

Lumber Kings and Shantymen: Logging and Lumbering in the Ottawa Valley By David Lee

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Book Reviews

Autumn 2007

Lumber Kings and Shantymen

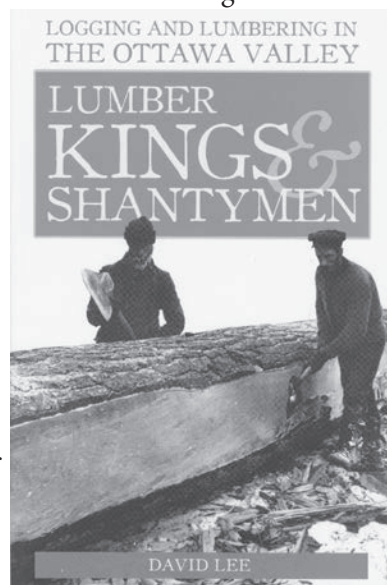
Logging and Lumbering in the Ottawa Valley

By David Lee. Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 2006. 280 pp. \$24.95 softcover. ISBN 1-55028-922-5.

David Lee's *Lumber Kings and Shantymen* offers a thorough investigation of the history of Ottawa Valley logging from its beginnings in the early nineteenth century to its decline in the twentieth. Logging began in the region when accessibility and market demands made production there profitable, a generation or so after the forests of Maine and New Brunswick had been fully exploited and slightly before the vast forests of the American upper-Midwest opened. The demands of wooden navies during the Napoleonic era and the subsequent demand for framing lumber made it increasingly worthwhile for entrepreneurs to invest in developing forest resources, and world markets made speculation in timber limits as profitable as cutting wood.

Readers might assume that Ottawa valley lumbering looked much like other resource development activity across North America. Lee's research shows not only how porous the American border was but also how powerful the wave of proto-capitalist industry was dur-

ing the post-Napoleonic period on both sides of that border. Similarly, the sequence of extraction looks familiar. First the large white pines were cut for squared timbers, then later lumbermen began to take smaller trees for planks, and finally the pulp industry took advantage of the still smaller trees left behind. Lee devotes a chapter to each of these uses and describes many familiar practices that again tie the Ottawa to the larger continental industry: registered timber marks, river driving associations, logging farms to feed men and



animals, booms and sluices to bypass rapids, and (when the industry became fully mature) mills and railroads.

Still, several aspects are unique to the Ottawa valley. First, private enterprise successfully moved governments (colonial, and after 1867 provincial and national) to give unusually large amounts of aid for improvements of the River and its tributaries. Subsidized flumes, timber slides, and canals increased profits and therefore tax revenues. Between 1867 and 1900 twenty to thirty per cent of Ontario and Quebec income came either from timber leases or taxes on timber products, a far greater proportion than Maine, New Brunswick, or the upper Midwest received. Lee devotes a chapter to the strong relationship between government and lumbermen that persisted for more than a century and helped define the distinctiveness of the valley and its people. The longevity of the various industries is another unique aspect of the Ottawa valley. White pine timber was essentially gone from New Brunswick and Maine by 1850, and soon after in the Midwest, yet Ottawa timber cutters were still finding usable trees to square and drive to market until 1908. And while pulp-cutting developed in the valley, lumbering continued into the twentieth century as well. Lee finds that the vastness of the Ottawa's resources has repeatedly been underestimated by researchers.

In his portrayal of cultural development in the Ottawa valley, among both cutters and employers, Lee makes a significant contribution. He demonstrates how the colourful and hard-working shantymen, cutting and moving astonishing quantities of wood, and the pioneering businessmen – Egan, Booth, Gilmour and the rest – who made fortunes by their labour, have become part of the lore of the region. They continue to shape its culture in a positive way long after their industry has faded in importance. In setting

logging and lumbering as complementary to other economic activity, *Lumber Kings and Shantymen* pushes back against the idea of arrested development posited in Harold Innis's staples theory.

Lee recognizes what he calls a 'distinct society' in the Ottawa valley forest, presenting a provocative term for this region which includes parts of Quebec and Ontario as one. He offers good evidence that the longevity and nature of the forest trade shaped people together as a unit straddling the River. Like other border regions – the upper Saint John River in New Brunswick or the region between eastern Quebec and Labrador – the evidence is somewhat anecdotal, but the cumulative effect shows an inward focus on local speech, music, and geography. Some Ottawa valley towns in western Quebec, for example, are only accessible by Ontario roads and so everything from local markets to local news is focused in that direction. Logging was the way that people interacted with the land and, whether French or English, Lee effectively shows that they constitute a discernable Ottawa valley culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Lee's investigation of culture and environment are less fully covered at the beginning and end of his period than in the middle. Besides being a great trade route and cultural highway both before and after the coming of the Europeans, the Ottawa River traversed the homeland of distinct native societies. Native people are only briefly mentioned, however, though my assumption is that many worked in the shanties. This subject might have been explored more fully. And in today's world, implicit within Lee's argument is the notion that the two provinces still share something distinct in the land. He hints at this legacy in the introduction, but a greater acknowledgment of the deep relationship of human being and environment in the valley would have helped better

to contextualize the lumbering story.

In a final, environmentally-oriented chapter titled “Was It Worth Cutting Down All Those Trees?” Lee answers ‘yes.’ Agreement is not unqualified, and he does acknowledge the huge amounts of pollution and wasted wood caused by the cutting. But for Lee the industry did more good than bad. His question is not environmental but, rather, a more local cultural and economic one. From his perspective lumbering created a beneficial foundation for later agricultural and industrial development and has helped shape Ottawa valley culture. Yet it is hard to ignore that the environmental story of forest clearing on this continent – from Maine and New Brunswick to Michigan and Wisconsin, then to the Pacific northwest, and finally to the American south – was driven by insatiable demand for softwood, particularly white pine. It continues in northern Cana-

da today. The Ottawa valley is a part of this larger continent-wide story of resource use and overuse. Lee’s greater acknowledgment here would have been helpful.

All this said, *Lumber Kings and Shanty-men* is a solidly researched work which adds usefully to our understanding of our past. Lee’s presentation is clear and the book is well illustrated and thoroughly indexed, and on the whole covers its subject well. The book adds a needed northern study to the logging history of North America.

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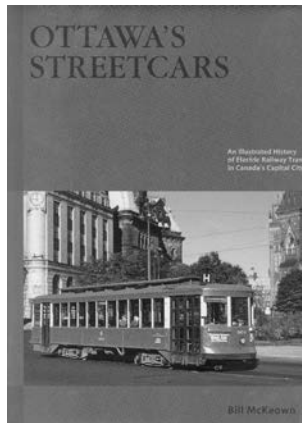
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Ottawa’s Streetcars

An Illustrated History of Electric Railway Transit in Canada’s Capital City.

By Bill McKeown. Montreal: Railfare DC Books, 2006. 256 pp. \$59.95 hardcover. ISBN 1-897190-07-7.

As the editor’s foreword suggests *Ottawa’s Streetcars* is a labour of love, and the culmination of an Ottawa native’s lifelong fascination with the city and its rail transit systems. Many readers, too, may recollect those days, as late as 1959, of big red streetcars passing the National War Memorial and the leafy bowers of Rockcliffe, or rocking through farmlands to the



Britannia Beach amusement park. This book is full of high-quality photographs that play to one’s nostalgia, and the fact that the research and writing occurred over a number of decades and largely while McKeown lived thousands of kilometres away in Osaka, Japan, provides an enhanced appreciation for his dedication. McKeown, who did not live to see publication of the