

Somewhat Narrow Horizons*

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SOMEWHAT NARROW HORIZONS*

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In rising to speak, I am all too conscious I am not rising to the occasion. Here is a glittering academic audience ready for my profound disclosures. Beyond, the wire services, radio and television are waiting to rush them to the country (I think). But what have I got to say? I heard earnest counsel on this, from men of knowledge and concern, who urged me to speak on one or another of the grave issues confronting this country and our age. I fully share their concern and I appreciated their confidence. But what do you do when you find you have little new to add in a historical context to your expressed views of urgent Canadian problems — or find that others are saying what you believe about current questions better and more fully? The answer is, do something else. Perhaps tell funny stories; or, on the eve of a critical national election, instruct everyone to go out and vote for the party of his choice. I tried to be a simple historian. I looked up the addresses of my predecessors as Presidents of the Canadian Historical Association for possible source materials.

I naturally found considerable variety. Some were general, on the “where stands History now” basis; some were quite particular, expressing a specialized research interest of the address-giver. Many were eloquent; many had messages of strong significance; all tended to increase my own consciousness of inadequacy. But I especially liked a sort of unfinished trilogy of the earlier 1950’s: “Broad Horizons” by Professor A. L. Burt, and “Wider Horizons” by Professor G. E. Wilson.¹ No one, apparently, has had the nerve to complete the series with “Widest Possible Horizons.” Nor have I. Instead I have been stirred to move the other way, to “Somewhat Narrow Horizons,” in order to express an interest in a history of rather limited, localized Canadian dimensions, well down from international, national or even provincial levels. Its field is Canadian urban development, or better, the city in Canadian history. If I do have a message, then, tonight it will lie here.

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The city in Canadian history: that sounds an obvious parish adaptation of Lewis Mumford’s all-encompassing theme, *The City*

* Presidential Address, read before the Canadian Historical Association, Calgary, June 7, 1968.

¹ See *Canadian Historical Association Annual Report*, 1950 and 1951.

in History. But while Mumford's omnibus volume not inconceivably misses Canada, it seems remarkable that Canadian scholarship has not paid more attention to the history of the city in this country. It is true that geographers, political and social scientists and serried ranks of planners are notably involved in urban studies in Canada, and some of their work has significantly contributed to aspects of our urban history. Yet the number of historians who have themselves contributed is scant indeed. Aside from a few books or articles, the writing of anything that may broadly be termed Canadian urban history has been left to authors of "popular" accounts of the glory that was Montreal or the grandeur that is Toronto.² And though some of these may have insight as well as enthusiasm, evidence as well as anecdote, the usual product is still that of the journalist or chronicler: worthy people for their purposes, but not generally held as substantial scholars in other fields of history.

It might be said that, considering the glory of Montreal and the grandeur of Toronto, not much more is required of Canadian urban history. But that is no more sensible than to disdain to look at general Canadian history and politics on the grounds that they are as dull as, or full of, ditchwater. Either for Canadian cities or politics, one may at least fall back on the defence of "A poor thing, but mine own." Still, the fact is that as men have formed governments and factions, grown crops or reared families, so they have for a long time lived in cities — even in Canada, land of all outdoors. Cities have had an integral part in Canadian historic experience, and deserve attention as considerable phenomena in the life and growth of the country — whether or not they be judged by some imperiously qualitative standard as good, bad or indifferent *vis à vis* the world outside.

In other countries, assuredly in Britain and Europe and in the United States, the growth of the city is well recognized in historical inquiry. It would be strange if in Canada there should be no similar need for investigation, because here, somehow, the urban cultural background of Europe failed to apply, or the North American con-

² Studies in Canadian urban history include *The Rise of Toronto, 1850-1890*, by D. C. Masters (Toronto, 1947); "Metropolitanism and Toronto Re-examined," by F. H. Armstrong, *C.H.A.A.R.*, 1966; and writings by J. I. Cooper on Montreal and E. G. Firth on York. There is material also of significance for urban history in such volumes as *Manitoba, A History*, by W. L. Morton (Toronto, 1957); *British Columbia, A History*, by M. A. Ormsby (Toronto, 1958); *Histoire Economique et Sociale du Québec, 1760-1850*, by F. Ouellet (Montreal, 1966); and *New Brunswick, A History, 1784-1967*, by W. S. MacNutt (Toronto, 1963). Among more recent popular works are *Montreal*, by K. Jenkins (New York, 1966); *Halifax, Warden of the North*, by T. H. Raddall (Toronto, 1948); *Vancouver, from Milltown to Metropolis*, by A. Morley (Vancouver, 1961); and *Edmonton, A History*, by J. G. MacGregor (Edmonton, 1967).

ditions that saw "cities in the wilderness"³ emerge almost from the start of European settlement did not operate north of the forty-ninth parallel. In reality, of course, work is proceeding in Canadian urban history at the level of thesis research, which in due time will add to publication. In fact, I am not very far in the van in making a contention few would really reject, that urban history can and should be a growing field in Canadian historical study. What I seek to do, therefore, is less to substantiate that contention than to illustrate it: to point out various particular considerations in the history of cities as found in the Canadian context.

The broadest, most evident consideration is the social process of urbanization in Canada. We may be a small people clinging to the margins of an intractable, near-empty land-mass; we may be deeply and constantly conditioned by that fact of terrain; yet we are equally a highly urbanized people, over seventy per cent urbanized; and more than half our population now lives in metropolitan areas, the smallest of which are conglomerations of some 100,000 each. If only to subscribe to the dictum that each age need ask its own questions of the past, we have reason to inquire into the development of our urbanized social life.

Certainly, on the most "applied" level, any study of pressing problems of urban concentrations today (or their counterpart, depressed rural areas) inevitably leads back into the course of history. But further, if earlier Canadian generations sought to learn about the occupation of primeval land-space, closer then to their own society, we surely should inquire into the occupation of urban living-space, which began in Canada with the founding of Quebec or Montréal. It may seem mere local anecdotage to note that both towns soon suffered from traffic congestion, or that early Halifax or York soon had to face questions of the unavailing poor, public disorder and crime. Yet these conditions obviously do not just emerge in large-scale modern cities, whether urban communities generate or simply concentrate social problems. We need to trace those problems through, in the towns that chiefly experienced them; and so far we have only made beginnings.

Furthermore, one should note that so-called "rapid" urbanization is not simply a feature of the present era in Canada. Our urban population which now nears eighty per cent of the total (it was less than twenty in 1871) did increase by 7.1 per cent between 1951 and 1961, and by 8.5 per cent in the preceding decade. Yet in the largely depression years of 1881 to 1891 it grew by almost seven per cent,

³ Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness* (New York, 1955).

and by 8 per cent in the boom decade of 1901 to 1911.⁴ These earlier years, in short, all but equalled our recent rates of urban increase, and even the seventies and nineties had higher rates than more "modern" times from 1911 to 1941. All this may invite conjecture about the impact of trade cycles and National Policy where cities and towns were concerned. Or one may see the same potent combination of steam-and-steel technology and potent continental resources working to develop urban accretions in Canada just as in the contemporary United States. At any rate, steam-age Montreal, Toronto and Hamilton deserve particular examination, no less than New York of the trusts, railroad Chicago or Carnegie's Pittsburgh.

Still further, urbanization can go hand in hand with the settlement of major land frontiers. This is scarcely surprising, since towns rise concurrently with newly productive regions as market, service or processing centres; in fact, a town nucleus may well precede farm settlement. But the process of creating new western urban centres has been paid less attention in Canadian history than in American, where indeed the point has been made that frontier expansion is a function of urban expansion.⁵ We tend to view the era before the First World War as that which above all produced the agrarian West. Yet it also saw Winnipeg jump from 42,000 to 130,000 between 1901 and 1911 and Vancouver from 29,000 to 120,000, tripling and quadrupling themselves.⁶ The same decade saw Edmonton multiply seven times over, and Calgary ten — far faster than Alberta in general.⁷ All this may be known and noted. But should not the startling rise of the urban as well as the farming West be given full analysis?

Nor is this story of impressive urban development only a matter of post-Confederation Canada. Between 1815 and 1834, Toronto, for example, grew thirteen-fold, rising with the settling of another farm frontier from a mere governing village to a city at the point of economic take-off as a regional metropolis.⁸ Moreover, in agricultural Upper Canada from the census of 1861 farming townships began showing evidence of rural depopulation, of a growing movement off the land.⁹ This may be regarded as an initial symptom of decay, the start of our sad decline from happy, healthy buggydom to the

⁴ Figures are derived from the retrospective statistics on population increase in the *Census of Canada* for 1931, Vol. I, supplemented by the *Census* for 1961.

⁵ C. N. Glaab and A. T. Brown, *A History of Urban America* (New York, 1967), p. 51. See also R. C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier, the Rise of Western Cities, 1790-1830* (Cambridge, 1960).

⁶ See note 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ E. G. Firth, *The Town of York, 1815-1834* (Toronto, 1966), p. lxxx; F. H. Armstrong, *loc. cit.*, p. 40.

⁹ See A. R. M. Lower, *Canadians in the Making* (Toronto, 1962), p. 260.

morbid morass of urbanism. But if that is so, roll up the map and close the books : they will not be needed for some years to come. In any case, the agrarian myth of North America, whose folk heroes cleared dark forest into smiling farmland, has only limited possible application to Canada, where a good deal of forest is better left standing, and much cleared land will not smile.

The plain point is that Canada in history has been much more broadly a land of commercial than of farming frontiers. And on the former, the urban centre has held clear dominance from the days of the fur trade on, even though the wilds might persist around the key economic activity : whether trapping, lumbering, mining or tapping energy resources. Accordingly, from the early stages of Canadian history forward, urban development has had a characteristically important role to play. For this was pre-eminently a land of "cities in the wilderness" – to transfer Carl Bridenbaugh's apt phrase.

Hence significant urban communities could emerge not primarily dependent on a farming hinterland around them, each with a comparatively large concentration of the territorial population. Thus the governing, garrison, and fur trade towns of Montreal and Quebec together disposed of close to twenty-five percent of the population of mid-eighteenth century New France,¹⁰ and had other concerns than the realm of seigneurial agriculture. Thus in the earlier nineteenth century Halifax grew as a wealthy Atlantic shipping entrepôt with little relation to Nova Scotia rural settlement; and the busy ship-building port of Saint John developed a remarkably extensive and effective unionism among its ship labourers while most of New Brunswick was still forest frontier.¹¹ St. John's, moreover, where the sea was the true wilderness hinterland, held nearly a quarter of Newfoundland's population by the mid-century,¹² dominating the fishing exports from its great houses on Water Street. Similarly from Quebec William Price ruled over the timber kingdom of the Saguenay,¹³ while Bytown controlled the vast Ottawa timber empire – often uneasily, because of its turbulent shantymen, a veritable proletariat in the wilderness.

But there is no need to go on multiplying examples. In brief, the city had a potent and distinctive role in Canada long before

¹⁰ Guy Frégault, *La civilisation de la Nouvelle-France* (Montréal, 1944), p. 217.

¹¹ John Rich, "The Growth of Trade Unionism in Saint John," unpublished M.A. thesis for University of New Brunswick, 1968.

¹² St. John's had over 30,000 inhabitants in 1855 to Newfoundland's total of 122,638. See *Census of Canada*, 1931, I, p. 150-151.

¹³ See Louise Dechêne, "Les Entreprises de William Price," *Histoire Sociale* (Université d'Ottawa), avril 1968.

there was the present state called Canada, and whether agrarian settlement had widely occurred or not. It seems better now to turn to other considerations regarding the Canadian city — one of which will not be metropolitanism. I leave that out only because I have held forth on it before, and will do so again elsewhere. Certainly there is no doubt in my mind that the relationship of dominant cities to their hinterlands (to which there have been passing references here) is a fruitful subject in Canadian history, as is the relationship of metropolitanism to regionalism, or of Canadian metropolitan centres to still bigger centres outside the country; in each case in political, social and cultural terms as well as economic.

Metropolitan relations, however, particularly involve systems of communications that link the urban centre with its hinterland region; and the topic of cities and communications deserves some comment here. Whether the city be analyzed in essence as temple, court, armed camp, storehouse or marketplace, it cannot function in any or all these regards except as a focus of communications also. Without them, it does not influence, command, supply or serve; it withers inside its own limits. All depends on the ability to transmit goods, men and information (and so wealth and power) either to or from the urban centre. Urbanization, in fact, is not just the bringing of people from the country into the city. It is also the bringing of the city to the country through effective communications, so that more and more of the population acquire urban standards, wants and interests. This kind of urbanization, now fostered by mass media, is incidentally quite consistent with the decentralization of industries or cities in our increasingly electronic age.

In Canada as elsewhere, the city has functioned as a focus of communications. It has exercised power because it is a focus, operating as a decision-making centre where elite groups concentrate, from compacts to corporation managements. And to a high degree a city has gained or lost power over areas outside it as technological change in communications systems has worked to its benefit or disadvantage. These may be airy generalizations or only statements of the obvious. But they can also serve as guides for further inquiry into the city's role in Canadian history.

For example, one could study the rising western towns of the 1900's in terms of the communications they focussed and led back to the East — Winnipeg, Regina, Calgary and many more. Not only the influence of the railway line, stockyard or elevator, but the prairie press and the mail order catalogue besides are bound up in explaining the rapid emergence of an urban-oriented twentieth-century society out of pioneer existence on the plains. Almost instant

civilization, thanks to city-centred communication. Just add people and stir.

As for urban elites and decision-making, there is so much we need to know about the merchants, financiers, entrepreneurs and promoters whose developmental schemes reached far beyond their city's confines, and by success, failure or political involvement repeatedly affected Canadian growth for good and ill. But Professor Alan Wilson touched admirably on this subject in a paper given before this association two years ago.¹⁴ And though it might be thought that I am simply reciprocating a kind mention he gave me there, I will make this specific reference and add little more than one point to it.

By Montreal's harbour, towered over by the great port facilities he did much to make possible, stands a statue of the Honourable John Young. But who knows him as other than a minor political figure or a free-trade advocate of the mid-nineteenth century? Who knows his work with the Montreal Harbour Commission — that significant group whose efforts to develop the river berths and downstream channel was instrumental in bringing Montreal ascendancy over Quebec as a deep-water ocean port? There are many sequels to be written on Montreal's St. Lawrence empire and the men who shaped it, just as there are on urban-imperial projects and builders from one side of the country to the other.

As for the effects of technological change, there is the impact of the iron steamship and the railway on the oceanic system of communications in which the Maritime port cities had thrived. Of course this is referred to in works concerning the regional economy of the Maritimes, or their provincial discontents after Confederation. But where are the studies of the attempts of Halifax or Saint John to cope with their changed situation, or the accommodations they partially achieved as continental winter ports? We have nothing like Edward Kirkland's *Men, Cities and Transportation*, treating similar changes as they affected New England, and particularly Boston's response to them.

Why not such a work, indeed, on Toronto's notably successful attempts to take advantage of the new means of rail communication? Books on railways as such, however useful, are not sufficient in themselves to bring out the work of the Capreols, Cumberlands and

¹⁴ A. G. Wilson, "Forgotten Men of Canadian History," *C.H.A.A.R.*, 1965, pp. 73, 79-80. See also his *John Northway, A Blue Serge Canadian* (Toronto, 1965), and F. H. Armstrong, "Approaches to Business History in Canada: The Historian's Approach," *Proceedings of the Fourteenth Annual Meeting of the Business History Conference*, University of Western Ontario (London, 1967).

Gzowskis in their own city milieu. Similarly, the story of the Canadian Pacific is not exactly adequate to express Vancouver's drive to use rail and road to enlarge its hinterland eastward – nor to include the beneficent effect of the Panama Canal on the city's communications, enabling it to enter rich Atlantic markets when Pacific ones had proved limited. Finally, what of a study of Edmonton's role as "gateway to the North," when with the rise of bush flying after the First World War it found itself in touch with northern reaches on a scale never possible before? True, some of these things have been partly done – or thinly, in popular studies – but seldom in terms of the city where the men, the designs and the means to technological decision came together in significant complexes well worth the historian's attention.

There is one last area for consideration here: the city in the cultural growth of Canada. Once more it is plain that Montreal is not Paris, nor Toronto Florence (Naples possibly?). Yet it is no less plain that the cultural developments we have experienced have been inevitably urban-centred. That may be only a world-wide truism. The arts, like money, concentrate in towns – and need the money too. Nevertheless, the fact that Canada has not known a landed aristocracy has meant that the essential clientele for the arts have been the wealthier ranks of the city burghers. And unlike the United States, of course, we have had few princely-capitalistic patrons. Lacking either the great country houses or the Newport estates, cultural development in Canada has been intimately associated with the well-to-do of the urban community. Nor has the growth of state expenditure and the spread of what I might call "cultural democracy" greatly altered that association.

This might seem to reduce artistic endeavour to the question of who will pay for it and where, ignoring the individual creative spirit of the artist, drawn as his muse listeth. Still, even though the artist may seek Precambrian or psychedelic immensities, there must be something in the fact that he dwells in, studies in, and usually gets his "school" label in, some particular urban setting. It may be that the Canadian artist in various fields can be better comprehended through studying the quality and style of his urban surroundings – in a country which has neither a landed aristocratic nor a rooted peasant culture, apart from dwindling elements in French Canada. At any rate, it can be argued that the history of literature, music, architecture and other arts in Canada would all be illumined by studying them in conjunction with the history of the cities where they so largely grew and found their public.

If the city has been inseparably linked with the development of the arts in Canada, so it has been with education. Again this can

seem obvious. Most of our universities, and the biggest ones, are in large population centres. The most complicated and expensive machinery of the public school systems are naturally to be found there. And yet there is more to be discerned. First, except for the Maritimes, Canada has followed a historic pattern of developing largely urban universities; there have been relatively few rural "college towns" on the widespread American model. The battle over urban university centralization was perhaps decided for English Canada in the 1860's, when denominational colleges in Canada West failed to break the hold of Toronto University on the provincial endowment, and not long thereafter there began the move to federation at Toronto as the only way to meet growing educational costs. Certainly it is clear that western provinces, and Quebec, adopted similar patterns of urban centralization. Now that new demands have brought the proliferation of universities (still city-centred) there seems only more reason to assess the university and its teaching as a product of Canadian urban culture — not forgetting the church in this respect, so long and so closely linked with higher education.

Second, there is a considerable assumption that mass public education, in English Canada at least, has stemmed from rural democracy and the backwoods log cabin school. But investigation now proceeding shows far more convincingly that school needs in developing urban centres shaped the effective state school system established in the Province of Canada during the 1840's and 1850's; the earlier, inept local schools had little to do with the Ryersonian bureaucracy and centrally directed educational machinery set up at Toronto.¹⁵ The problems of city numbers and the illiterate, imputedly dangerous poor focussed issues of state support, property and personal rights, and of free and compulsory schooling. And improvements in state education, as in state social welfare and control measures, took form increasingly in urban areas — to be spread outside from there — precisely because it was there that needs led to innovations. Here again is a theme worthy of development in Canadian urban history: the city as an educational, and social, workshop, producing changes of regional or national significance in the whole fabric of Canadian cultural life.

But has the history of the city anything to say on Canada's most insistent problem, the relations of French and English-speaking cultures? At all events, cities have been deeply involved in the

¹⁵ Susan Houston, "The Vagrant Child in Upper Canada: A Social Issue in Education, 1850-1865," seminar paper, University of Toronto, 1968, stemming from doctoral research in progress.

strains between the two. One need only point to Montreal's links with the Lower Canadian rebellion of 1837, the election violence in the city in the 1840's, the furore over the Rebellion Losses Bill. More interesting is the special experience in urban history Montreal and Quebec provide as cities of two cultures: different in nature from other major Canadian cities, where there may be an ethnic mosaic within an English-speaking cultural dominance, or recent immigrants in ghetto communities; but where there is no such rooted bi-cultural division. Hence one could profitably study the political, social and economic evidence of the workings of dual cultures in these two urban entities, each with its own long tradition and its considerably different record of Anglo-French relations — perhaps because the English have never really posed a threat to the French of Quebec city, not at least, since the 1760's.

Much more could be said on the significance of urbanism in French-English relations in regard to heading up and polarizing conflict, in regard to making "hot" information all too available, and in regard to adding the general tensions and problems of urban living to the sensitive areas of cultural divergence. But it is time to call a halt. In so doing, I am conscious none the less of all I did not say of Canadian urban history: on themes such as class, ethnic, and religious relations in the city; on labour, immigration, unemployment and relief; on social problems and policies; alcoholism and the temperance movement; industrial and financial development, wholesaling and retailing; not to mention the press, the professions, the crafts, and the amusements. There is besides the whole question of the city's role in national and regional politics and its own municipal political life. There is the history of its internal services, transport and utilities; its planning and speculation, its buildings, its general ambiance. And still the list could be extended to cover its people in individual and collective personalities, the "urban biography" of their whole community.

It is sufficient to say, surely, that this is no small subject, either for Canada now, or for the Canada of yesterday, without in any way excluding other approaches to a country such as this, the urban society and culture that has emerged requires an urban history. And urban history, after all, has both intra-national and supra-national connotations. Cities form part of an urban network that spreads far beyond Canadian boundaries. In only one regard, as agencies that focus information flow, they are centres for the breeding and exchange of ideas, units in an emerging world pattern, not of the global village, but of the global megalopolis. Beyond "Somewhat Narrow Horizons," therefore, broad vistas may open indeed.