

**Baldwin, Douglas, and Spira, Thomas, eds. *Gaslights, Epidemics and Vagabond Cows: Charlottetown in the Victorian Era*.
Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1988. Pp. vii, 207. Illustrations.
\$15.95 (paper)**

L. D. McCann

Volume 17, numéro 3, february 1989

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017638ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017638ar>

[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

McCann, L. D. (1989). Compte rendu de [Baldwin, Douglas, and Spira, Thomas, eds. *Gaslights, Epidemics and Vagabond Cows: Charlottetown in the Victorian Era*. Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1988. Pp. vii, 207. Illustrations. \$15.95 (paper)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 17(3), 217–218.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1017638ar>

Stansell, Christine. *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986. Pp. xiv, 301. Tables, index.

A complex and fascinating discussion of the interaction between urban growth, industrialization, and class formation, *City of Women* is an important book — one, however, with several significant flaws. Stansell analyzes the development of New York City industry, the emergence of a class society there, and the position women had in that new order. Although the author is concerned with the larger culture that emerged between 1789 and 1860, working-class women form her primary focus. Working-class men, middle-class men, and middle-class women are discussed largely in relationship to this group. According to Stansell, lower-class women faced difficult economic circumstances as household production declined and the wage economy emerged. They were forced to accept work either in factories, in home production work, on the streets, or in domestic service. Their work, leisure activities, daily routines, and personal and intimate relationships increasingly became played out in the public sphere. Stansell argues that “by 1860, both class struggle and conflicts between sexes had created a different political economy of gender in New York.”

The subtitle of the book, “Sex and Class in New York,” is especially apt. Sexuality pervades her discussion to the point of salaciousness, and at times, seems inappropriate. When developing an argument, she often cites the most extreme examples, and leaves the impression that this was how women behaved, what men thought of women, and what women thought of themselves. Her use of such evidence occurs early in the work. In her discussion of the attitudes men held toward women in the early Republic she cites Lord Chesterfield, a man known to hold antagonistic and harsh views of women. Evidence from an especially brutal rape trial is also mentioned.

From this and similar evidence, she concludes that men held women in contempt, that this “was probably a bond that men shared across class lines in a ‘plebeian’ culture where sporting gentlemen might consort with workingmen at bawdy houses and cockfighting rings and in political affrays. Images of women as bawds and tricksters were a staple in the conversations of labouring people, and the lusty moll of sailors’ ballads and journeymen’s jokes was close kin to the greedy whore of gentlemen’s lore.” After several pages of such evidence and arguments, she finally mentions that “not all men detested their wives.” This type of emotive discussion, followed by a brief and partial disclaimer, occurs throughout the book. And while the author discusses some extremely important aspects of working class life such as violence, the neighbourhood, the implications of outside work on the family, street life, and new leisure activities, the reader is left to ponder the accuracy of her statements. Is her discussion of working class culture in New York representative of the vast number of people at the low end of the economic spectrum, or is it representative of only a small segment of that group? Was working-class New York and women’s position in that world more diverse than she describes? How did ethnicity effect behavior and choices? Did working class women view prostitution as a viable means to secure a basic income or extra money? Furthermore, most of her discussion of working class women is seen through the prism of men: male labour organizations, male dominated charity societies, male literature, and a male court system. How women viewed themselves still remains a question.

Barbara M. Tucker
Director, Center for Connecticut Studies
Eastern Connecticut State University

Baldwin, Douglas, and Spira, Thomas, eds. *Gaslights, Epidemics and Vagabond Cows: Charlottetown in the Victorian Era*. Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1988. Pp. vii, 207. Illustrations. \$15.95 (paper).

This is an interesting, informed, and important collection of essays. We know far too little about sewers, lighting, markets, and vagabond cows in the 19th-century Canadian city. For this reason alone, we are much in debt to Douglas Baldwin and Thomas Spira and their colleagues for writing about these much-neglected subjects.

In a short preface the editors state the major themes of the essays: the problems of private versus public ownership of essential services, the dilemma of balancing budgets and neglecting the provision of better public health facilities, and, finally, the struggle of city officials to wrench themselves free of constricting political and economic provincial controls. Charlottetown was ultimately successful in winning these battles, but not without encountering some petty set-backs. To demonstrate these themes, Charlottetown’s historical character is introduced in a context-setting chapter by Peter Rider. For readers wishing a general introduction to the early development of this provincial capital, it is a useful essay. To provide a bench-mark for the major thematic chapters, Alan MacEachern has written a creative (that is, fictitious) account of Charlottetown social life in 1855, the year of the city’s incorporation. Based on solid empirical research, it is an attempt to evoke the temper of the times through a series of imaginary letters. While indeed creative, the letters often tend towards the parochial and do not place the city in larger context. In fact, this is the major problem of the volume: the failure of the authors to connect consistently with a larger world.

The next chapter explores how the elite of Charlottetown were not terribly involved in local politics. The city had little ability to create taxes, hence to exercise power, and

the elites were thus more involved in provincial matters. In fact, until 1880, the provincial government could veto any city council decision. Unity was usually achieved, however, when public health matters were at stake, if only for reasons of self-interest. As Douglas Baldwin argues, "if public health legislation is defined as the attempt to control the physical environment to prevent diseases, then the 19th-century sanitary reformers were the first public health advocates in Charlottetown." Self-interest spilled further into the public realm when concern for regulating the market-place gained ascendancy. This argument is central to Boyde Beck's essay, which claims that the city's "market complex in the 1860s apparently catalyzed the process through which the traditional protective thrust of the laws became more selfish and mercenary."

The following chapter is a comprehensive examination of the police force from a social historical perspective by Greg Marquis. Given his work on Toronto and Saint John, Marquis has described a great deal about this institution in urban Canada. But like the other essays, an over-arching theme and the use of stronger theoretical principles would add power to this richly detailed account.

As it did in other Canadian cities, fire prompted the development of a public water supply. Although some argued for private ownership, the public viewpoint, based on security, necessity, and true economy, prevailed. Not unexpectedly, Charlottetown's sewerage system was a public matter, not one of great interest for the entrepreneurial sort. For lighting the streets of the provincial capital, as Harry Holman tells us, "public lighting remained private business." Control, in fact, was based externally, first in Montreal and later in Halifax. The volume closes with an account of Charlottetown life in 1914, posed as another set of imaginary letters. While we can indeed accept that the fictitious letters are based upon historical fact, and that the essay is charming, it is more difficult to accept the lack of a summary essay that

places Charlottetown in wider context, one that assesses the major themes of the volume. Still, we remain much in debt to Douglas Baldwin and Thomas Spira for exploring a neglected theme in Canadian urban history, for the book is generally well edited, an interesting read, and informative.

L. D. McCann
Centre for Canadian Studies
Mount Allison University

McIntyre, W. John. *Aurora: A History in Pictures*. Erin: The Boston Mills Press, 1988. Pp. 144. Black and white photos. \$14.95 (paper).

The use of photographs has become increasingly prevalent in the treatment of the past, their ability to capture evocative images making them a valuable primary source. The camera, however, is not an impartial implement. Since both photographers and subjects can distort the past through the staging of pictures, caution must be exercised when interpreting this type of evidence.

In *Aurora: A History in Pictures* W. John McIntyre uses photographs to trace the evolution of this community on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of its incorporation. The book is organized into 13 thematic sections that cover various facets of town life. The photographs are generally ordered chronologically, but at times organization gives way to confusion as the photographs, particularly those on local government, appear to be randomly placed. A more fundamental problem is the conceptual framework of this study. The book suffers the fate of much local history in that Aurora is examined as an isolated entity, its growth not being placed within any broader context. This is especially unfortunate given the town's close proximity to Canada's largest metropolis. The study also lacks an interpretive framework, with each photograph being accompanied by only a brief

description. While some of these anecdotes, particularly on civic architecture, are informative, their value as evidence is diminished by the lack of any citations or references. Moreover, the continuity of the text is hampered because each photograph is treated as a separate entity and there is an absence of the progression and evolution of the town. The author makes few efforts to relate the photographs to Aurora's economic and social development, which is a problem given that industry played a key role in the town's early years. Numerous factories, of which the Fleury Plow Works was the largest, attracted many new settlers to the community. The inclusion of some maps outlining changing residential areas as well as the location of industry would have provided a valuable frame of reference as a gauge to growth.

The photographs, at times, lack proper balance. Images of worker cottages are noticeably absent among the pictures of stately homes. In all fairness, however, there are numerous excellent photographs that provide an interesting look at the history of Aurora. The home section depicts many fine examples of Georgian architecture that once graced the streets of this community. Pictures of the many business interiors impart light on the conditions of early 20th-century commerce. In addition, the book also contains a bibliography that reveals the available sources for further study.

Despite its many shortcomings, *Aurora: A History in Pictures* is useful in making available the pictorial heritage of this community. However, as with other primary documents, the time has come for photographs to receive critical treatment, and, in order for the value of pictures to be fully recognized, they must be placed into an interpretive framework.

Mark Cortiula
University of Guelph