

Durflinger, Serge, *Fighting from Home: The Second World War in Verdun, Quebec* Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006. Pp. 296. \$29.95 (paper)

James A. Wood

Volume 36, Number 1, Fall 2007

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1015825ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015825ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Wood, J. A. (2007). Review of [Durflinger, Serge, *Fighting from Home: The Second World War in Verdun, Quebec* Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006. Pp. 296. \$29.95 (paper)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 36(1), 66–68. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015825ar>

chapters (two of which have appeared previously as journal articles), Catherine Carstairs explores the interplay of medical expertise, legislative, police and court responses, and public opinion that shaped Canada's response to opium, cocaine, heroin, and other illegal drugs from the end of World War I until the dawn of the 1960s drug crisis.

Drug policy, and the relevant criminal law, was a federal responsibility, but the two major groups of illegal drug users, Chinese opium smokers in the 1910s and 1930s, and lower-class, white 'junkies' by the 1950s, were not only urban but also regionally concentrated. Between 1922 and 1961 nearly half of all convictions nationally took place in British Columbia, one-fifth in Ontario, and less than a tenth in Québec. Canada's early 20th-century drug war was played out in the streets, taverns, and boarding houses of Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal (p. 11). The title, *Jailed for Possession*, sums up the typical response to users during what the author calls the "classic" era of Canadian drug use. Although journalists, social reformers, and the emerging profession of psychiatry supported treatment of addicts over incarceration, that latter response prevailed well into the 1960s.

Carstairs examines the anti-drug panic of the 1920s, which took the form of an anti-Chinese crusade and the role of the Opium and Drug Branch (later the Division of Narcotic Control) of the federal Health Department and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Most drug busts in the period were carried out by the RCMP and the Vancouver and Toronto police and the Chinese, until immigration restrictions greatly reduced their numbers, were an easy target. Chapter 3 examines the experience and culture of post 1930s "hypes" or users, who, unlike recreational drug users in the 1960s and 1970s, tended to be poor, white, and "troubled" in various ways. Up to a fifth of those convicted after World War II were women, and the author explores the appropriate gender dynamics. Most known addicts were prostitutes. Police, corrections, and John Howard Society sources indicate that users of narcotics shared a tight-knit culture, complete with its own slang and rejection of "straight" society.

Separate chapters are dedicated to narcotics policing and the role of physicians. The latter had surprisingly little impact on drug policy as a profession and, as the only legal distributor of narcotics, were under suspicion by enforcement agencies such as the Division of Narcotic Control (DNC). Doctors were able to protect themselves as a profession from DNC snooping over time. Another job for the DNC was to estimate the number of known addicts. Limited treatment programs began in British Columbia and Ontario in the 1950s. Canada's police employed a relatively small number of officers, who resorted to informers and undercover work, to prosecute peddlers and users. In 1928, municipal and provincial police carried out the bulk of drug arrests. By the 1950s the RCMP, armed with writs of assistance (semi-permanent search warrants), was involved in virtually all drug arrests (pp. 94–95). The conviction rate in drug prosecutions was high

and the numbers of convictions, compared to the national crime rate, was low. The police do not appear to have been in a panic about narcotics up to 1961.

Chapter 6 examines the attempt of the John Howard Society (JHS), a prisoners' aid organization, in employing social work methods to help Vancouver drug users. The JHS, reflecting the dominant casework approach of social work, relied mainly on individual counseling of male and female "rounders." To keep their clients out of jail, counselors attempted to persuade them to cut their ties with the drug culture and join the world of the "square johns." The brief final chapter also deals with a Vancouver topic—the controversy over treatment methods in the 1950s and early 1960s. In order to control the demand by sympathetic community organizations for clinics and possibly treatment by maintenance, the DNC funded a study under Ontario psychiatrist George Stevenson which ended up blaming addicts for being selfish, immoral, and immature. The treatment facilities operating or being planned in the late 1950s and early 1960s were penal, not medical, in nature.

The author employs a wide range of sources, including the press, police and coroners' reports, medical journals, and the records of social agencies. She also constructed two databases from two sets of confidential files: DNC records on known drug users and Vancouver JHS case files. The first database is based on 159 DNC files for 1922–61; the second on nearly three hundred individuals. Although these represent only a fraction of the individuals charged with drug offences in the period under consideration (most of the DNC records were culled), Carstairs is confident that they are representative in terms of age, gender, class, race, country of origin, and geographic location.

This is a well-researched study whose organization, style, and length make it an ideal assignment for undergraduate students. It is also essential reading for anyone interested in how Canada has responded to the drug issue. Although the book was not written as "urban history" there are a number of urban themes that the author may explore in the future, such as the historical geography of drug use and control, and the relation of drug users, peddlers and police to organized crime. Policing scholars would be particularly interested in how the RCMP and local police, given their long history of professional mistrust and competition, negotiated urban drug enforcement.

Greg Marquis
University of New Brunswick Saint John

Durflinger, Serge, *Fighting from Home: The Second World War in Verdun, Quebec Vancouver*: UBC Press, 2006. Pp. 296. \$29.95 (paper).

Fighting from Home is the product of meticulous research into the municipal workings and community spirit of war-

time Verdun, Quebec's third-largest city during the war of 1939–45. Although Verdun has since been incorporated into the city of Montreal, during the war this mixed French- and English-speaking community boasted the country's highest voluntary enlistment rate for a municipality of its size, with approximately one-in-ten residents serving in the armed forces. For Durflinger, "the message from Verdun was unity in war and community participation for victory," (106) and *Fighting from Home* portrays its citizens, English and French, rising to the occasion of a wartime emergency, some out of devotion to Britain, others in an effort to equal their city's impressive contributions during the First World War, but most often in support of their neighbours, friends, and loved ones who were serving overseas.

Durflinger illustrates the civic pride and cooperative mechanisms which combined to make Verdun's experience of the war remarkable. Verdun avoided much of the English-French bitterness that affected other mixed-language cities in Canada during the war, conflicts that are so often the focal point of Quebec historiography. With a ratio of 54% English-speakers and 42% French, Verdun's experience was not one of "majority over minority," but rather a moving example of consultative municipal leadership and a willingness among city residents to accommodate one another's differing viewpoints. Leadership by a powerful and widely-respected English-speaking mayor on one hand and a French-speaking city manager, executive committee, and majority of aldermen on the other provided the foundation of a working relationship between two cultures. Verdun's French-English balance not only survived, it flourished owing to the support of fundraising efforts, salvage collection, rationing, the Red Cross, and the Mayor's Cigarette Fund.

Durflinger intended his work as a "wartime municipal biography," (205) a focus which allows him to offer welcome insight into issues that are usually examined from the national or provincial level. Unique in terms of its enlistment rate, Verdun was also representative of the Canadian homefront experience in a number of respects. The ratio of French to English enlistments matched the national average, and Verdun echoed national economic trends when the war-materials production boom led to an attendant rise in wages, profiteering, union activity, and the entry of women into the industrial workplace. Federal election results in Verdun "represented a microcosm of wider national anxieties," (185) and results tended to mirror those at the national level, leading to rising support for the CCF while still electing only Liberal candidates.

With detailed research and documentation, Durflinger employs statistical analysis to substantiate his findings and compare Verdun's statistics to national averages. His maps and charts are helpful, particularly in analyzing electoral returns. Quantitative analysis is used wherever possible, employing city, church, and school records, while narrative accounts from journals, interviews, and newspaper articles provide a feel for how individuals experienced the war. One

particularly valuable source presented itself in the form of thousands of file cards kept by the Mayor's Cigarette Fund for Soldiers Overseas. These cards provided the author with a wealth of information on language-based and neighbourhood enlistment, and while reading his account it is almost possible to gain a sense of the author's excitement when he first discovered these records. Taken together, these sources allow Durflinger to reconstruct a lively account of wartime Verdun.

With a population density of 24,298 inhabitants per square mile and a large mixed-language population, Verdun had the potential for tremendous discord, yet *Fighting from Home* reveals a surprising absence of conflict over well-known national issues such as the 1942 plebiscite on conscription. During the plebiscite, French- and English-speaking Verdunites carefully avoided antagonizing each other, effectively "agreeing to disagree" and experiencing no reported political demonstrations or altercations pitting one group against the other. Voting day brought a quiet victory for the "yes" side, with Verdun's English-speaking majority casting its vote in support of Mackenzie King while the French population voted solidly against. While quiet reigned on the conscription issue, Verdun experienced unexpected depths of acrimony concerning more local issues. Responding to rising rents and accommodation shortages, the city's tenants, the majority of whom were English-speaking, directed growing bitterness towards their French-speaking landlords, particularly when the families of servicemen were evicted. Tensions also exploded in violence during the "zoot-suit riot" of 1944 when an altercation that began in Montreal spilled over to a dance in Verdun, pitting close to a hundred sailors against groups of young men whose garish dress was intended to portray an image of defiance and rebelliousness. To the sailors, "zoot-suits" signified a rejection of the war effort, and Durflinger presents the riot as an unusually violent example of wartime tensions spilling over in a city that was otherwise remarkable for containing such conflicts between English and French, owners and renters, youths and elders. Throughout much of the war, "accommodation, or at least the stifling of unneeded provocation" (179) was the rule, and calm prevailed owing largely to the efforts of a committed municipal council, the aid of local churches, charitable organizations, and the Canadian Legion.

Durflinger's study indicates the need to re-examine some of the most widely-held assumptions of national and provincial history in Canada, citing unheralded support for the war among French-speakers in Verdun. As part of the "Studies in Canadian Military History" series from UBC Press and the Canadian War Museum, whose goal is to encourage the investigation of military historiography from new perspectives, Durflinger's study of Verdun employs urban history to provide a fresh look at the Canadian homefront. While the containment of wartime tensions between French- and English-Canadians is traditionally viewed as the result of Mackenzie King's skillful political manipulations, Durflinger's "grass-roots"

explanation is grounded upon social accommodation at the local level and the shared experience of hardship by a community united in support of its soldiers overseas. Significant new social understandings can arise from works such as *Fighting from Home*, both as urban studies and in fostering an understanding of the broader national context.

James A. Wood
Wilfrid Laurier University

Marec, Yannick, dir. *Villes en crise ? Les politiques municipales face aux pathologies urbaines (fin XVIII^e-fin XX^e siècle)*. Grâne : éditions Créaphis. Pp. 759.

Cet ouvrage dirigé par Yannick Marec, éminent spécialiste de l'histoire sociale des villes, rassemble les actes d'un colloque tenu à Rouen en décembre 2002 ; une cinquantaine de chercheurs français et dans une moindre mesure étrangers, en grande majorité historiens mais aussi géographes, sociologues ou économistes, y présentèrent leurs travaux relatifs aux « pathologies urbaines » et aux réponses élaborées pour y faire face. Se présentant sous la forme d'une succession d'études monographiques réparties en cinq parties, ce gros volume relève le défi d'une double comparaison : « interchronologique » d'abord puisque le champ couvert s'étend de la fin du XVIII^e siècle à nos jours ; internationale ensuite, les auteurs nous emmenant de Paris à Vienne en passant par Montréal, Turin ou Bruxelles même si les textes qui concernent la France métropolitaine dominent largement.

L'étude des problèmes de la ville n'est pas un thème nouveau pour les historiens français. On peut penser aux recherches d'André Guilleme sur les établissements industriels dangereux et polluants en banlieue, ou, pour une période plus récente, aux travaux d'Annie Fourcaut sur les lotissements défectueux de l'entre-deux-guerres, de Danièle Voldman sur la crise du logement au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. L'originalité de cet ouvrage collectif tient plutôt au fait d'aborder la crise urbaine dans son incroyable diversité : criminalité, hygiène, circulation, logement, pauvreté . . . Tous les maux de la ville sont ici embrassés, même les plus inattendus comme les fraudes alimentaires à Rennes étudiées par Jean-François Tanguy. Les termes « pathologies urbaines » sont donc pris dans leur acception la plus large afin de tenir compte de « l'ensemble des dysfonctionnements urbains à caractère collectif » (p.6). Le second trait marquant de ce livre tient au fait d'être davantage centré sur les réponses apportées à la crise urbaine que sur ses manifestations. Mais les termes « politiques municipales » ne doivent pas être entendus dans un sens trop étroit : ils n'englobent pas seulement les actions menées sous l'égide du maire mais « une série d'actions enchevêtrées, aux formes et aux initiateurs multiples, parfois complémentaires mais souvent concurrents ». Les auteurs s'attachent donc à montrer la diversité des personnes physiques et morales qui luttent contre les « pathologies urbaines », permettant ainsi de met-

tre en lumière le jeu ambivalent de rivalité et de complémentarité entre ces différents acteurs. L'État, les communes, les associations, les organismes confessionnels charitables et même les entreprises se succèdent et s'associent, avec plus ou moins de difficultés, pour combattre les dysfonctionnements de la ville. Un large éventail de combinaisons se trouve représenté dans les différentes contributions : le « système de Strasbourg », étudié par Catherine Maurer, allie bienfaisance catholique et action municipale ; Pascale Quincy-Lefebvre montre la difficile cohabitation entre le paternalisme de l'entreprise Michelin et les politiques menées par la mairie de Clermont-Ferrand ; les associations populaires roubaisiennes ont tenté de jouer un rôle majeur dans la définition du projet de rénovation du quartier de l'Alma-Gare . . . De la variété des expériences relatées se dégage malgré tout une tendance générale : la place de l'État dans la définition et la mise en œuvre des politiques d'assistance n'a eu de cesse de s'affirmer depuis la fin du XIX^e siècle. La création d'un ministère de la ville en 1990 en est l'aboutissement le plus tangible.

Les politiques municipales ainsi que leurs acteurs ont évolué au fil des décennies et cet ouvrage donne des clefs pour déchiffrer ces changements. Les types de lecture de la ville se modifient constamment : on ne perçoit pas la ville de la même façon sous le Second Empire et après la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Or, la perception du phénomène urbain influe largement sur la manière dont sont pensées les réponses aux pathologies urbaines. A ce titre, la partie sur « Louis Chevalier revisité » et les nombreuses contributions relatives à l'hygiénisme sont particulièrement éclairantes. Le travail de contextualisation intellectuelle mais aussi politique et économique des maux de la cité et des solutions mises en œuvre constitue une des principales richesses de ce travail : l'avènement du libéralisme économique n'est pas sans incidence sur la pauvreté à Cordoue au XIX^e siècle. De même, la guerre franco-prussienne a des répercussions indirectes sur le développement de la délinquance à Dijon avec l'immigration de dizaines de jeunes désœuvrés qui fuient l'Alsace-Lorraine.

Les émeutes qui ont éclaté dans les banlieues françaises en novembre 2005 quelques semaines après la publication de ce livre lui ont conféré une dimension particulière. « Relier le passé au présent » pour reprendre la formule de Yannick Marec, ou plutôt donner une perspective historique à des problèmes de la ville contemporaine, tel est l'un des objectifs, en grande partie atteint, de ces multiples études. Depuis deux siècles, les espaces urbains sont l'objet de représentations, de stigmatisations, de peurs que l'analyse scientifique vient parfois contredire. La contribution stimulante de Jean-Claude Farcy portant sur les rapports entre immigration et délinquance dans le Paris de la fin du XIX^e siècle en est le meilleur exemple.

Deux carences méritent tout de même d'être relevées. La place des femmes, en tant que victimes de la pauvreté et actrices des politiques municipales, est très largement