

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Fingard, Judith. *The Dark Side of Life in Victorian Halifax. Porters Lake, Nova Scotia: Pottersfield Press, 1989. Pp. 224. 14 black and white plates, 3 black and white illustrations, 2 maps. \$16.95*

Carolyn Strange

Volume 18, numéro 3, february 1990

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017722ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017722ar>

[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

Strange, C. (1990). Compte rendu de [Fingard, Judith. *The Dark Side of Life in Victorian Halifax*. Porters Lake, Nova Scotia: Pottersfield Press, 1989. Pp. 224. 14 black and white plates, 3 black and white illustrations, 2 maps. \$16.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 18(3), 256–257. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017722ar>

Fingard, Judith. *The Dark Side of Life in Victorian Halifax*. Porters Lake, Nova Scotia: Pottersfield Press, 1989. Pp. 224. 14 black and white plates, 3 black and white illustrations, 2 maps. \$16.95.

On the cover of *The Dark Side of Life* is an etching of a man in tattered clothing, stumbling into a hovel. Inside the spare dwelling, a woman and two infants cower in the corner in presumed anticipation of impending abuse. The illustration captures many of the themes that Fingard explores in her book: abject poverty, drunkenness, violence, and the acute vulnerability of women and children - all of which were characteristic features of life amongst the "underclass." The lurid description of the drunken man also reflects contemporary reformers' assumption that alcohol was the source of the misery of the poor. Fingard sets out to chart the lives of individuals from what the Victorians termed the "dangerous classes" and to analyze the inter-class relations that middle-class reformers forged in their attempts to improve the life of the poor. She vividly brings the figures on the front cover to life in her excellent study of urban poverty, crime and reform in nineteenth-century Halifax.

Fingard uses the term "underclass" to describe those who lived on the margins of Halifax society, even though they were concentrated in the heart of the city immediately north of the Citadel. She colourfully recreates the institutions and neighbourhoods that displayed the complexity of life in the "underclass." Taverns, brothels and dance halls were the centres of sociability and informal economic exchange, but they were also common sites of violence, drunkenness and abuse. For women and children, the

squalid dwellings of the barracks district were equally dangerous places that offered no respite from the disorder that religious and secular urban reformers associated with "the street." Fingard ably captures the flavour of daily life in the north end and the many illustrations add a visual reference for her descriptions of the Halifax that middle-class reformers "discovered" in the mid-nineteenth century.

The book is divided into two sections, the first of which sketches the life of the "underclass" in the Victorian city. Although conceding that the poorest and most desperate of Haligonians were not the only urbanites to run afoul of the law, Fingard argues that an analysis of the city's petty offenders is the best way to restore personality to the anonymous "dangerous classes." She focuses on 92 of Halifax's most notorious recidivists, most of whom served time in the Rochhead prison for drinking-related crimes, in an attempt to place faces on the composite pictures that historians of crime and urban disorder have thus far provided in quantitative studies. Her concentration on recidivists also sheds greater light on women and blacks who were over-represented as minor offenders in part because of their inability to pay fines to avoid jail terms. Fingard compiles information from jail registers, newspapers and reform literature to portray these members of the "underclass" as complex individuals who were as included to manipulate their mean circumstances as they were likely to find themselves arrested. At times, her eagerness to tell their story threatens to overtake her analytical framework, but this tendency is certainly understandable given the richness of her qualitative material.

The second part of *The Dark Side* is more familiar in its examination of the efforts of reformers to tame the "dangerous classes." Even here, Fingard rejects the conventional approach of urban historians who have discussed the ideas and stated goals of urban moral reform without examining the impact of reform programmes on the poor, the disreputable and the criminal. She is not interested in campaigns against prostitution or contemporary notions of immorality - instead, she looks at women's rescue homes "because they attempted to recast along self-interested middle-class lines the lives of prostitutes and other women in trouble with the law." Similarly, she prefers to let the programmes of white, Christian reformers, who routinely segregated black and white clients, establish their racism that otherwise might be apparent in their official policies. Fingard's concern throughout is the effect of inter-class relations on the inhabitants of the north end and its children, women and blacks in particular. One of her most provocative, though well-substantiated conclusions is that "the 'respectable' were far more racist in Halifax than was the underclass."

The Dark Side opens new doors for urban historians who are venturing beyond accounts of urban elites or straightforward studies of economic growth. Fingard does not neglect these essential building blocks that allow the historian to recreate the urban life of the past. But like the child rescuers and temperance advocates who ventured boldly into the unfamiliar world of the "underclass," Fingard leads Canadian historians into an area largely unexplored. At times, her unqualified use of terms such as "jailbird" and "low-life"

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

is as jarring as the Victorians' labelling of the poor. In general, though, her sensitivity to the subjectivity of the "underclass" and her commitment to document their struggles is evident and well conveyed in her engaging prose.

Carolyn Strange
Department of History
Rutgers, State University of New Jersey

McCann, Larry ed., *People and Place: Studies of Small Town Life in the Maritimes*. Fredericton, New Brunswick: Acadiensis Press, 1987. Pp. 263. Maps, black and white photographs, graphs. \$10.95 (paper)

This eclectic volume considers a selection of varied and interesting facets of life in the Maritime Provinces, primarily from an historical perspective. In addition to providing an objective evaluation of processes there, it attempts to capture the feel and "flavour" of the people and places in the Maritimes. Most of its authors have been intimately acquainted with the study area during their careers, and this is clearly reflected in many of the chapters.

Part one describes the background of settlement by examining the politics of a country, the promotion of a railway, social mobility in New Glasgow, and the Maritime novel from 1880 to 1920. Part two concentrates upon the transition from a traditional way of life to more modern times throughout the Maritimes. The role of philanthropic foundations in the region, the temperance movement in Amherst, regional poetry, and the rise and fall of Pictou Island are discussed here. A photo essay is used to examine the legacy of rural gas stations, and to

evoke a genuine sense of a past that has all but disappeared.

In contrast to the historical emphasis of the first two sections, the concluding papers move into the present and recent past. They treat population growth and industrial structure in small Maritime towns, the association between social relations and newspaper reporting in New Brunswick communities, and the evolution of the Mulgrave Road Theatre Company. The volume concludes with an analysis of attitudes about the provision of care for the elderly in a small Maritime town.

Because of the diversity of topics covered, the book is difficult to categorize, but parts will appeal to many. It attempts to provide a "snapshot" of life, history, geography and literature in a number of Maritime towns from the 1700s to the present. Many of the chapters are detailed, almost personal accounts of small-scale places and activities in the region. The detailed historical analyses will undoubtedly appeal to many readers of this journal.

My historical-geographical bias caused me to select "The Rise and Fall of Pictou Island" by Eric Ross as a favourite chapter. It traces settlement on the island from 1814, graphically describes the lives of the inhabitants, and then takes us through the transition to the present. In addition to supplying useful factual information, the author manages to evoke the character of the people, the look of the land, and the nature of life upon a typical Maritime Island. One can almost re-live the events described through the account in this chapter.

The study by Bendetti and Price focuses on the role of industrial structure as an indicator of potential urban growth or decline. A sample of 156 towns in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island was used to test for a series of relationships between population growth and industrial characteristics. The application of standard statistical techniques led to the conclusion that places which were dependent on the service sector grew, whereas towns which were highly dependent on 'smokestack' and primary industries suffered decline. The authors suggested that additional insights would result from research into individual towns; an excellent challenge for the urban historian!

Much of the book does indeed look at individual towns, or at specific aspects of the behaviour of individuals in these communities. W. G. Godfrey traces the career of the politician James Glenie in Sunbury County during the Loyalist era in New Brunswick. He carefully illustrates the way in which a master politician retained the loyalties of his constituents through both good times and adversity. Jobb's account of the promotion of the railway to Sackville stresses the role of influential individuals in acquiring railway service. This account will appeal to those interested in the impact of the entrepreneur in urban growth.

McCann and Burnett use an analysis of the social mobility of ironmasters in New Glasgow during the late nineteenth century to illuminate the effects of social class and immigration upon the town's economy. Their carefully documented study also demonstrates the effect of social class and connections upon social advancement in a pre-industrial