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Beautiful Barrie: The City and its People: An Illustrated History of Barrie, Ontario By Su Murdoch, Bradley E.S. Rudachyk, and Kurt H. Schick

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Images of a Century

*The City of Niagara Falls,
Canada, 1904-2004*

By City of Niagara Falls Centennial Book Committee. Niagara Falls, Ontario: City of Niagara Falls, 2004. viii + 368 pp. Illustrated. \$35.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-973647-90-6. Electronic edition forthcoming 2006.

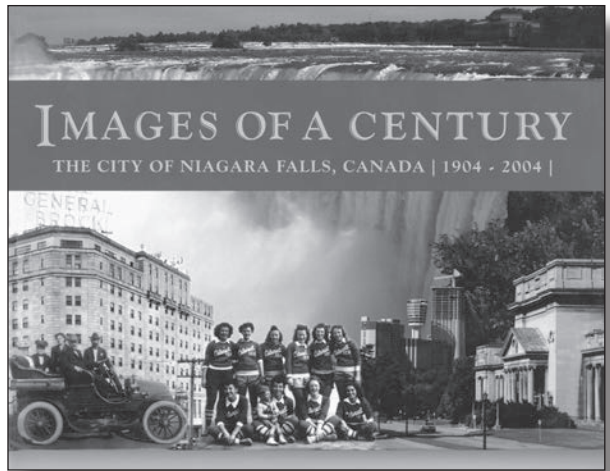
Beautiful Barrie

The City and its People: An Illustrated History of Barrie, Ontario

By Su Murdoch, Bradley E.S. Rudachyk, and Kurt H. Schick. Barrie, Ontario: Barrie Press, 2005. 440 pp. Illustrated. \$65.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-968373-32-1.

Bildungsroman is an interesting term. It relates to stories that follow characters through critical phases of their lives, relating their personal development to significant events and experiences. They are biographies with a narrative spin. Then there's another word – prosopography – that refers to a collection of biographies which, taken together, constitute an array of *dramatis personae* that are the movers and shakers of a given time and place and, when considered in their individualities and interconnections, serve to throw light onto society, culture, and politics.

And that's my segue into this review of two excellent local histories of two of Ontario's cities: Niagara Falls and Barrie. They too are biographies, albeit biographies of places. Like human biographies, places have beginnings, evolve through



time and develop a distinctive character, a veritable “personality of place” as they are molded by the people, great and small, who live in them.

Of course, everyone knows Niagara Falls, one of the world's “natural wonders.” In many ways, the ever-changing reactions of human beings to it reflect our evolving cultural history. For the First Nations, Niagara was a place of wonder and awe and elicited supernatural associations. For early Europeans, the sublimity of the colossal scale, the overwhelming sounds, and the incomprehensible volume of moving water all defied description. Then with the conquering of the gorge by bridges (and tight-rope walking entertainers!), and the harnessing of the power by canals and tunnels and turbines, Niagara became metamorphosed into what David Nye has termed the technological sublime – a metaphor for human progress and dominance over Nature. Now the focus of sight-seeing was on other places: an array of bridges, towers, and lavish hotels all highlighted by an abundance of electricity. The sensory excesses of Nature became accompanied by the carnivalesque, even the burlesque, as tourism shifted from the domain of the elite to the realm of the masses. And

throughout all of this, the people who lived within earshot of the Falls and surrounded by visitors to that attraction, contended with the prosaic requirements of life and created a community in which to live and work.

Much of this was in place by the advent of the twentieth century and, in 1904, the City of Niagara Falls was created out of the town and village of the same name. This comprehensive volume attempts to capture what has transpired since that date. As the Chair of the Centennial Book Committee and the city's Official Historian, Sherman Zavitz, puts it, hundreds of photographs were carefully selected for "their human interest value" to "present a window into the life and times of Niagara Falls" from 1904 to 2004. Hence the sub-title: "Images of a Century." This is very much a history rendered in the scopical devices of the age of photography.

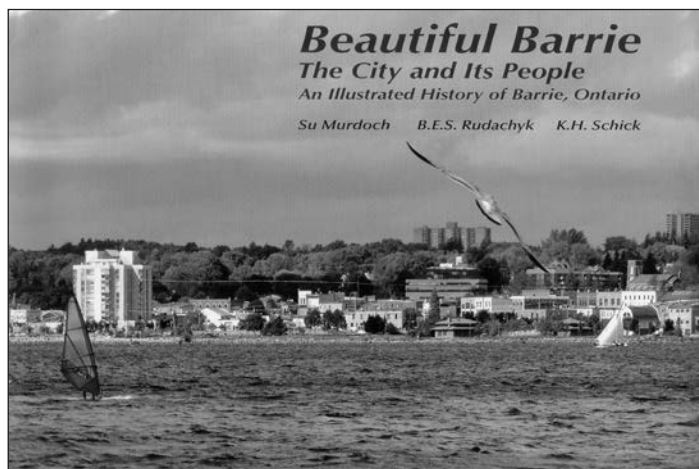
Zavitz sets the scene in his Introduction, reviewing the pre-1904 experience with this place. Rather than proceeding then with thematic periods that might encapsulate the essence of particular phases on Niagara Falls' development, the ensuing hundred years follow in precise ten-

year slices. Thus, while the first chapter, 1904-13, captures Canada's and Niagara's optimism and boosterism, and the second, 1914-23, the defining experience of the Great War, the transforming years of World War II straddle the 1943-44 threshold. Yet, somehow, it works. Scholarly, yet accessible, introductions set the scene for a magnificent array of images: bridges and railways; homes and hotels; factories and workers; bicycles, trolleys, sleighs, and automobiles; advertisements for movies, dry-goods and food-stuffs; schools, bands, and sports teams; local politicians, foreign dignitaries, royalty, and, of course, Marilyn Monroe. And all of these are accompanied by expansive and informative captions. Taken together, text and image constitute a rich panoply of urban life in Niagara Falls.

Beautiful Barrie: The City and Its People is another illustrated history. But its range is much greater, running from "earliest times" to 1959 when Barrie was incorporated as a city. This span of time is underscored by an interesting device: a succession of date-notes listed at the foot of each page throughout the full nineteen chapters. For example, on page 14 we read that in 1649 "Five Nations at-

tack Ouendat villages in Huronia." One of the notes on page 343 records that on December 31st "Barrie's Sesquicentennial ends with the Downtown Countdown at City Hall." Of course, there is a lot of detail in between as befits a community that has encountered the geopolitics of the early nineteenth century, and subsequent agricultural settlement, transport economics, and urban growth.

Since the opening years of *Beautiful Barrie* predated cam-



eras, its illustrations are a rich array of surveys, maps, and military topographic art and sketches that are replete with details of peoples and places. Indeed, such is the comprehensive scope of this project that it will serve as a template for other local histories. The authors identify and draw on such diverse sources as Department of Lands and Forests surveys, land registry records, travellers' accounts and diaries, family correspondence, early chronicles and local newspapers. The text is studded with images of self-assured founding fathers and, as in other examples of the genre, prominent attention is given to their places of work and residence. These views seem to underscore an edifice complex that bespoke of pride and progress in the transformation from wilderness to urbanity. But urbanity requires more than elegant homes, prosperous enterprises, and inspirational ecclesiastical architecture. The warp and woof of a developing society needs institutions and cultural activities too, and in *Beautiful Barrie* these are also to the fore. A bicycle club, a Kazoo band, a Girls' Hockey Club, a St. George's Society, an Oddfellows' fraternity, and a Kiwanis club all speak to an emerging public culture. The authors sweep us through decades of war-depression-war into an age when the city's boosters claimed it could be an "industrial utopia" and even "Ontario's most progressive city." Although the authors decided to close with the founding of the City of Barrie on the first of January in 1959, another three chapters and ninety pages bring the story into the 21st century. Coloured collages of community activities, three superb fold-out waterfront views (from 1853, 1875, and 2003), and dozens of oblique air-photographs effect

a comprehensive rendering of the Barrie urban area. I really think I know this place.

Which brings me back to that other word, prosopography. Just as multiple biographies allow us to populate the past with actual insights into the workings of society, so multiple biographies of places allow us to create a tapestry of regions and communities which, when taken together, elevate the local into the regional and even the national. And there have been so many in this genre of historical writing: among them Bill Patterson's *Lilacs and Limestone* (1989) on Pittsburgh Township, Orland French's *North of Seven* (2003) for North Hastings, and the Kingsville-Gosfield Heritage Society's two volume study of Kingsville, *A Stroll through Time* (2003). The volumes reviewed here have added Barrie and Niagara Falls to this growing list of excellent regional scholarship displaying community pride.

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