

## Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW  
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

**Kalman, Harold. *A History of Canadian Architecture*. Toronto, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1994. Pp. 933. 2 volumes. 860 Black and White photographs. Bibliographies. Notes. Index. \$95.00 (set) cloth.**

H. Stanley Loten

Volume 24, Number 1, October 1995

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019237ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019237ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

### ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Loten, H. S. (1995). Review of [Kalman, Harold. *A History of Canadian Architecture*. Toronto, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1994. Pp. 933. 2 volumes. 860 Black and White photographs. Bibliographies. Notes. Index. \$95.00 (set) cloth.] *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 24(1), 61–63. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019237ar>

talent in well-produced maps is most evident. Sheila Wilson was the reference librarian at the St. Catharines Public Library. The collaboration is a natural and effective one. Between them it is hard to imagine anything about St. Catharines that the authors would not know. Curiously, though, neither is a native of the city each knows so well.

The organization of the book is primarily chronological from the earliest days of the settlement to 1991. Despite being rooted in the pre-European period, the narrative is triumphal. St. Catharines rises from humble origins to be a major Ontario Victorian city. The Welland canals, the grapes, and the agriculture combine to set the special times and places of an interesting city. The city's development was slow until the 1950s when it picked up steam, ostensibly because of major amalgamations with Merriton, Port Dalhousie, and parts of Grantham and Louth townships. By 1971 it was a city of 110,000; and has grown another 20,000 since. In the early part of the century, population was doubling every 20 years; at all other times (with the possible exception of the years before 1851 when W.H. Merritt left his imprint so boldly), it grew very modestly.

Useful comparisons can be made with another Ontario canal city. Peterborough was generally a more important town and industrial centre until the 1950s, even though the traffic through the Welland was much heavier than that through the Trent canal. Peterborough has, in St. John's Anglican Church, a stone Gothic building dating from 1835. St. Catharines has, in St. George's Anglican Church, a stone Gothic church for which the cornerstone was also laid in 1835. There are no stone Gothic Anglican churches in North America of older vintage than this pair; an earlier church in Thorold was torn down because it was on the route of the second Welland canal. St. Catharines

has more insurance companies, but Peterborough was probably more heavily insured, chiefly with Canada Life, than any place in Ontario in the late nineteenth-century. St. Catharines came up with very significant bridges; the Glen Ridge Bridge (1914) appears to be a match for the Hunter Street Bridge (1919-21). Peterborough has emerged as a major rowing centre only since the building of Trent University; St. Catharines has a very long tradition of rowing prowess. While St. Catharines was the centre of the fine Niagara agricultural regions, the annual fall fairs at Peterborough were much more important. The comparisons between the two cities clearly would reward close historical analysis.

This book is strongly recommended and deserves to be widely read by a general audience, as well as an academic one. Still, it is not the last word. "Incentives from outside its boundaries, as well as from within, have dictated much of the city's character." (ix) *Incentives* seems to translate as "impersonal forces"; the thesis of the book is somewhat deterministic when discussing setting and trends; yet people, in great diversity, "helped shape the city." Is a city people, or is it things and forces? Jackson and Wilson touch on almost everything, but in the end are satisfied with description. Housing patterns are described as being working-class, but there is no definition of class. One is struck, as well, by the contrast between Jackson's analysis of canal workers compared to Peter Way's *Common Labour* (Cambridge, 1993). The book is more anecdotal, less analytical, than urban historians might wish. We learn, for example, that in 1921 34.2% of the population was Anglican; however, we have nothing against which to savour that observation. We are told, also in 1921, that the Merriton fair "drew large crowds" without any hint of how large, or why it attracted crowds; the point is only mentioned

so we can be told that a tightrope walker fell to his death. (237) The absence of footnotes also encourages the authors to pursue chronological detail rather than interpretive overlays. While one could wish for more interpretation and more detail on significant matters, the authors offer forthright and authoritative opinions at almost every turn of this big book.

Elwood H. Jones, Trent University

---

**Kalman, Harold. A History of Canadian Architecture. Toronto, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1994. Pp. 933. 2 volumes. 860 Black and White photographs. Bibliographies. Notes. Index. \$95.00 (set) cloth.**

W. Biggerstaff Wilson, the "second son of pioneer Victoria entrepreneur William Wilson," built a Tudor revival house "on Rockland Avenue, Victoria" in 1905-6. It is "characteristic of (Samuel) Maclure's best work." The false half-timbering appears "only on the front and sides" but has "a striking decorative effect" and the house as a whole has "a truly picturesque effect." "The principal interior feature . . . is the magnificent hall" in which a "variety of handsome materials is introduced to good effect." "Fir is used for the wall panelling . . . the fireplace is tiled . . . Maclure looked for . . . a historical point of departure that was appropriate for the strong British element in the young west-coast city" and could only find that in "an external tradition that had appropriate meaning in the new setting." But Maclure's design was not merely historically derivative, it was also in tune with contemporary developments both in Britain and the United States, in both the "Queen Anne and Arts and Crafts" movements. Norman Shaw and Philip Webb in Britain, and Bruce Price and H.H. Richardson in the United States produced similar work at about the same time, or

slightly earlier. Kalman selects the Charles A. Newall house (1881) in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania, by Wilson Eyre, for comparison, and quotes Maclure's future partner, Ross Lort, to the effect that such work had a very direct influence. In addition to all this, Kalman includes the information that W. Biggerstaff Wilson inherited "his father's food-warehousing business . . . and the fortune of the London bachelor after whom he was named." He then proceeds to describe more briefly other less ambitious and less formally revivalist Maclure houses, having set the context of discussion by means of his fuller treatment of the Biggerstaff Wilson house.

The above is a greatly condensed review of how Harold Kalman handles one building that is not particularly extraordinary in his recently completed two-volume compendium, *A History of Canadian Architecture*, the first general survey of the field in recent years, and a work that has received widespread critical acclaim. Taken by itself, his depiction of the Biggerstaff Wilson house is no more than a brief, sketchy essay. But it occurs more or less in the midst of a comprehensive summary that ranges through such diverse constructions as the Chippewa shaking tent (prehistoric to present), the Newfoundland tile (seventeenth to twentieth centuries), Norgate Shopping Centre, Montreal (1949), the National Gallery of Canada (1983–88), Cathedral Place, Vancouver (1989–91), and the Newton Library, Surrey, B.C. (1991) by Patkau Architects. The amount of associative detail that Kalman packs into this catalogue of Canadian building exploits is truly amazing: such arcana as the average age of Basque fishermen and the percentage of them that slept ashore, and Fred Lasserre's spectacular faux-pas at UBC School of Architecture in telling Douglas Cardinal to get lost because "he had the wrong family background."

The Biggerstaff Wilson house illustrates Kalman's approach to this mammoth project. Each section and subsection is introduced with a brief contextual essay, and then individual examples are discussed largely on their own terms. Descriptions of the buildings chosen are fleshed out by collateral information such as historical or geographical context; biographical data on builder, designer, and owner; materials used, and functions accommodated—none of this in an obtrusively systematic manner. Social history tends to be more fully reported in relation to early material, while technical matters and formal architectural features predominate in discussion of the more recent work.

The diverse subjects and events recounted are organized according to three rough matrices: chronology, geography, and typology. This permits a division of the subject into relatively manageable chunks that can be discussed and digested independently. No doubt historians would quibble with the specifics of Kalman's subdivision, but clearly a field such as Canadian architecture can hardly be ploughed in one straight line, particularly when "*architecture and building* (Kalman's emphases) are not really different species at all." Under the heading "Canadian Architecture" Kalman sets out to depict Canadian history through the medium of all buildings ever constructed within the country. Thus we find subsections on bridges, canals, forts, towers, windmills, tipis, pit houses, police posts, snowhouses, power dams, tilts, full studding, and fishing stations, among other entries more conventionally associated with the history of architecture.

Comprehensiveness of scope, and the need to divide the material in various ways, produce some difficulties in the structure of the work. Quebec and the Maritimes are referred to time and again,

while the Arctic, the Prairies, and the West Coast are described less frequently. Subjects like the buildings of the indigenous cultures are scattered through the two volumes. The same can be said for stylistic categories such as the Gothic revival, which crops up in both volumes, as do the various forms of Georgian that our upper middle classes so love. In many cases, an introductory essay accompanies the first appearance of these subjects, but this can hardly be repeated when the same topic crops up at a later date and in a different geographical setting. As a result, some discussions of, for example, Gothic revival, float somewhat detached from the contextual framing that has been established at an earlier point in the work.

*A History of Canadian Architecture* is not a book that one can simply sit down and read. It is a reference work that gives an overview. Sources are carefully documented, and the more detailed treatments that are available for nearly all areas of the subject are fully identified. Nevertheless, the book has its most effective impact as a whole, rather than within its component parts. Necessarily, the treatment of individual subjects, urbanism in particular, must be severely curtailed. Town planning, for example, is reviewed as one subject (chapter 12), and there are a number of settlement and community plans at various points in other chapters, but there is practically nothing on the modern city, and nothing on suburban development since World War II. Similarly, Kalman reviews the ecclesiastical aspect of Gothic revival at some length, but skips over its theoretical side that actually forms the basis of twentieth-century modern. Modern architecture, in fact, gets relatively skimpy coverage in the last of the 15 chapters, even though it probably accounts for the majority of buildings ever built in Canada. Some examples discussed as "Post Mod-

ern"—e.g., the Northwest Leisure Centre in Regina (1984)—seem dubiously classified, as is the revivalist West Edmonton Mall which is included under "Modern." Clearly, Kalman's primary interest is with pre-modern, and with both historical and physical restoration. His introductory framework for post-modern architecture (p. 845), undoubtedly the most significant discourse under way at present, does not push the subject much beyond the superficial and ultimately self-defeating level of "reuse of historical forms."

But these minor reservations aside, there is no doubt that this is by far the most comprehensive account of Canadian architecture ever produced. It resoundingly confirms Kalman's contention that "a uniquely Canadian (architectural) character" does indeed exist, and this account will stand as a significant accomplishment in Canadian architectural scholarship. At the same time, the field is still open for more narrowly defined work, particularly in the area of Canadian architecture since the mid twentieth-century, and Canadian urbanism. Kalman's theoretical stance—that architecture "is no more or less than an expression of the values of the people who built it"—is essentially the half-century-old viewpoint and methodology of Lewis Mumford's. Valuable as Kalman's (and Mumford's) work is and will be for the future, the present state of architectural understanding in the profession, as in the general public, desperately needs scholarship that recognizes architecture's unique field of action more explicitly and sees it as a mode of building culture rather than merely as a means of expressing culture.

H. Stanley Loten, School of Architecture,  
Carleton University,  
sloten@ccs.carleton.ca

**MacKay, Donald. *The People's Railway: A History of Canadian National*.  
Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1992.  
328 pp.**

One of Ken Mackenzie's last acts as archivist for Canadian National was to build support within the corporation for a Canadian National history project. The centrepiece of the project was a commissioned corporate history, to be written by popular historian Donald MacKay. The result is *The People's Railway*, a solid but traditional account of Canadian National.

The contradiction created by the railway's two roles, as a public service enterprise and as a profit-maximizing business, is the most important theme in the book. MacKay makes a convincing case that, at least since 1935 when C.D. Howe became minister of railways and canals, Canadian National has been moulded "into more of a business and less of a government agency for national improvement." (p. 118) Although MacKay appears to sympathize with this development, he is evenhanded in his treatment of the issue and is willing to see the merit of the public service argument.

This debate over the role of the Canadian National provides one of the few coherent themes in MacKay's book. MacKay adopts a top-down approach to corporate history, tracing developments under each Canadian National administration. This approach has some merits. It permits the reader to associate particular policy innovations with the responsible chief executive officers, and the personalities of Henry Thornton and Donald Gordon enliven the narrative. The chronological approach also provides a convenient way of ordering the history of a corporation that at various points in its history was involved in railway transportation, merchant shipping, radio broadcast-

ing, the hotel business, and real estate development.

On the whole, however, I found MacKay's approach made for frustrating reading. Subjects such as the changing nature of employer-employee relations, the impact of technological innovations, or the development of freight and passenger services receive a few brief paragraphs in many chapters. Readers of this journal will be particularly disappointed by the scattered references to Canadian National's role in postwar urban development projects. Overall, MacKay's approach limits his ability to offer any kind of coherent or consistent analysis of particular subjects and obscures long-term developments. The best chapters are those in which certain themes flow from the chronological approach, such as the chapters on the impact of World War II, or Canadian National's "pursuit of passengers" in the 1960s.

In preparing the book, MacKay conducted interviews with executives and veteran railway workers. The voices of ordinary workers can be heard at various points in the book, most clearly in an intriguing chapter on "railway people." MacKay allows the railroaders to speak for themselves, giving the reader a sense of what it meant to work for Canadian National in the twentieth century. Much more could be done with these interviews, and historians can be grateful that MacKay has deposited the transcripts in the "CN Archivist's Collection."

It is always difficult to evaluate in an academic journal a book written for a general audience. While willing to overlook omissions in the bibliography and several minor factual errors, I would like to register an "academic" complaint about the haphazard endnotes contained in this history. Interested readers are on their own in tracking down quotations