reviews: hence, successful artists and printers usually found it in their best financial interests to be as reliable as possible. Some artists drew as many as twelve views a year but most drew far fewer. The artist's rendering was merely the beginning of the technical and business process: the lithographers, printers, business agents, salesmen were part of the assembly line that put the views on thousands of parlor walls. Much fanfare preceded a new view and its eventual appearance often marked an important point in a community's life.

These bird's eye lithographs, immensely popular for nearly all of the nineteenth century, declined rapidly in the twentieth. Hard times in the 1890s depressed the market; cities changed so quickly that renderings became obsolete before they could be marketed; changing tastes made them less respectable for the homes of the elite; and, most importantly, the airplane made the imaginary viewpoint of the bird's eye less necessary. When one could photograph a real bird's eye view, the artists' pictures seemed less creative and exotic. Most nineteenth-century views proved profitable. Average costs to the businessmen who paid all the artistic and commercial expenses were about \$500: average sales were about \$1,000. When the profits declined so did the number and quality of the views.

Reps makes a major substantive contribution to art, social, communications, and business history as well as to urban studies. Additionally, his work is equally important as a source for historians. Land use and development, architecture, maritime activities, commercial development, railroad and other transportation systems, city planning and layout, and urban engineering are only some of the more obvious subjects of the physical environment that the views can help illuminate. They would be especially useful for comparative work among cities, types of

cities, eras, and regions. Most of the large cities have several views listed in the catalogue: Toronto, for example, has fifteen and Winnipeg has eight. New York, the city with the most, has nearly two hundred. As Repts knows, it is almost certain that large numbers of published views have escaped his research net. Nonetheless, no guide in the future is likely to turn up more than a small fraction of the number he has found.

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Stilgoe, John R. *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983. Pp. xv, 397. 179 Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$29.95 U.S.

It would be hard to imagine a book more fascinating and innovative than John Stilgoe's analysis of the impact of the railroad on the American environment. Arguing that no traditional term, urban, suburban, or rural, properly defines the social organizations that grew along the railroad right-of-way, Stilgoe created the term "metropolitan corridor" to describe the combination of depots, crossings, businesses, and industry that grew tunnel-like on either side of the railroad tracks. The society of the metropolitan corridor developed its own symbols, architecture, and literature as it transformed the way America looked and Americans lived.

Nearly half of this 400-page book consists of photographs. They range from the simple view of a locomotive with its train-for-a-tail wagging down the tracks to the iron-brick-wire junction of tracks, power station, telegraph lines, terminal, and business that sat in the centre of many cities. Stilgoe manages to resist the temptation to fill the pages with redundant scenes of beautiful trains and quaint depots: each photograph adds in some way to the analysis. Although traditional terms *are* inappropriate *nouns* to describe the relationship between railroad and environment, the photographs show these terms have some utility as *adjectives*: there were urban, suburban, and rural metropolitan corridors. Everywhere the trains went activity of some sort went with them. They moved with an emotional and economic force too powerful for small boys or businessmen to resist.

One customarily hears figures of speech such as "sinews" or "arteries" applied to railroads. These imply that railroads connected one part of the economic body to another or that they carried vital materials from organ to organ. As Stilgoe implicitly shows, however, railways were not merely a transportation system that existed to bind parts of society together. They may have started that way, but they became an end in themselves and often became more important than the communities they were built to serve. Railroad Street eclipsed Main Street, terminals dominated city centres, track layout determined

road construction and traffic patterns, people moved to be near rail service, and the town ignored by the railroads watched while rivals sprang up along the right-of-way. Few Americans, however, thought they had created a Frankenstein; from Ralph Waldo Emerson to William Dean Howells, trains and trolleys inspired romance and praise.

The automobile era replaced the railroad era in influencing business patterns, architecture, and spacial relationships. Americans wax their cars on weekends, gas stations and snack bars fill up the four corners of a crossroads, the economy rises and falls with news from Detroit, the used-car salesman has become a metaphorical figure, but somehow the automobile has not found a place in the heart equal to the railroad. Little boys do not wear bus driver's hats and wave as the Greyhound goes by. Until the recent wave of truckdriver country and western movies and songs, cars have not been an important part of popular art as trains once were. And, despite the fact that almost everyone depends on and uses them, automobiles inspire hostility among many people. Noxious exhaust, nerve-wracking noise, the absence of parking places, expensive repairs, and other unfortunate spinoffs, seem to rank equally with convenience and speed in many minds. Trains polluted and killed but few people complained. We often seem to bemoan the advent of cars as much as we lament the passing of the railroad.

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Miller, Fredric, Morris J. Vogel and Allen F. Davis. *Still Philadelphia: A Photographic History, 1890-1940*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983. Pp. xiv, 290. 250 Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$24.95 U.S.

Less innovative than the above two books, *Still Philadelphia*, is comprised primarily of photographs interspersed with commentary and data. On the surface, it resembles Robert Harney's and Harold Troper's, *Immigrants: A Portrait of the Urban Experience, 1890-1930* (Toronto, 1975). Like Harney's and Troper's award-winning pictorial history of Toronto, *Still Philadelphia* eschews photographs of mansions, grand public buildings, and high culture and concentrates on the lives of the average and poor. The photographs are sometimes compelling, the commentary is accurate and informative, but both lack the punch of the Harney and Troper volume. There are too many pictures making the same point or no point; many of them require a knowledge of Philadelphia's geography and neighbourhoods to be appreciated. The text contains little analysis and no discernible thesis. Neither does *Still Philadelphia* match the level of achievement of the published volumes in the History of Canadian Cities Series. The blurb from Temple University Press calls the book a "Philadelphia Family Album." This is an accurate description. Few scholars will cite *Still*

Philadelphia in serious works on urban history, but thousands of Philadelphians will buy, peruse, and thoroughly enjoy it.

Philadelphia, of course, is a city with an extraordinarily rich history by North American standards. Founded by William Penn, the capital of the main Quaker colony metamorphosized from the "City of Brotherly Love" in the colonial period into the "City of Homes" in the late nineteenth century. Famed for its row houses, Philadelphia experienced the twin migrations from Eastern Europe and the American South that most northeastern cities did, but managed to maintain a relatively low population

density in its ethnic neighbourhoods that never approached the stark horror of Boston, New York, and Chicago slums. The authors show many pictures of misery, overcrowding, and unsanitary living conditions, but they also focus on the positive qualities of the immigrant experience. Work scenes predominate followed closely by shouts of children at play in the streets. Many people looked proud of their jobs and even ragamuffin kids seemed hardpressed not to ham it up when someone had a camera.

Bruce C. Daniels
Department of History
University of Winnipeg