

Mullins, William H. *The Depression and the Urban West Coast, 1929-1933: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle and Portland*.
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. Pp. ix, 176

Hugh Grant

Volume 20, numéro 3, february 1992

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019279ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019279ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Grant, H. (1992). Compte rendu de [Mullins, William H. *The Depression and the Urban West Coast, 1929-1933: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle and Portland*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. Pp. ix, 176]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 20(3), 137-138. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019279ar>

use planning (as opposed to social or economic planning) from 1850 to the present, although urban development patterns prior to 1850 are also briefly presented.

Planning and Urban Growth in the Nordic Countries is organized in a very clear and straightforward manner. It consists of six chapters: an introduction, a chapter on urban planning trends for each of the four countries, and a conclusion that discusses common features and patterns found in "Nordic planning." Each of the chapters addressing an individual nation is written by a specialist from that country. While there is some variation in emphasis from chapter to chapter, which is to be expected in a multi-authored volume, the topics covered in each chapter are remarkably consistent. The chapter on Denmark is representative. The authors, Bo Larsson and Ole Thomassen, focus on the largest urban centres (Copenhagen, Aarhus, Aalborg, and Odense) to help trace the evolution of Danish physical planning, emphasizing in particular city centre development, housing, transportation, and regional planning. Planning activities and legislation are placed in historical context as are general demographic and economic trends.

The authors identify several characteristics of Nordic planning that might surprise North American readers. First, the "progressive" reputation of northern European planning is a relatively recent phenomenon; the general acceptance of land use controls, for example, only occurred in the years following World War II, much later than in North American cities. Second, a strong anti-preservation attitude was prevalent in Nordic cities during much of the 20th century, an attitude that contradicts the widely-held notion regarding the importance of preservation throughout Europe. Third, regional planning in these countries, frequently used as textbook examples of innovative approaches to planning (i.e.,

Copenhagen's renowned Finger Plan), is generally perceived as being a failure. And finally, the high level of power and influence attributed to the private sector in the planning process goes against the commonly-held notion that, in nations governed by social democratic parties, public controls would dominate.

The positive attributes of this volume far outweigh the negative. However, a few problems do exist. The first concerns content. For the years 1950 to the present, which the book covered extensively, new development (i.e., suburban housing, new towns) is emphasized much more than is city centre redevelopment and preservation; for example, Hall and associates make virtually no mention of pedestrian streets, a widely-applied planning strategy, particularly in Swedish and Danish downtowns. A second problem lies in the format which, while straightforward and logically-organized, tends to be encyclopedic at times, detracting from its readability. And finally, the excessively high cost of this volume will limit its readership; few individuals could afford this book and, during an era of tight academic budgets, many libraries may balk at the price.

In conclusion, I would strongly recommend Hall's book, especially for institutional libraries affiliated with departments of urban history, urban studies, and/or city and regional planning. The volume fills a gap in the literature and should serve as a valuable reference book.

Kent A. Robertson, Professor
Local & Urban Affairs Program
St. Cloud State University (Minnesota)

Mullins, William H. *The Depression and the Urban West Coast, 1929-1933: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle and Portland*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. Pp.ix, 176.

From this densely-written book, drawn from a detailed reading of local newspapers and civic archives, the following picture emerges. With the onset of high rates of unemployment in 1929, local relief work in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle and Portland was organized principally through private charities. Municipal governments responded by accelerating public work programs and by channelling funds through the community chest. As the Depression deepened, direct public relief was forthcoming, but local administrations soon found demand exceeded their fiscal capacity. By 1932, local communities were unable to cope without state or federal assistance.

This story is a useful one, but difficulties arise with Mullins' attempt to draw more ambitious conclusions. He promises insights into the nature of the Depression: was it different in the West?; did it produce a specific regional outlook?; did patterns of behaviour and thought change as the economic malaise persisted?; and, finally, did attitudes towards individualism, self-reliance and the work ethic undergo significant reappraisal? The answers to all of these questions are unconvincing for several reasons.

First, there simply is no contextual framework offered for case studies of four cities. Little use is made of the extensive literature on the Great Depression in the United States (for instance, no reference is made to the recent interpretations of the Hoover administration offered by William Barber and Michael Bernstein); as a result, local events are not placed in a wider setting. This occurs at some cost. Economic historians will be uncomfortable with the utilization of data on build-

ing permits and bank demand deposits as "bellwethers" for overall economic conditions in the four cities. The economic data are badly handled for the purpose of description (for instance, no distinction is drawn between real and nominal wages or money supply) and of explanation (causality for the depression is attributed to an exogenous fall in the money supply). Nor is there a systematic comparative analysis of various regions, of regional urban centres, or of events before or after 1929-32 from which to draw any meaningful conclusions. At other times, the author departs from a comparative framework to suggest that the "political culture of the four cities" allows inferences to be drawn about the nation.

Second, problems abound with Mullins' implicit assumption that an organic "community," led by businessmen and civic authorities, responded to the needs of the unemployed in a conscious and coherent fashion. He does not seem to recognize that individuals organize their actions through other institutions, such as trade unions, which might engender conflict rather than harmony over political goals. As a result, Seattle's unique labour history gets little mention in relation to the city's Unemployed Citizens League, while the frequency of riots or the existence of the anti-communist "Red Squad" in Los Angeles goes largely unexplained. In Portland and San Francisco, we learn merely that there were surprisingly few riots.

Third, the book suggests that the citizenry first accepted and then challenged Hoover's oxymoronic credo of "cooperative individualism." Mullins defines "cooperation" and "individual self-reliance" to include any actions undertaken in concert by individuals at the local level to address their common needs. Through this simplistic and self-serving definition, "Hooverville" the shanty town on the out-

skirts of Seattle is transformed in a "manifestation of the pluck, independence, and individualism held in such high esteem by he whose name the community had taken." Similarly, the socialist-organized Unemployed Citizens League in Seattle becomes the best reflection of Hooverian "hopes and aspirations." When taken to this extreme, the concept of "cooperative individualism" loses whatever meaning it may have initially conveyed. Moreover, it is unclear if a broad community consensus of the virtue of "cooperative individualism" ever existed. An equally plausible explanation is that no change in motivations or attitudes among civic leaders occurred; they merely acknowledged that local resources were insufficient to cope with the needs of the unemployed (an appendix on voting behaviour in Seattle polling areas in 1928 and 1932 is far too selective and inconclusive to be of much validity in this regard.)

In short, views expressed by the president of the chamber of commerce or the local newspaper editor may be insightful, but serve as an incomplete and potentially misleading guide to history. Similarly, Mullins presents a useful, but limited account of events during the early years of the Depression. He adds to our understanding of the manner in which these four West Coast municipalities responded to the demands for relief, but this contribution serves as a poor substitute for a systematic analysis of the motivation and attitudes underlying local responses to unemployment in the Great Depression.

Hugh Grant
Department of Economics
University of Winnipeg

Stelter, Gilbert A., ed. *Cities and Urbanization: Canadian Historical Perspectives*. Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1990. Pp. vii, 277. Tables, maps, illustrations.

After editing four volumes with Alan Artibise, Gil Stelter has pulled together a fifth composed of eleven papers written by geographers and historians. Except for his Introduction and the first paper, also his, they were first published between 1979 and 1987. In some way, the papers are representative of ongoing empirical research, but they are also intended as vehicles carrying Stelter's view of urban history, as laid out in the Introduction. Since nearly half of the work is by geographers, he might have included the term "geographical" in the title. Also, items in the "Further Reading" section, while helpful, seem to have been arbitrarily selected. Overall, though, the papers are by and large useful additions to urban studies, fulfilling the aim of the general editor of the series, "New Canadian Readings." As stated in the Foreword, the goal is "to bring some of the best recent work by this country's scholars to the attention of students of Canada."

Stelter's own essay, "The Changing Imperial Context of Early Canadian Development," usefully surveys some of the dimensions of urban life, especially the establishing of towns and their spatial design, in Europe, from the medieval era onward, as the context for early Canadian urbanization. Why he begins the essay with a straw man I do not understand. I doubt that anyone today believes the ideas for creating Quebec were *sui generis*. Also, word of recent work by Joseph Wood pointing to the dispersed character of early New England communities has apparently not reached Guelph.

David Hanna's "Creation of an Early Victorian Suburb in Montreal" is an excel-