

**Acheson, T.W. *Saint John: The Making of a Colonial Urban Community*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1985. Pp. 314. Illustrations. Statistical Appendix. \$29.95**

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## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Acheson, T.W. *Saint John: The Making of a Colonial Urban Community*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1985. Pp. 314. Illustrations. Statistical Appendix. \$29.95.

Professor Acheson's volume adds in a significant way to our stock of knowledge about nineteenth century urban societies, though perhaps not too much new in the way we think about them. More to the point, what does this volume tell us about nineteenth century cities? At the same time a lot and not too much. And this ambiguous assertion is made not simply because urban histories must surely be the hardest things to write and the easiest to criticize. It is made, rather, because, despite what the title may lead one to believe, this is not an urban history.

*Saint John* is a laboratory used to get at agency and change in nineteenth century society. The critical questions are those asked by social historians, not urban historians.

The sub-title — The Making of a Colonial Urban Community — ought to be the focus of the reader's attention. Especially "community," though the definition of the word is not especially clear. As Acheson himself says: "This study is an attempt to explore the changing nature of community in Saint John from the beginning of the transition from town to city in the early nineteenth century to the entry into the 'golden age' of the 1850s" (p. 9).

And what had changed? The later community was "a much more abstract and centralized ideal" than the earlier one. "Also gone was the unity of a formal social hierarchy." Instead, citizens defined themselves in terms of a city "increasingly interpreted through impersonal institutions staffed by professionals," as well as in terms "of sub-communities based on culture and interest" (p. 249).

The city was, of course, bigger (some 4,000 to nearly 40,000 in population), economically dynamic where it had been stagnant, complex where it had been simple, and the object of a series of economic transformations, from "mercantile" outpost, to timber entrepot, to lumber manufacturer and ship builder, to commercial entrepot, nascent manufacturer, and metropolis for the Saint John Valley, the Bay of Fundy and part of Maine. The population, too, was much more mixed.

The "making" of this new community is seen as a multi-dimensional process. "The sources of this change were complex, embracing changing economic circumstances, ideological viewpoints, the intrusion of new social and ethnic groups into the urban environment, and the impact of an English urban model" (p. 249).

The city, itself, as a dynamic element, and perhaps even as the chief vehicle of the transformation is, as evident, not seen to be a factor. It is the crucible, the context or the setting.

To put matters in much more simple terms, this is a study of how a "community" dealt with — or sometimes didn't deal with — growth. "How does a traditional society hold together as it rapidly increases in size and complexity?" (p. 244). And, perhaps a little less clearly, this is a study that attempts to relate the sources or agencies of growth to relationships in the "community."

Acheson is clearly struggling with matters of process and structure and the relationship between them. He does not dichotomize them and give precedence to one or the other. Rather, he sees interaction. It is a tricky approach, and one should not be surprised that the discourse gets a little vague, and even confused, and that the reader gets to wondering where exactly the writer is taking him.

The spirits of Hegel, Marx and Weber all haunt the pages, and those of perhaps less august bodies, the footnotes: Careless, Blumin and Stelter among the urban historians; Frisch and Katz among the new social historians; Hennock and Fraser on the local politics front; plus familiar figures from ethnic, labour, family and religious studies. Few sources of intellectual inspiration are overlooked or drawn on when it seems meet and right so to do. Some notables are prominent in their absence, especially those of left: especially culturalists (except Palmer and Akenson in minor roles); the Tilleyes, who have rather important things to say on the matters under consideration; and the geographers of capitalism.

Eclectic borrowing gives the appearance of erudition, but ideas borrowed for their immediate usefulness are often rooted in approaches that, in a more general way, are hard to reconcile. To posit "modes of production" and ideological viewpoints as sources of change, in practically the same breath, would seem to require some justification.

The drift of Acheson's argument is best seen in the organization of the chapters. The first is "The Urban Economy." It establishes the root causes of growth, and in this sense the cause of the "social" problem. The second chapter introduces "The Common Council," one of the chief agencies for dealing with the problem. Then the problems are set out. Two chapters follow that deal with "class" and the "social order": one focussing on the merchants, the other on the artisans. A third chapter, "Irishmen and Bluenoses," deals with the central cultural tension.

Then come three chapters that represent a social response or solution to the problem: "The Evangelical Movement,"

“Temperance,” and “Education”; and two chapters (bringing us around to the beginning somewhat) that represent a political response: “Anatomy of Political Reform” and “Private Capital and Public Resources.” A penultimate chapter on “Policing the City” provides an example of an institutionalized solution to the social problems of growth. A final chapter, “The People of a Loyalist City” is descriptive and anomalous. It could be more fully part of the text or in the appendix with the statistical tables on which it is based.

But bringing the argument back around to a solution in the political institution is only partial. The focus remains on social questions, and the political reform necessary to make the switch from labour to capital intensive solutions in this area. A more complete resolution would seem to require that local political reform be brought around to the economic analysis that begins the book.

There is no doubt that most nineteenth century cities, by the 1840s, sought political reform to deal with pressing social questions and a noisome urban landscape. But at the same time, they were seeking reform — corporate autonomy to borrow, to tax and to build infrastructure — to further the economic development of the place. It is on these economic issues that crucial intersections of process and structure occur. And they are evident in *Saint John*, in spite of the focus on social issues, but not fully developed.

Acheson spends much time on the city's political institutions, and quite rightly. For one thing they were unique. Saint John is perhaps the only example in British North America of eighteenth century incorporation, though the mayor and chief officers were appointed by the Crown, and the city could not tax property. But the city controlled much waterfront property, and, through grants of the “freedom of the city,” controlled access to the urban economy. And it could act; it could respond to change, social and other.

It is tempting to argue that Saint John's unique political situation gave it an economic edge: it was one reason it became the biggest city in the Maritimes. The city was implicated in economic growth.

It is equally tempting to argue that early incorporation, among other things, delayed local reform that was widespread elsewhere in the 1840s and gave rise at least to the independent commercial city in British North America. Saint John, according to Acheson, was reformed locally only in the 1850s, and that in this reform the powers of the Common Council were curtailed (p. 178).

In the post-1840s economy, Saint John was disadvantaged, particularly by its incapacity to mortgage urban property to build a common infrastructure.

Perhaps an argument can be made that the city's political institutions were so absorbed by the social problems of

growth, and so comprised the partial solutions to them, that the effort required to address impending economic problems was likewise partial and ineffective, as was, ultimately, political reform. In this sense, the study of Saint John begins perhaps too late (its models are better found in the literature on the eighteenth century city), and ends too soon. It is also perhaps too narrow. Social structure is a tremendously important point of access to the city, but has its limitations as a vehicle of explanation.

There is much in Acheson's study for many of the historical kingdoms, principalities, duchies, estates and tribes. Students of local governments, especially, can consult it for the first comprehensive study of Saint John's one-of-a-kind common council, and as one of the few studies of local government, anywhere, that links local government to the society it mediated. Social, economic and urban historians, as well, will find much of value here. An excursion into this volume will be amply repaid, for there is much of value here, and it is handled with diligence, with integrity and with regard for the received literature. More diligence by the editors might have reduced an excess of ‘typos’.

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Hitchcock, John R., and Anne McMaster, eds. *The Metropolis: Proceedings of a Conference in Honour of Hans Blumenfeld*. Toronto: Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto, 1985. \$14.00.

A Conference in honour of Hans Blumenfeld is indeed a landmark event! *The Metropolis* is a compendium of presentations at this Conference in 1983 and does the event full justice. Apart from a unique metropolitan view, it provides a welcome discussion of Hans Blumenfeld's lifelong concern with the structure and dynamics of metropolitan areas in the western world. The list of academics and professionals contributing to the Proceedings is distinguished and illuminating, and ranges from Brian Berry (Carnegie-Mellon), to Jeanne Wolfe (McGill), and from Dean Emeritus Al Rose (Toronto) to former Toronto Mayor John Sewell (now *Globe and Mail*).

The Proceedings are organised in four groups of papers: The Changing Metropolis, Transportation, Housing, and the Livable Urban Environment.

Len Gertler's paper in the first group elegantly addresses metropolitan governance, corporatism and the city, and in conclusion poses the question: “Do the governmental institutions of the contemporary metropolis have a capability to respond to the issues of our time?” One wishes one could