

HSTC Bulletin

Journal of the History of Canadian Science, Technology and Medicine
Revue d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine au Canada

hstc
bulletin

Peter Charlebois. *Sternwheelers and Sidewheelers: the Romance of Steam Driven Paddleboats in Canada*. Toronto: NC Press, 1978; 144 pp., \$9.95

Arnold Roos

Volume 3, numéro 2 (10), february 1979

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081961ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081961ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

HSTC Publications

ISSN

0228-0086 (imprimé)

1918-7742 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Roos, A. (1979). Compte rendu de [Peter Charlebois. *Sternwheelers and Sidewheelers: the Romance of Steam Driven Paddleboats in Canada*. Toronto: NC Press, 1978; 144 pp., \$9.95]. *HSTC Bulletin*, 3(2), 7–8.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1081961ar>

Peter Charlebois. Sternwheelers and Sidewheelers: the Romance of Steam Driven Paddleboats in Canada. Toronto: NC Press, 1978; 144pp. \$9.95.

A book such as this can be reviewed on two levels, along the lines of what it purports to be, or what it actually is. The book's back cover states that it is "The first book to deal comprehensively with those thrashing, puffing monsters of yesteryear." This, and the book's title, implies that the work will deal 'comprehensively' with the evolution of paddlewheelers in general and specifically with their history in Canada. Charlebois' book falls so short of this goal that to review it as serious analysis would be superfluous.

As a popular book it may have something for the general reader and possibly the serious scholar. The work does bring together numerous photographs of paddlewheelers that, up to now, have been unavailable except in widely-scattered archives. This, at least, is to be commended. The work on this level certainly points to the fact that such vessels, of which there appears to have been quite a number, played an important role in the history of Canadian transportation. It is unfortunate that the author did not consider it worthwhile to simply present the public with a complete compendium (or as complete as the record would allow) of representative photographs of all such vessels that operated in Canada. This undertaking is needed and it would have overcome some of the other objections to this book.

The work begins with an inadequate overview of the history of paddlewheelers and their motive power. The author so oversimplifies the history that he often gives an erroneous impression. For example, when he deals with boilers he implies that the fire tube boiler was the typical boiler used throughout the period covered by the book. This ignores years of experimentation with boilers that were upright, horizontal, or were plain cylinders, some having internal flues, others being fired from the inside and others from below. To state that sternwheelers had hulls along the lines of a row boat and sidewheelers' hulls like those of modern vessels is totally meaningless. Sternwheelers' hulls had numerous designs depending upon function and water to be traversed; sidewheelers's hulls varied from those with deep-water design (with a keel) and those for shallow-water (flat-bottomed). Charlebois does not even attempt an explication of the evolution of hull design which is essential for an understanding of the vessels and their mode of operation. Such an introduction may require more pages than he was willing to allow, but, as it stands, it does more harm than good.

The body of the work is divided into six sections dealing with vessels found in particular geographical regions of Canada.

For the most part, the information is limited to photographs of vessels along with basic hull dimensions, tonnage, and (where available) quotations concerning the vessel drawn from period newspapers. This section of the book suffers from the lack of critical analysis, and from the marked lack of historical knowledge on the part of the author.

Photographs are not always matched to the information provided. On page 43, two photographs of a vessel named 'Montreal' are shown and are purported to be the same boat, but they clearly are not. Even worse, on page 109, the vessels 'Marquis' and 'Northcote' are simply mislabelled.

When dealing with historical information, Charlebois seems to be on tenuous ground. He notes that the 'Northcote' pioneered a practice termed "grasshoppering." It seems strange that a technique identical to that operation and given at times the same name was common practice in the USA at least fifty years prior to the construction of the 'Northcote.' A critique of all the misleading general statements and errors of fact, especially in the section on the Yukon with which the reviewer has knowledge, is simply not worth the effort.

In his final statements (on ship registration) he hints at some of the difficulties encountered by the historian and some of the historical tools available to him. Unfortunately, given the quality of this work, the author has not mastered them.

--Arnold Roos
Parks Canada

* * *

QUERY

Mr Phil Mozel would like to hear from anyone with information concerning the observatory at Woodstock College, Woodstock, Ontario, including history, photographs, present whereabouts of observatory records and instruments, etc.

He will return all materials loaned, or examined them in situ. Mr Mozel can be reached at:

1395 Willowdown Road,
Oakville, Ont. L6L 1X2
or may be called (collect) 416-827-3012 (home)
416-497-5221 (business)

* * *

BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR COURSES IN THE HISTORY OF CANADIAN SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Due to unforeseen delays, the Bibliography has just now gone to press. All those who ordered copies will receive them by the end of this month. Those wishing to order one may do so with a cheque for \$2.50, payable to HSTC Bulletin.