

**Thorold J. Tronrud. *Guardians of Progress: Boosters and Boosterism in Thunder Bay, 1870–1914*. Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 1993. Pp. 74. Black and White Illustrations, index. \$9.95 (plus \$2.00 postage)**

Steven High

Volume 24, numéro 2, march 1996

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016605ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016605ar>

[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

High, S. (1996). Compte rendu de [Thorold J. Tronrud. *Guardians of Progress: Boosters and Boosterism in Thunder Bay, 1870–1914*. Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 1993. Pp. 74. Black and White Illustrations, index. \$9.95 (plus \$2.00 postage)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 24(2), 64–65. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016605ar>

mother and companionate wife—the answer, according to Morton, is a resounding 'No'. She concludes the book with a Community Party activist's portrait of imaginary working men and women conversing across gender lines. At the end of a long day, in the relative isolation of suburban life, "it was possible only for a poet to grasp the revolutionary potential of men and women's sitting and talking together." (156) *Ideal Surroundings* is a timely reminder of how urban space can disunify even as it brings people closer together.

### References

1. Jay White, "The Homes Front: The Accommodation Crisis in Halifax, 1941–1951," *Urban History Review* XX/3 (Feb. 1992), 119.

Wendy J. Atkin, Department of History,  
Carleton University.

---

Thorold J. Tronrud. *Guardians of Progress: Boosters and Boosterism in Thunder Bay, 1870–1914*. Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 1993. Pp. 74. Black and White Illustrations, index. \$9.95 (plus \$2.00 postage).

This is a well written and designed publication of particular interest to those of us concerned with the history of Northwestern Ontario. We must wonder, however, whether the world needs yet another local study of boosterism. Does Thorold J. Tronrud add anything new to what Alan F.J. Artibise, Elizabeth Bloomfield and many others have already written about this phenomenon? After reading this compact work, I must answer the question with a qualified yes.

In *Guardians of Progress*, Tronrud examines the ideas and techniques of boosters at the Lakehead from 1870 to 1914. In doing so, Tronrud recreates the super-

charged atmosphere that drove businessmen and land promoters to ever greater heights of rhetorical excess. Readers familiar with Ontario's North will undoubtedly be amused by promotional literature that promised newcomers a mosquito-free environment! In contrast, Tronrud's depiction of boosters themselves is more conventional, reflecting accounts found in other monographs. Tronrud's finding that over one-third of Port Arthur and Fort William's elected municipal officials were involved in land development mirrors what other urban historians have discovered. Tronrud argues that a philosophy of growth did not extend beyond the elites of the two towns. Boosterism was therefore a destructive force because it exaggerated class conflict and failed to achieve, at enormous public expense, industrial growth.

The most innovative dimension to this study is Tronrud's exploration of boosting techniques such as lobbying, exhibitions, films, advertising, publications, and bonusing. The imagination of the boosters matched the vigour they brought to their lobbying efforts. Each spring, to cite one example, large delegations descended like locusts upon unsuspecting politicians, businessmen and reporters in Toronto. These brash delegations of over thirty people gave way, by the turn of the century, to professional lobbyists. Tronrud's analysis of the content of booster publications is also noteworthy. Although facts, figures and slogans dominated the text of these publications, boosters appealed most frequently to the visual sense through the use of colour, photographs and drawings. Besides the portraits of prominent local men and the occasional photograph of Amerindians (to add a touch of the exotic no doubt), people were largely absent from these visual representations of the Lakehead.

Although boosterism was a product of inter-urban rivalry, Tronrud treats Port Arthur and Fort William as a single community. Tronrud's approach mutes the dynamic rivalry between the two towns, leading to an inaccurate generalization regarding social relations at the Lakehead. Namely, social conflict is emphasized at the expense of communal solidarity. Boosters acted in their class interest and not on behalf of the community's welfare as a whole. In taking this stance, the author overlooks a remarkable record of inter-class cooperation in Port Arthur. Despite the suggestion that boosters felt politically threatened by the working-class, the *Daily News* (the voice of boosterism in Port Arthur) endorsed a labour slate in the 1910 municipal election. Far more surprising, was the decision by almost two-thirds of Port Arthur's ratepayers to subsidize the construction of the Finnish socialist hall! These two examples, not cited in the monograph, suggest that residents were bound by a sense of community. Working people were not immune to the appeal of boosterism. In the dispute over bonusing arrangements, the objections raised by organized labour revolved around the question of boosting techniques, and was not necessarily the rejection of boosterism itself.

In reconstructing the public image projected by the elite in booster publications and local newspapers, Tronrud sometimes confuses their public pronouncements with what they actually achieved. Although boosters wanted to control the municipal governments at the Lakehead, Tronrud takes them at their word. A survey of Port Arthur's municipal government records suggests a great deal more political accommodation than Tronrud acknowledges. In fact, Port Arthur and Fort William were at the forefront of municipal innovation during these years. The creation of municipally owned

and operated urban services represented an important alternative to the bonusing of private enterprise through cash grants, loan guarantees and tax exemptions. Moreover, municipal enterprise enjoyed near unanimous support from all social classes in the two cities. Yet, Tronrud overlooks this important legacy of boosterism at the Lakehead. Abandoned industrial plants, huge debts, corrupt officials and the ruined dream of being the "Chicago of the North" are paraded before the reader instead.

Despite these shortcomings, Tronrud's exploration of the mechanics of boosting techniques is an important addition to the existing literature. Its impact, however, would have been greater if Tronrud had considered municipal enterprise. This is an unfortunate oversight, as the Lakehead provides an excellent example of how a philosophy of growth contributed to municipal innovation and community empowerment.

Steven High  
Department of History  
University of Ottawa

---

**Backhouse, Frances (with introduction by Pierre Berton). *Women of the Klondike*. Vancouver: Whitecap, 1995. Pp. xi, 211. Black and white photographs. Maps. \$16.95 paper. ISBN 1-55110-375-3.**

With the centennial of the Klondike Gold Rush approaching in 1998, northern enthusiasts will welcome the long-overdue attention writers are giving Yukon history. Pierre Berton, in the foreword to *Women of the Klondike*, describes it as a "new spin on a familiar tale." In many ways it is exactly that. Like much Yukon history, this is a lively narrative chronicling the contributions of a variety of women who participated in the Klondike Gold Rush from 1896–1904.

Organized in a roughly chronological format, Backhouse takes us from the cities and farms of southern Canada and the United States to the gold fields, saloons, and mining cabins of the Klondike. Here we find one of the best overviews of the routes men and women stampedeers travelled to the Klondike. Readers looking for a clear synopsis and description of the hazards and glories of the 'golden trail' would do well to begin here. Backhouse's descriptions are excellent, well written, and concise; her maps are uncomplicated and easy-to-read.

Photographs are an important feature of narrative histories. Most of the photographs in this book are familiar ones to archival researchers and the majority of the originals are clear, well-composed, and well-preserved. Yet in the review copy at least, a number of the photos are poorly reproduced and appear fuzzy, streaky, and grainy (the photo of Mary Rothweiler's Magnet Hotel on p. 72 and that of the women in a Klondike kitchen on p. 44 are good examples). This is a shame, since a number of these photographs have not been previously published and deserve much better presentation.

The greatest value in this work is that we hear these Klondike women in their own voices. Backhouse provides us with an excellent selection of quotations from women's diaries, published memoirs, and newspaper reports. This gives the book its most marketable quality: northern flavour. There is much here for readers who enjoy lively, personal stories.

*Women of the Klondike* is a series of anecdotes forming what almost amounts to a short biographical dictionary. Separated by line breaks in the text, the author presents brief biographies, accompanied by lengthy quotations by and about individual women who resided

in Dawson City and surrounds. Unfortunately for the reader, Backhouse rarely provides transitions that might link these individual women, and this makes her narrative rather choppy and segmented. While this technique makes the book easy to put down and pick up, on the other hand it prevents the reader from gaining a sense of the larger story of women's contributions to Klondike society.

By the end of *Women of the Klondike*, I wondered how these individual women's stories fit together. Did any of these people know one another or were they all separate, temporary sojourners in a city that knew no neighbourliness? How did these women perceive themselves and each other? We see a couple of middle-class women commenting on dance hall employees, and we see a number of women choosing husbands from the local population. We do not, however, have a sense of the city of Dawson as it developed, or of the social networks or interactions that might have mediated people's ability to meet one another socially and to select mates. We are left with the impression that each woman made her way "alone among thirty-thousand men" as the author describes Frances Dorley (p. 63), rather than as members of a developing community of men, women, and families.

Gender historians will wonder how this book differs from Melanie Mayer's *Women of the Klondike* published in 1989. The answer is that it is not altogether different. In fact, the two books have much in common, telling a number of the same stories and employing a similar format, yet curiously Backhouse does not cite Mayer or list her book in the bibliography.

That the author has not interpreted these women's stories or tried to fit them together will frustrate urban historians look-