

**McDonald, Donna. *Lord Strathcona: A Biography of Donald Alexander Smith*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1996. Pp. 600. 47 Illustrations. \$34.99 (cloth)**

**Matthew J. Bellamy**

Volume 26, numéro 1, octobre 1997

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016679ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016679ar>

[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

Bellamy, M. J. (1997). Compte rendu de [McDonald, Donna. *Lord Strathcona: A Biography of Donald Alexander Smith*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1996. Pp. 600. 47 Illustrations. \$34.99 (cloth)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 26(1), 65–66. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016679ar>

freedom and human rights. Until 1989 the western world defended democracy in Germany and in its outpost West Berlin against communist aggression. In contrast, during these years East Berlin was the capital of the former German Democratic Republic and its torchbearer against capitalist imperialism, as well as the showcase of socialist achievement. As this book shows, two very different German societies and popular cultures emerged on each side of the wall. It is this deep division that now weighs heavily on Germany, and on Berlin in particular. Today, it is difficult to find any consensus among Berlin citizens and German politicians about how to interpret and deal with the city's troubled historical past. But large-scale urban reconstruction and architectural representation, necessitated by Berlin's renewed role as the capital of a united Germany, make the past, immediate or distant, an unavoidable fact in everyday life.

It is one of the many strengths of this book that it succeeds in connecting the past with the present in an imaginative way, and on different cognitive levels. For instance, in the first chapter, entitled "The Wall" the author's innovative methodological approach is demonstrated. He keeps his focus on that physical barrier — which has defined, and still defines, the identity of Berlin citizens, while at the same time outlining Berlin's earliest history and geographical characteristics in the context of present-day politics and popular culture. This ability to fuse the past with the present is evident throughout, and particularly in the second chapter on "Old Berlin". Here the author provides a delightful and thorough account of Berlin's architectural treasures and history, and a sophisticated assessment of its many aesthetic qualities, despite the fact that the city's architectural past sports only the occasional gem. But what makes this historical journey truly fascinating is the context of divergent visions in East and West Berlin during the 1980s on how to best reconstruct the remnants of the Hohenzollern past. It is a story not only of different theories of aesthetics — not unexpected given the different ideological foundations of East and West Germany — but it is also a case study of how governments attempt to use the past to serve the present. This story's political relevance emerges fully when the author presents his analysis of the ongoing acrimonious debates about how to acknowledge the Hohenzollern legacy in Berlin today.

The book's discussion of the Nazi period and its monumental legacy of terror, and accompanying bad taste, is even more revealing given that the subject is a virtual minefield. Fortunately, the author keeps a balanced view of the many debates that have raged over the use of public space for public atonement of Nazi crime and mass murder. Not only does he refrain from stereotypical explanations, he also dares to probe further than the frequently arid arguments offered by feuding German politicians, intellectuals and artists. In fact, he is at his best when he turns to the neighbourhood level, probing such divisive issues as the renaming of streets and the replacement of monuments. Reworking the city's memory has a long tradition in Berlin, but expunging the East German legacy since 1989

has proven to be a most contentious undertaking. While names of former East German or Russian politicians are not a problem, the case for public oblivion is not as easily made in the case of Weimar socialist leaders or communist resistance fighters against the Nazi regime. Also, public inscriptions to mark the many sites of Nazi terror are not always welcomed by local residents. It is to the author's credit that he shows how the ordinary German has accepted political and cultural change, and it is in this way that he succeeds in presenting new insights into popular mentalities and existing social divisions in Berlin, and in Germany. Certainly, his technique of intertwining historical facts and architectural history on the one hand, with politics, and popular and artistic culture on the other, makes this book a very informative and enjoyable historical journey.

Irmgard Steinisch  
Department of History  
York University

---

McDonald, Donna. *Lord Strathcona: A Biography of Donald Alexander Smith*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1996. Pp. 600. 47 illustrations. \$34.99 (cloth).

Driving the last spike into the "CPR" track at Craigellachie, in the B.C. interior, is an image that has embellished Canadian text books for over a century, as it does the dust jacket of this book, which recounts the life of Donald Smith, the elderly man swinging the hammer at the centre of the photograph.

Donald Alexander Smith, son of a Scottish tradesman, came to Canada in 1838. He immediately entered the service of the Hudson's Bay Company and worked his way through the ranks from apprentice clerk to chief commissioner in 1871. He left the fur trade in 1874 to take the office of land commissioner for the company, reporting directly to London. In 1889, having become, after years of shrewd investments, the company's largest shareholder he was elected governor of the Hudson's Bay Company. Notable for settling the terms of union between Riel's provisional government and Canada in 1869, Smith entered politics. He represented Winnipeg in the Manitoba legislature (1870–1874), and Selkirk in the House of Commons (1871–1878). A Conservative, Smith broke with John A. Macdonald in 1873 when details surfaced about the government's role in the "Pacific Scandal". In 1887, he was elected president of Canada's first bank, the Bank of Montreal. A decade later, he was raised to the peerage of the United Kingdom as Lord Strathcona.

McDonald's biography is the most extensive account of Smith's public and private life we possess to date. It offers new insights into his investments, health, personality, donations, conspicuous and clandestine diplomacy) and his marriage to Isabella Sophia Hardisty. The work is more representation than analysis. It is heavily factual and contains few speculations that go beyond the evidence. What emerges from it is a picture of a

nineteenth-century man who, unlike Gerald Tulchinsky's "River Barons", was not solely driven by a devotion to Montreal and its growth and the profits that could be made from that growth. Smith was deeply committed to family, region, nation and empire, to material progress and to the ethic of hard work, and not exclusively for economic reasons.

Well grounded in the primary sources — Scottish, American, British and Canadian — McDonald's study does more than recount the life and times of an individual. Under her pen, questions about the nature of the "English" community in Montreal, the interplay between metropolis and hinterland and the integrity of Canadian business, fuse in a single account.

Smith was one of a small number of Scottish-born elites who dominated the Montreal — and therefore the national — economy until the time of his death in 1914. The Scottish community, in alliance with the Tory politicians in Ottawa through a number of institutions (the HBC, the Bank of Montreal and the CPR) — all of which were Smith-related — managed to make Montreal a "national metropolis". As the prime focus of capital, exchange, enterprise and leadership, Montreal effectively dominated vast economic hinterlands. By establishing a commercial monopoly, centralizing business and expanding the railway east and west, Smith and a handful others — who happened to be located in Montreal — developed the Canadian nation and urban network.

This class of Montrealers had become initially very wealthy by investing in commercial enterprises, specifically in the staple trades. Smith, for instance, had made a good deal of money reinvesting his HBC salary in the fur trade. Yet with the development of new technologies and the modernization of the economy at mid-century, Smith and his associates emerged among the strongest supporters of the growth of manufacturing. During the 1850s Canada's largest bank, the Bank of Montreal — in which Smith had been amassing shares since the late 1840s — began purchasing large amounts of railway stock, signifying a shift from its old commercial business into a new kind of industrial lending. Furthermore, shortly thereafter, the Bank of Montreal began lobbying the government for the establishment of a central bank that would finance manufacturing and provide a fiat currency and a national banking system suited to an industrialized economy. It was not the chartered banks, therefore, that were preventing money from going into manufacturing; indeed, it was the more important commercial bank, Smith's Bank of Montreal, that was spearheading the advance into a different kind of system. Over his lifetime, Smith owned shares in twenty-five manufacturing and power companies, among them, the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company, the Lachine Rapids Hydraulic and Land Company, the Montreal Light, Heat and Power Company and the Pease Foundry.

Beyond its strengths, this book manifests the weaknesses of biography. In her efforts to always keep Smith in view, McDonald limits her work to the upper level of the bourgeoisie. In this way she makes a similar choice to that of Acheson and

Pédalue. This results in entrepreneurs of medium importance being left in the shadows. As Linteau has argued, the group was an important economic force in Montreal and cannot afford to be overlooked. In addition, by keeping Smith in the foreground, McDonald paints a picture of the Montreal business community that is unrealistically homogeneous and harmonious.

Despite its shortcomings, this book, or parts of it, could be read with benefit both by students of business history and urban historians.

Matthew J. Bellamy  
Department of History  
Carleton University

---

Ryan, Mary P. *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997. Pp. xii, 376, 44 black and white illustrations, bibliography, index. US\$27.50.

Combining a rich array of primary sources such as newspapers, government records, and firsthand accounts with the work of numerous recent historical studies, Mary Ryan's *Civic Wars* presents a fascinating tale of three cities — New York, New Orleans and San Francisco—in the period between 1825 and 1880. Focused, as the subtitle suggests, on people as participants in public and political life, it is also a history of the changing nature of political participation in this period. In charting the tumultuous flow of public life, Ryan focuses not on the urban elite or on "centers of government but on the far more dispersed and elusive habitats of the people(12)," following the people through the various public spaces in which they interacted. In doing so, Ryan also traces the gradual, if highly problematic, expansion of democracy. Cities, rather than "other putative cradles of democracy" such as the frontier or the New England town, Ryan argues, are where "direct confrontation with a particularly heterogeneous and fractious people(10–11)" offered the new "representative institutions" of democracy their strongest test. In seven chapters, divided into three sections, Ryan vividly describes parades, political meetings, riots and other forms of political activity and group identification that took place in public spaces from New York's Bowery to Jackson Square in New Orleans to Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, and closely analysing the interrelations of class, race, ethnicity and gender revealed there. This blend of anecdote and analysis conveys the heterogeneity and fluidity of urban life, and of the shifting, complex meanings of the identities that individuals and groups claimed as they sought their place in the public life of their cities.

Ryan's work reflects the fragmented, somewhat elusive nature of both the history and the recent historiography of places populated by an almost impossible diversity of characters and cultures, anxieties and ambitions. To those who see such diversity