

## *Thumbing a Ride: Hitchhikers, Hostels, and Counterculture in Canada* by Linda Mahood

Bruce Douville

Volume 111, Number 1, Spring 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1059973ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1059973ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

### ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Douville, B. (2019). Review of [*Thumbing a Ride: Hitchhikers, Hostels, and Counterculture in Canada* by Linda Mahood]. *Ontario History*, 111(1), 106–108. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1059973ar>

example, that historians of Niagara tourism have been overly focused on the nation does not mention Karen Dubinsky's important cross-border study of Niagara Falls. Moreover, although Larkin at times points to the depredations that the Six Nations experienced because of the Welland Canal, she does not pause to reflect on whether the canals (on both sides of the border)

were such a boon to Indigenous territories and peoples. Nevertheless, the next time I am "caught by a boat" on either side of the Welland Canal, I will try to control my impatience and remember its role in shaping this transnational community.

Cecilia Morgan  
University of Toronto

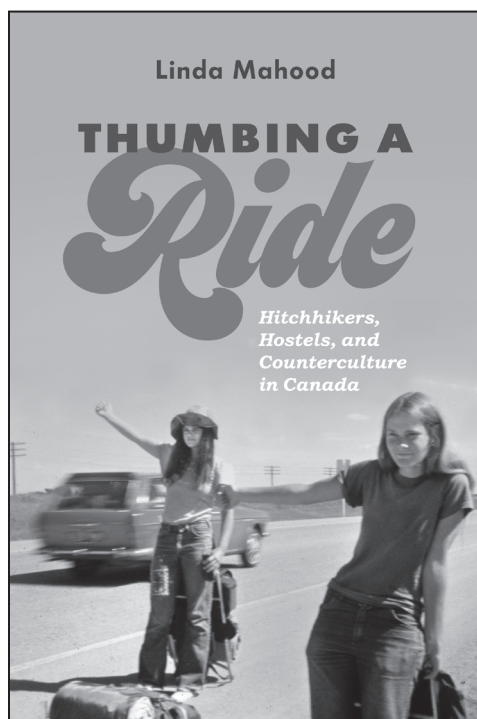
*Thumbing a Ride*  
*Hitchhikers, Hostels, and*  
*Counterculture in Canada*

By Linda Mahood

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018. 344 pages. \$89.95  
hardcover. ISBN 978-0-77483-733-0. \$32.95  
paperback. ISBN 978-0-77483-734-7. \$32.95 e-  
pub. ISBN 978-0-77483-736-1. (ubcpress.ca)

In *Thumbing a Ride*, Linda Mahood examines the early seventies phenomenon of teenagers and young adults hitchhiking across Canada. The book opens with the author's personal account of thumbing a ride in Quebec in the fall of 1978. Because I also hitchhiked in my youth, and am also a scholar of countercultural movements in Canada's "long sixties," I was eager to read this work, and it did not disappoint.

Mahood shows that from the 1930s to the 1950s, Canadians hitchhiked throughout the continent, and overseas. In these years, the press and popular culture presented two competing narratives about hitchhiking. On one hand, it was seen as healthy outlet for adolescent wanderlust, and a way for those of limited means to enjoy the cultural and educational benefits of travel. On the other hand, it was perceived to be a risky activity associated with "wild boys" and "unadjusted girls" who



posed potential dangers to motorists and to themselves. Mahood shows how, in the post-Second World War years, it was the latter narrative that dominated. In many provincial jurisdictions including Ontario, it was also against the law.

But by the end of the sixties, an era of hitchhiking had begun in Canada, thanks to a confluence of factors: the completion of the Trans-Canada Highway; a substan-

tial population of baby boomer youth; and the emergence of a youth-oriented counterculture that affirmed freedom and rejected materialism but not "automobility." The widespread phenomenon of young people "thumbing a ride" drew sustained attention from journalists, police, social workers, and government officials. Observers could only speculate about the number of hitchhikers, with estimated figures in the hundreds of thousands. A "rucksack revolution" was underway.

A substantial portion of this book focuses on the response of social workers and government officials. Social workers associated with the Canadian Welfare Council investigated the phenomenon and issued reports on "transient youth." This led the federal government to establish a network of youth hostels in cities across Canada in 1970. In the years that followed, the government's program to meet the needs of travelling youth fell under the direction of "a new generation of 'hip new civil servants' in their twenties and early thirties," the so-called "blue-jean bureaucrats" (147). The government's provision of these services reflected the sympathies of Prime Minister Trudeau, who had backpacked throughout Europe in his youth. Furthermore, in a time of shrinking youth employment, they were intended "to keep 'idle hands busy'" (147).

Readers well-versed in the literature of Canada's long sixties will detect a familiar pattern: of older "establishment" figures (in government, churches, or social services) providing countercultural or radical youth with the resources to "experiment," provoking irate responses from local communities. Mahood shows how these taxpayer-funded hostels faced opposition from mayors, police, and local citizens, who regarded the "crash pads" as magnets for juvenile delinquents and radical left activists. Events in late 1970 seemed to

confirm the critic's fears: clashes between hippies and bikers in Thunder Bay and London, Ontario, and a prolonged stand-off in Vancouver between police and the young residents of Jericho Hostel, culminating in the "Battle of Jericho."

The federal hostels also faced opposition from the Canadian Youth Hostels Association (CYHA), which, as an affiliate of the International Youth Hostel Federation, had run its own network of hostels since the 1930s for a clientele of adventurous middle-class youth eager "to discover 'out of the way places'" (140). While the CYHA was keen to keep its members-only hostels from becoming "hangouts or crash pads for drifters" (164), it had hoped to meet the needs of the burgeoning number of young cross-country travellers. Consequently, it was irked that the federal government chose to establish a competing hostel network rather than fund the CYHA.

Hostility towards hostels was an extension of the widespread unease about transient youth. While critics were concerned about the dangers that hitchhiking hippies posed both to motorists and local communities, they were also concerned about the dangers faced by hitchhikers themselves, especially the risk that sexually predatory motorists posed to young females. Mahood finds ample evidence of this anxiety in the Canadian press, the expressed desire of municipal officials to ban hitchhiking (including North York mayor Mel Lastman), and the "anti-thumb propaganda" put out by the Ontario Provincial Police. In an era of women's liberation, many young females were prepared to take the risk of thumbing a ride, as an assertion of their equal right to mobility. Nonetheless, the evidence that Mahood provides from contemporary accounts and oral interviews makes it clear that the risk of sexual harassment and assault was very real for both female and

male youth.

This did not stop Canadian youth from hitting the road, and accumulating experiences from which they crafted stories. Mahood argues that storytelling was a means of establishing a sense of community with fellow hitchhikers, and passing time. Some of these stories were second-hand and possibly apocryphal (e.g., the tale of the hitchhiker who was stranded in Wawa, Ontario for so long that he got married), but most of them were firsthand accounts. In a chapter centred on these stories, Mahood conveys her interviewees' experiences of life on the road, and "what hitchhiking meant to travellers" (175).

*Thumbing a Ride* is an engaging work, based on impressive primary research. It

will be of interest to many readers with firsthand memories of adventures on Ontario roads. It should also interest present-day hitchhikers. Mahood claims that Canada's era of hitchhiking concluded by the late 1970s, due to police enforcement of provincial laws, as well as new municipal bylaws prohibiting the practice in cities and towns. Yet a cursory internet search reveals that young Canadians still hitchhike—even in Wawa. Sites like Couchsurfing.com are thriving, thanks to adventurous young travellers. Clearly, the "rucksack revolution" is not over yet.

Bruce Douville

Part-time Faculty, Department of History,  
Algoma University

## *Boundless Dominion*

### *Providence, Politics and the Early Canadian Worldview*

By Denis McKay

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. 384 pages. \$34.95  
paperback. ISBN 978-0-7735-5107-7 ([www.mqup.ca](http://www.mqup.ca))

Presbyterians are a people who take time seriously. They are the Christian church with the deepest sense of history. This extraordinarily comprehensive volume guides us through three centuries of that history, initially in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Scotland, but essentially in nineteenth-century Canada, mostly in Upper Canada and the Maritimes. This is not a chronicle of personalities and institutions, but a work, as author Dennis McKim early affirms, written with a "conviction that ideas matter," (p. 14); it is thus "mainly a work of intellectual history" (15).

McKim's clear intent—to merge the traditional with the secular—is reflected

in his choice of epigraphs: two for each of eleven chapters. One is Biblical (King James Version)—five Old Testament and six New Testament (three of these from Matthew, the Gospel with the strongest sense of history). The secular quotations are modern—two nineteenth century, five twentieth, four twenty-first—all are influential social historians, writers or philosophers.

*Boundless Dominion* is thus not a church history. It is not a parade of prominent Presbyterian divines or institutions. Nor is it an exposition on the tenets of Calvinism, though it often immerses (almost drowns) the reader in theology. It does describe the Presbyterian proclivity to multiply by dividing, especially in eight-