

Robert Sweeny, *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize: Montreal, 1819–1849*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. 456 pp.

Dan Horner

Volume 44, Number 1-2, Fall 2015, Spring 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1037246ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1037246ar>

[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

Horner, D. (2015). Review of [Robert Sweeny, *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize: Montreal, 1819–1849*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. 456 pp.] *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 44(1-2), 84–85. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1037246ar>

des pouvoirs, de la création de nouveaux savoirs et de la relation entre la population et les élus. Fischler montre que pendant longtemps, une forme d'urbanisme de la réglementation (normes pour l'action individuelle) a dominé sur l'urbanisme de planification (objectifs pour l'action collective) dans la pratique montréalaise.

La période 1914-1960, où Montréal et ses banlieues dominent la scène nationale, est marquée par des critiques de corruption de l'administration montréalaise. Si Nicolas Kenny aborde le nettoyage matériel de la ville, Mathieu Lapointe se penche sur un nettoyage plus subtil, celui des mœurs. Tâchant de combler les lacunes de l'historiographie sur les enjeux de moralité, Lapointe met de l'avant la question de la prostitution pour montrer « comment la gestion d'un 'problème' urbain a été intimement liée à l'histoire politique de la ville [et] à l'évolution des mentalités et de la politique québécoise durant cette période » (p. 86). La question du vice commercialisé apparaît liée aux lacunes de la démocratie municipale. De son côté, Harold Bérubé s'intéresse aux banlieues, négligées dans l'historiographie de l'histoire urbaine, dans le but de mieux les intégrer à l'histoire politique de Montréal. Il étudie l'action politique des banlieues, leur autonomie et leur mode de gouvernance particulier et met l'accent sur la création de la Commission métropolitaine de Montréal en 1921, un jalon important de l'histoire de la gouvernance métropolitaine montréalaise.

Depuis 1960, la désindustrialisation, l'étalement urbain et l'impact du redéveloppement sur le bâti sont des enjeux de la gouvernance. Bérubé suggère, dans un deuxième texte, que la question de la gouvernance montréalaise réapparaît à ce moment, notamment par une multiplicité de nouvelles études, dans le contexte d'une « révolution métropolitaine » à l'échelle du continent. S'intéressant à la dimension politique de cette révolution, Bérubé plaide pour une meilleure historicisation de la gouvernance métropolitaine montréalaise. Enfin, Gérard Beaudet s'intéresse aux années 1970, durant lesquelles l'attention portée à la protection du patrimoine bâti hors des centres historiques s'est accrue significativement en réaction aux rénovations urbaines indifférentes « aux qualités des voisinages » (p. 119). La mobilisation citoyenne a joué un rôle clé selon lui dans la révision des façons de faire des urbanistes et des décideurs. Ces mouvements en faveur du patrimoine architectural et urbain ont refaçonné à leur tour la gouvernance municipale montréalaise.

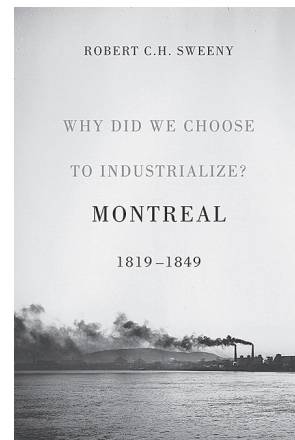
Cet ouvrage soigné fait une bonne synthèse des connaissances et identifie quelques secteurs toujours en friche. Il s'avère d'une importance réelle pour le « renouvellement d'une histoire politique qui élargit ses objets d'étude et qui intègre des perspectives interdisciplinaires » (p. 1). Il saura nourrir et stimuler les discussions sur la gouvernance de la ville et de la région de Montréal, les enjeux de pouvoir et les limites de la démocratie.

Giselle Giral

Candidate au doctorat en histoire, Université Laval

Robert Sweeny, *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize: Montreal, 1819–1849*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. 456 pp.

At first glance, *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize* is a book about Montreal and Lower Canada's transformation from an ancien regime society to an industrial, liberal and capitalist society. Robert Sweeny examines the relationship between town and country, the processes of social change and the tension between advocates of a moral economy of a liberal economy. On the merits of this alone, *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize* makes an important contribution



to the historiography of urbanization in Early Canada and, more broadly speaking, of the transition to capitalism. There is, however, a second and equally important layer to this work. *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize* is a compelling testament to meticulous archival research and active history. It is a book about an historian's career, about a craft and a vocation. Sweeny writes eloquently about moments over the course of his career when a close reading of a body of archival documents- often notarial records- awarded him a fresh perspective on the processes of social and economic change in Montreal and, to a lesser degree, Newfoundland. He leads us from his earliest works as a founding member of the Montreal Business History Project- a collective undertaking by a group of politically engaged social historians working in the late 1970s- to the periodic re-thinking of his approach to the historian's craft spurred on by the cultural turn, the emergence of gender history, post-colonial theory and technological developments in the field of digital mapping.

This act of piecing together an interpretation of the past through archival documents is one that Sweeny urges historians to engage in with a critical eye. Throughout *Why Did We Choose to Industrialize*, he outlines a variety of moments when re-thinking historical sources- grappling with how they were produced and what their authors aimed to do by producing them- led him towards new perspectives on the processes of historical change. Sweeny credits this approach to archival work with allowing him the opportunity to complicate some of the conventional assumptions around the narrative of the transition in colonial cities. Amidst a historiography shaped by sweeping assumptions about the transition, Sweeny demonstrates how notarial records provided fresh insights into the relationships between banks, artisans and merchants that demonstrated the weaknesses in the Staples Thesis. Years spent working on digital mapping, meanwhile, prompted Sweeny to challenge the notion that industrialization and the transition to capitalism created an urban landscape marked by social segregation. The complexity of the trail of archival sources uncovered by Sweeny suggests

that there is much work left for historians to undertake examining how these processes unfolded at the local level, rather than just accepting broad generalizations at face value.

Sweeny pushes the reader to take into consideration the epistemology of the documents they rely upon, and how they reflect an unjust society. Particularly noteworthy here is his critical assessment of censuses, street maps and city directories of Montreal published in the 1820s and 1830s. While these documents, Sweeny argues, might tell us a great deal about the city's composition at a transformative moment, they were inextricably shaped by the assumptions and aspirations of their creators. In the face of rapid social change and relationships that were being renegotiated on the fly, the producers of these sources were finding ways to accentuate the order and modernity of their surroundings. Taken at face value, these documents can sometimes push historians towards assumptions that Montreal's transition to a capitalist society shaped by liberal assumptions about property occurred much more tidily than it did. There is a richer vein, Sweeny argues, that can be tapped by digging deeper into the archival record. An essential part of this, he argues, comes with taking into account the importance of human agency. The importance of choices and strategies is crucial to Sweeny's interpretation of social change, and is reflected in the book's title, which reframes industrialization as the product of complex decisions, rather than of an invisible hand. The restructuring of society that occurred in the first two thirds of the nineteenth century and produced a less equal society with regards to class and gender was not inevitable. The usurping of a longstanding moral economy by liberal concepts of property ownership was profoundly transformative, and its impact reached into every aspect of public life and people's lived experiences. Historians, Sweeny insists, must demonstrate how contentious and audacious the transition was.

Common assumptions about social change during this period are shaped, he argues, by the reality that historians tend to pay much closer attention to the economic activity of the colonial elite, rather than the complex economic activities of daily life in a bustling city. This gave credence to the notion that the exportation of staples like wood and grain, dominated by a masculine merchant elite with close connections to the political establishment, shaped the colonial economy. A closer look at notarial records, however, reveals the persistence of a local craft economy. Furthermore, evidence that the majority of stalls in the city's public markets were owned and operated by women demonstrates that the daily workings of the Montreal economy were far less marked by gender segregation than many historians have assumed. Again, this is an occasion where Sweeny pushes historians to seek nuance through a careful reading of archival records.

Elsewhere, Sweeny argues convincingly that the conventional approach to studying urbanization and the economic and cultural transitions of the nineteenth century has led many historians to lose sight of the crucial place that changing gender relations played in this process. In keeping with recent works by

Bettina Bradbury and Sherry Olson and Patricia Thornton, that grappling with the gendered nature of the strategies that men and women used to negotiate their place in a changing world is essential to understanding the transition. For Sweeny, this was part of a larger realization that the structuralism adopted by many politically engaged scholars in the 1960s and 1970s did not leave adequate room to take into account human agency. Sweeny uses sources like tax rolls and census records to trace the process of suburbanization, and notes the ways in which it was rooted in geographic and economic restructuring of work and family life that was the product of personal decisions and strategies. These complex processes paved the way for a more explicitly patriarchal and unequal society.

Why Did We Choose to Industrialize is not a conventional academic monograph. It is a fascinating and at times contentious record of an historian's career, of the unexpected places that the archives, successive historiographical debates, and the geographic trajectories of academic life can take us. Sweeny traces his shifting perspective on theory and methodology to definitive moments—days spent in archives or panels attended at academic conferences across Canada and Europe. In doing so, he reminds readers of the challenges and rewards that come with remaining engaged with our colleagues, of continuing to pursue fresh insights into the places, processes and periods that we study, and of staying attuned to the connections between the events we study in the past and the contemporary world we inhabit.

Dan Horner
Ryerson University

Jessica van Horssen. *A Town Called Asbestos: Environmental Contamination, Health, and Resilience in a Resource Community*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016. 256 pp.

In *A Town Called Asbestos*, Jessica van Horssen tells the story of Asbestos, Quebec, a mining town founded in the late nineteenth century. The town was named for the mineral, which when added to materials made them flame resistant, an increasingly important quality in the industrializing world. A geological anomaly, the asbestos in the mineral deposit located roughly equidistant from Quebec City and Montreal lay in the form of a circular mound versus the more typical linear sheets. William Jeffrey discovered the site in the 1870s, and working with Charles Webb, formed a company to work the newly named Jeffrey Mine. Asbestos the mineral

