

Helman, Claire. *The Milton-Park Affair: Canada's Largest Citizen-Developer Confrontation*. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1987. Pp. 183. Illustrations. \$12.95

J. L. Granatstein

Volume 16, numéro 3, february 1988

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017741ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017741ar>

[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

Granatstein, J. L. (1988). Compte rendu de [Helman, Claire. *The Milton-Park Affair: Canada's Largest Citizen-Developer Confrontation*. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1987. Pp. 183. Illustrations. \$12.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 16(3), 293–294. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017741ar>

Portuguese living in Quebec. It is an unpretentious case study based on data collected from 255 Portuguese households interviewed in 1984 in the Montreal region. It documents that the Portuguese community has chosen French as its second language, primarily because they have found employment in the francophone sector of the economy. But the members of this francophone (and francophile) ethnic community have sent their children to English schools and, as a result of this, Portuguese youth, while trilingual, tend to integrate into the English-speaking community. In noting this phenomenon, the authors attempt to demonstrate that the situation has changed drastically with the enforcement of provincial language legislation (in particular Law 101) that has put a rein on this tendency and that, at present, most young people of Portuguese origin are moving towards French. In positing this, Veltman and Paré tell us that this aspect of language policy must be interpreted in the light of political choices made in the larger system and seen as what could be a consequence of shifting political alignments.

Through the use of questionnaires, the authors bring out the role of the immediate social context in the choice of language and the shortcomings of the concept «langue d'usage unique» used by the Canadian census. According to Veltman and Paré, «on peut notamment reprocher à cette notion subjective et globale de véhiculer une réalité disparue.» Thus, their study shows that, even if the language spoken by the Portuguese is Portuguese, among members of the same generation, they speak French or English. None of these questionnaire replies offers startling new insights, but they do illustrate clearly that the census question reflects the language of intergenerational contacts and is not particularly suited to the study of language shifts.

This working paper could be profitably read in the context of two available books on the Portuguese in Canada (i.e., Anderson, G. and D. Higgs, *L'héritage du futur*, and Alpalhão, J.A. and V. Da Rosa, *Les Portugais du Québec*), that document different socio-economic aspects of the Portuguese communities in Canada. To our surprise, these two monographs are absent from the bibliography.

While this is not a publication for the beginning student, it is deserving of attention by those interested in new research on linguistic shift in Canada. Thus, the study fills a gap in our knowledge of immigrant groups in the province of Quebec. While it can never be considered as a definitive work on the topic, it probably will be of some use to students seeking basic data on language choices made by immigrants in Montreal. As stated before, what would have enhanced its utility is a broader and more comprehensive description of the socio-economic niches occupied by the Portuguese communities of Quebec.

A final note: It would have been appropriate, for the sake of precision, to make reference to Montreal in the title. As a matter of fact, the findings may or may not apply to other

«Québécois d'origine portugaise» living in Hull or Quebec City, for instance.

Victor M.P. Da Rosa
Department of Sociology
University of Ottawa

Helman, Claire. *The Milton-Park Affair: Canada's Largest Citizen-Developer Confrontation*. Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1987. Pp. 183. Illustrations. \$12.95.

Ratepayers and residents operate under serious disadvantages when fighting developers. The money is always concentrated on the other side and the city politicians, all too often, believe that their bread will be buttered better by the developers, not the voters. It takes time and effort to mobilize a community, endless hours attending meetings at City Hall and raising funds, hours that could be more usefully spent doing a job or simply playing with the kids. Staying power, in other words, is not the notable characteristic of a citizens group. And yet, sometimes it all comes together; sometimes the residents can defend themselves and emerge out of the fire as a stronger and more viable community.

Milton-Park is in Montreal, located just to the east of the McGill University campus. In the late 1960s, the housing stock in the area was slightly run down, but still sound. The residents were a bilingual mix of working class and middle class, hippies, professors, and workers, all of whom enjoyed living within a fifteen minute walk from the centre of town. But that very advantage attracted developers, ironically in this case two lapsed communists who had split with the party in 1956 and set out to make money. The developers put together a proposal, attracted funding from private and public sources and declared themselves ready to clear the slums.

Aided by a mole within the Montreal planning department, aided not at all by the politicians, the tenants and owners began to organize. Newsletters poured out; marches set off for City Hall; street festivals brought the wider community into the neighbourhood; the media was pressed into service; and the developers' spies were rooted out. Given the population of the area, there were political agendas being played out as the Maoists jostled with activists of various hues. Inevitably a core group of twenty developed, led by a McGill professor. Who else, after all, had the time to spend fighting City Hall and the access to mimeograph and xerox machines?

Milton-Park lost some of the early battles as its disorganization hurt it. The developer cleared a great tract of land for a hotel-apartment complex. But then the cost of money began to rise, the October Crisis hurt Montreal's image and

kept investors away, and the developers suddenly found themselves overextended. The activists in Milton-Park had gone through several permutations in the meantime and new combinations had emerged by the mid-1970s, now dedicated to co-op housing. With an angel in the person of Phyllis Lambert, the architect daughter of the Bronfman dynasty, the federal and provincial governments were pushed and prodded into putting up money for renovation of the surviving housing stock. The impending referendum of May 1980, for example, was skillfully used to persuade the federal Liberals that support would be rewarded. And by 1983 the new Milton-Park was in existence, a thriving community of 597 co-op houses restored at a cost of more than \$30 million in government funds and occupied by a mix of classes and occupations.

Claire Helman's book tells this story in a simple prose that is illustrated with some well-chosen photos. She has her heroes and villains, but she is not averse to noting the follies of the residents. What we don't find out, however, is how many of the original residents of Milton-Park were still there in the 1980s to move into the renovated co-ops. My guess is that a maximum of twenty per cent had survived death and change to reap the benefits of the generation-long struggle. But so what? We all work to make the future better. And in Milton-Park, the future happily turned out to be better. An instructive book, this; one that demonstrates that residents can sometimes outlast the developers and politicians.

J.L. Granatstein
History Department
York University

Carter-Edwards, Karen. *100 Years of Service*. Cornwall: Cornwall Electric, 1987. Pp. x, 335. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$30.00 cloth.

100 Years of Service, is an official history Cornwall Electric, commissioned by the utility to commemorate its 100th anniversary. The book has all of the strengths and weaknesses of both an "institutional" history and a local history, that is one rich in detail but one that does not put Cornwall Electric into a wider context. To her credit, Carter-Edwards does give an interesting and colourful account of electricity's introduction and development in this Ontario town. With more such local studies historians may be able to understand the process of industrial development and public regulation of one of modern society's vital commodities: electricity.

Unfortunately, some problems mar the book. Besides spelling and typing errors, there are several confusing passages. For example, in discussing referenda in 1919 and 1921 to renew the electrical company's franchise, the reader is not given the number of eligible voters, only the margin of defeat

or victory. Nor is the criteria for eligibility made clear: in one place it is residents who vote and in another ratepayers. Clarity would be served by completeness.

The most serious flaw in the book, however, is its company bias. The story of this electric utility's relations with the municipal council, its employees, the Ontario Hydro Electric Power Commission and the public power movement, is presented entirely from the vantage point of the company, leaving important questions unasked. Public power activists are dismissed as a few isolated "cranks" who enjoyed little community sport: a marginal labour group looking for a platform from which to promote itself; or naive householders and businessmen looking for cheap rates, but who had little regard for the profit motive as an incentive to efficiency.

The conditions that produced this privately-owned utility, in the Ontario sea of public ownership, deserve greater attention than the author gives them. She implies Cornwall chose private ownership because, due to greater efficiency, its rates were lower than those of Ontario Hydro. Cornwall was tempted to join the new Hydro system in 1912, lured like many Ontario municipalities by the promise of lower rates and excitement over "people's power" had the Commission made a firm offer. By the time the matter came up for discussion again in 1919 and 1921 — when referenda to renew the company's franchise produced heated discussion between Hydro and anti-Hydro forces — the Hydro system was coming to be seen as a huge monopoly, impervious to local control. As well, experience had by the 1920s shown that low rates offered to a municipality upon joining the system were not always maintained. At the time Cornwall was reasonably happy with its private electrical utility. So long as abundant hydro-electric resources and the threat of public ownership helped keep rates down, there was no reason to switch to Hydro. Although the author dutifully praises the company for its contributions to the city through promotion of local industrial development, its "commitment to service" and its cultural and charitable activities, these public relations gestures are not assigned their real significance. Clearly good relations with the city was a crucial factor in warding off public ownership.

Accounts of labour relations are badly one-sided. Cornwall strikes are depicted as upheavals generated by outside agitators and the company is portrayed as a wonderful place to work. Carter-Edwards neglects to note here that the electrical utility business was in the forefront of the twentieth century policy of promoting employees stability through good employee benefits. Cornwall Electric was not exceptional nor does she give any recognition to the union's role in creating a good work environment. The company was not alone.

The company's history also provides an excursion into the relationship of utilities and financial institutions. For many years, Cornwall Electric was owned by Sun Life, of Mon-