

Gaslights, Epidemics and Vagabond Cows: Charlottetown in the Victorian Era, Douglas Baldwin and Thomas Spira, eds, Charlottetown, PEI, Ragweed Press, 1988.

Fred Armstrong

Volume 12, Number 2 (35), Fall–Winter 1988

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800274ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/800274ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Armstrong, F. (1988). Review of [*Gaslights, Epidemics and Vagabond Cows: Charlottetown in the Victorian Era*, Douglas Baldwin and Thomas Spira, eds, Charlottetown, PEI, Ragweed Press, 1988.] *Scientia Canadensis*, 12(2), 150–151.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/800274ar>

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

Gaslights, Epidemics and Vagabond Cows: Charlottetown in the Victorian Era, Douglas Baldwin and Thomas Spira, eds, Charlottetown, PEI, Ragweed Press, 1988.

Many years ago, possibly after too deep an immersion in thesis research on Toronto during the years when it grew from village to city, I decided that the most appropriate title to describe that era would be 'Whores, Sewers and Mackenzie.' Somehow this caption tied the whole thing together: society, public works and politics. Probably fortunately, Maurice Careless, my thesis supervisor, suggested saving this masterpiece for a book and the more soporific title 'Toronto in Transition' was substituted. The book has never appeared; but it is a pleasure to see that someone has finally come up with a lively and appropriate title for a study of nineteenth century municipal history.

Rather than a general overview of Charlottetown, *Gaslights, Epidemics and Vagabond Cows* is a collection of ten essays, four of them written by Douglas Baldwin who is now a professor at Acadia University. These studies will be of particular interest to students of the history of science and technology, for unlike most urban histories, the collection devotes chapters to public health, market regulation, water supply, sewerage and street lighting. After an introductory essay by Peter Rider on the development of Charlottetown from its first settlement in 1719 to its incorporation as a city in 1855, the essays examine specific themes in the growth of the city from that date until the start of World War I. Exceptions are the first and last studies, by Alan MacEachem and Judy Bellamy respectively, which capture the society and atmosphere of the town at the terminal dates of 1855 and 1914 through the media of a set of imaginary pioneer letters written home by an immigrant family. Soundly based on contemporary records, these are extremely well done and capture the atmosphere of the city beautifully.

For the theme essays, Douglas Baldwin's account of public health in 'Pigs, Epidemics and Hospitals' provides a lively, first class account of contemporary cleanliness problems illuminated with specific cases, such as the typhus outbreak brought by the *Lady Constable* in 1847 and the smallpox epidemics of 1885. His chapters on sewers and lighting are also interesting, if a mite detailed; but in his account of the evolution of the water

supply system, a battle that continued for years, the detail tends to be rather overwhelming.

One of the most interesting sections is Baldwin's study of the problems of the municipal council and its relationship with the Island's Legislative Assembly, which provides a fine examination of the complexities of municipal government. Charlottetown's politics in the nineteenth century present a decidedly individualistic picture of the limited powers of the council discouraged the leading citizens from sitting on it. This chapter goes well with Greg Marquis' examination of the problems of the police force.

A bibliography and a final chapter by the editors summing up the development of the city during these six decades would have been a useful addition; however, the book is well indexed and footnoted. It will make enjoyable reading for anyone interested in the growth of the Victorian city.

Fred Armstrong

Fred Armstrong, a specialist in Ontario history, is a Professor of History at the University of Western Ontario.
