

Scientia Canadensis

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

Scientia
Canadensis

For King and Country: Lieutenant Colonel John By, R.E. Indefatigable Civil-Military Engineer. By Mark Andrews. (Merrickville, On.: Heritage Merrickville Foundation, 1998, 238 p. ISBN 0-9684014-0-6. \$25)

Richard White

Volume 25, 2001

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800435ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/800435ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (imprimé)

1918-7750 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

White, R. (2001). Compte rendu de [*For King and Country: Lieutenant Colonel John By, R.E. Indefatigable Civil-Military Engineer.* By Mark Andrews. (Merrickville, On.: Heritage Merrickville Foundation, 1998, 238 p. ISBN 0-9684014-0-6. \$25)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 25, 90–91. <https://doi.org/10.7202/800435ar>

For King and Country: Lieutenant Colonel John By, R.E. Indefatigable Civil-Military Engineer. By Mark Andrews. (Merrickville, On.: Heritage Merrickville Foundation, 1998. 238 p. ISBN 0-9684014-0-6. \$25)

John By is one of the better known engineers in English-Canadian history so, presented with this short new biography, one might immediately ask what purpose it serves. The answer is that, while it might not contribute much new to the serious literature on the subject, it stands well on its own as a brief introduction to the man and his engineering accomplishments. The author is a professional engineer, with no evident experience as an author, and the book does appear a touch amateurish at times. But Andrews brings a sincere admiration for his subject, and a sensitivity to engineering details that an outsider might not have, and the result is a simple but pleasing work.

This reviewer is not familiar enough with the literature to know exactly where Andrews makes original contributions. The principal chapter, John By's Rideau Canal, does not seem to be saying much

more than what one could find in Passfield's *Building the Rideau Canal* or Legget's *Rideau Waterway*. But experts might well think otherwise. Even if this assessment is correct, however, what is the harm in reading the story again, especially when it is told by someone as familiar as Andrews is with the engineering details of the canal and its splendid structures? One brief section that does strike an original note is the early material on By's childhood and family, the latter of which, Andrews is quite clear, was "prosperous" and was of "upper middle class" status (p. 21, 26). One more debunking, some of us can hope, of the "humble beginnings" myth of early engineers. Notable, too, are the chapters covering his early military training and engineering, although their value is somewhat reduced by a shortage of source material.

This lack of sources is an obstacle of the first order for any biographer, and Andrews does not have the sleight-of-hand to overcome it. In compensation we occasionally get descriptions such as: "Military history tells us how the Engineers, including By, constructed them" (p. 64), which is reasonably effective, but we also get a good many speculations like: "Presumably this was a topic of conversation between Sir John and By..." (p. 81) which quickly run thin. Andrews makes what he can with what he has, and is always candid about the limits of his sources, but simply can not flesh out either the man or his work as much as one would like.

The book is nicely illustrated with a large number of reproduced paintings, drawings, and maps. It also includes an impressive bibliography of both archival and published material—far more extensive, in fact, than the book itself reflects—and an appendix with a few intriguing documents. Although limited in sophistication, this book is wrought by careful and caring hands, and the result is a small but fine contribution.

RICHARD WHITE

Biographical Note: Richard White is the author of *The Skule Story: The University of Toronto Faculty of Applied Science and Engineering, 1873–2000* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2001). Institutional affiliation : University of Toronto.