
Royden Loewen

Citer ce compte rendu

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inally, he suggests that the bicycle was responsible for turning
countries into "a recreational space" for city dwellers. (222) Yet his own evidence shows that such treks were not at all the norm and that the handful who did un-
dertake such world travels depended on other modes of trans-
portation to get to the furthest reaches of the planet. He also
asserts that farming communities were less given to mecha-
nical invention than the towns of central Canada engaged in mak-
ing various kinds of machinery." I think that the historical record
of agricultural innovation shows the exact opposite: Canadian
farmers were constantly inventing, adapting, and building ma-
achines to help them do their work. Some of their innovations
were far more significant and enduring than the largely cosmetic
refinements offered up by most Canadian bicycle inventors. Fi-
ally, he suggests that the bicycle was responsible for turning
the countryside into "a recreational space" for city dwellers.
(230) This might come as a surprise to historians of sport, rec-
reation, and boat-building in this country who have documented
our long tradition of recreational use of the countryside.

I also had problems with Professor Norcliffe's writing style. He
writes almost exclusively in the passive voice which tends to ob-
scure the human actors who are generally at the centre of his-
torical events. When he does use the active voice, it is the
ideas, movements, and projects that are acting. Thus, we have
innovations occurring, arriving in clusters, developing, and driv-
ing industrial modernity. Modernity is a movement and a project
that is contested and marches, advances, and otherwise moves
forward, all apparently without the help of human beings. When
people do appear in the story it is either as part of a specific nar-
ative – the Karl Kreelman tour – or as subjects being acted
upon by the forces of modernity. This not only makes the book
difficult to read, it also leaves readers with the erroneous impres-
sion that technological and cultural change are not the products
of human action.

Norcliffe's "two-wheeled" approach to his subject did not work. The
theoretical analysis is not well integrated into the narrative
but seems to sit on top of it. As a result, he presents us with de-
tailed theoretical discussions followed, often abruptly, by long
passages devoted entirely to descriptive narrative that only tenu-
ously relate to the arguments he is making. The detailed ex-
cerpts from Karl Kron's travels (157-68) tell us a great deal
about the state of roads but not how the bicycling community
contributed to their improvement or whether Kron saw himself
in the vanguard of cultural and technological progress.

For all of its problems, I think that this book is worth a careful
read. Norcliffe's research is first rate and he has documented
hitherto unknown events, artifacts, and individuals central to the
history of cycling in Canada. Though his theoretical analysis
was not very successful, he nevertheless demonstrates the
value of exploring the history of technology and the necessity of
placing technological developments in a broad social and cul-
tural context. Given the appalling lack of academic interest in
the field of technological history in this country, this alone
makes the book an admirable effort.

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Orm Overland. Immigrant Minds, American Identities: Making
the United States Home, 1870-1930. Urbana: University of

This book reflects the American immigration historian's ongoing
fascination with the process of integration and even assimilation
into American society. Recent works by George Sanchez, Jon
Gjerde, Donna Gabaccia, Mario Maffi, and others have de-
scribed processes of ethnicisation. They agree widely that eth-
nicity is invented, not some kind of transplanted cultural
"essence." What then can another book on the topic add to this
discussion, especially one that emphasizes Western European
immigrants that became integrated into American society with
seeming effortlessness?

Much indeed, for Overland has made an intelligent and insight-
ful contribution. Unlike other works on ethnicisation, he looks at
the process by which immigrant group organizations sought the
favour of the wider American society by asserting and even her-
alding their ethnicities. In these proclamations of ethnicity they
did not contest America, but sought to place themselves at its
very centre. Each group advocated a particular "foundation
story," claiming a seminal place within American culture. The ob-
vious claims Italians had on Columbus the "discoverer" of Amer-
ica, the Irish on the idea of liberty, or the Norwegians on the
status of "frontiersman", were made alongside more obscure as-
sertions of Washington's "Italian sentiment" (60), of Columbus's
Jewishness, of German socialism's affinity with American citizen-
ship, of Dutch "true religion", of Norwegian "discovery" of four-
teenth-century Minnesota. It did not matter that such assertions
often were spurious; they constituted a particular strategy of int:
gration.

The book has many strengths. The first is this central thesis. But
the many ironies and surprises that support the central thesis
make the book a fascinating account. The fluid nature of in-
vented identities undermines any notion of national "essential-
ism", but the very phenomenon of "myth making", argues
Overland was an "essential feature of American ethnicity," the
creative identity of white non-English immigrants wishing "inclu-
sion" (21). The drive for inclusion was that of the European immi-
grant, but "excluded" groups also found paths of integration:
African Americans by asserting national partnership with the
English, the Chicanos by professing true Spanish descent from
were compelled to assert athletic prowess, entrepreneurial skill, or peaceful tradition. The story may just be even more complex than Overland’s evocative portrayal demonstrates.

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La Seine “était dynamique au XVIIIᵉ siècle, animée par une grande diversité de pratiques et d’acteurs et dominée par une tension permanente entre les usages et leur régulation. Elle devient statique au XIXᵉ siècle, la centurie de quais ayant pour objectif principal d’enfermer et de contenir le fleuve” (p. 344). Depuis nous dit Isabelle Backouche, le fleuve – et ses abords – est un “espace étranger à la vie de la capitale”. Il est “musée”, il est architecture, il est esthétique; il n’est plus le moteur d’urbanité qu’il a été, l’“espace urbain” au cœur de la vie parisienne.

Partant de ce constat, l’objectif Backouche est de faire connaître la relation entre Paris et son fleuve avant et pendant la “rupture” opérée au cours de la première moitié du XIXᵉ siècle. Comment la Seine a-t-elle perdu le rôle prépondérant qu’elle tenait dans Paris? Comment le lien entre Paris et son fleuve a-t-il été tissé puis, quand et comment s’est opérée la rupture? Divisé en trois parties, l’ouvrage couvre la période 1750 à 1850, soit au moment où de “réels enjeux, économiques et politiques, s’attachent aux relations entre Paris et son fleuve”, jusqu’au moment où le devenir de Paris devient indépendant de son fleuve.


Le fleuve est “un espace qui envahit la vie urbaine” (p. 103) en 1750. Il agrémentait ou imposait des contraintes aux déplacements de tous les Parisiens, se pose comme un lieu de rassemblement et de consommation, permet à tout un chacun de s’investir d’une appartenance géographique intra-parisienne (appartenance à la rive Gauche, à la rive Droite). Enfin, Backouche démontre que, de par son rôle central, la Seine bénéficiait d’un statut – juridique notamment – complexe qui la distinguait dans la cité (p. 141) et dont le contrôle était jalousement gardé par les autorités locales et leurs représentants (inspecteurs, contrôleurs, receveurs).