

Wright, John Ross. *Urban Parks in Ontario. Part I: Origins to 1860*. Ottawa: 1983. Designed by Media Production Services, University of Ottawa. Pp. x, 109. Illustrations, maps, tables

Wright, John Ross. *Urban Parks in Ontario. Part II: The Public Park Movement 1860-1914*. Ottawa: 1984. Designed by Media Production Services, University of Ottawa. Pp. xiv, 220.

Illustrations, maps, tables. Copies available from Ontario Government Bookstore, 880 Bay St., Toronto. \$5.00 payable to Treasurer of Ontario

Gerald Killan

Volume 15, numéro 1, june 1986

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018909ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018909ar>

[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

Killan, G. (1986). Compte rendu de [Wright, John Ross. *Urban Parks in Ontario. Part I: Origins to 1860*. Ottawa: 1983. Designed by Media Production Services, University of Ottawa. Pp. x, 109. Illustrations, maps, tables / Wright, John Ross. *Urban Parks in Ontario. Part II: The Public Park Movement 1860-1914*. Ottawa: 1984. Designed by Media Production Services, University of Ottawa. Pp. xiv, 220. Illustrations, maps, tables. Copies available from Ontario Government Bookstore, 880 Bay St., Toronto. \$5.00 payable to Treasurer of Ontario]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 15(1), 106-107.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1018909ar>

were very much like Montreal. Very few made the transformation from the commercial to the industrial pattern in an archetypal fashion. It might be better to argue that the dependency argument would work well in most other places: Montreal is a typical example of the norm.

There surely can be little doubt that reform, especially its planning component, was not much more successful elsewhere than it was in Montreal. If it was weaker in Montreal, it was only marginally so.

Perhaps more problematical in Germain's argument, a problem she recognizes, is the possibility of a large secular shift at the turn of the century, in which cities changed from producers and promoters of capital and industry into delivery systems for social goods and services. What we may be seeing in Germain's argument is the emergence of the typical dependent city of the twentieth century, one in which the booster nexus between capital and place is shattered.

Regardless of the demurrers, Professor Germain has produced a much more satisfactory explanation of urban reform than we have seen hitherto, whether for Montreal, or in general. We will no longer be able to read the literature of reform with the same eyes. The book is a reflection of the sensibility of the author, and also the virtue of reflecting on the literature of both other disciplines and other traditions.

John H. Taylor  
Department of History  
Carleton University

---

Wright, John Ross. *Urban Parks in Ontario. Part I: Origins to 1860*. Ottawa: 1983. Designed by Media Production Services, University of Ottawa. Pp. x, 109. Illustrations, maps, tables.

Wright, John Ross. *Urban Parks in Ontario. Part II: The Public Park Movement 1860-1914*. Ottawa: 1984. Designed by Media Production Services, University of Ottawa. Pp. xiv, 220. Illustrations, maps, tables. Copies available from Ontario Government Bookstore, 880 Bay St., Toronto. \$5.00 payable to Treasurer of Ontario.

Some years ago, those of us interested in Ontario's outdoor recreation history applauded when the provincial Ministry of Tourism and Recreation decided to subsidize a history of urban parks by Professor J.R. Wright of the University of Ottawa's Recreation Department. Since the historiography of urban recreational space in Canada is so thin, we waited impatiently for the appearance of this study, and entertained high hopes that it would match the standards of scholarship attained in comparable American and British literature. Alas, those hopes have not been realized.

The kindest thing one can say about these first two volumes of a threatened trilogy is that the chronology of urban park development in Ontario has been clarified, and considerable information previously scattered in obscure local sources compiled into one study. It is interesting to learn that the first urban parks appeared in Ontario during the 1850s in Hamilton, Kingston, Niagara-on-the-Lake and Toronto. These were created shortly after the establishment of the first British pleasure grounds (London's Victoria Park 1842 and Liverpool's Birkenhead Park 1843), and at the same time as the first great American parks (Fairmount Park in Philadelphia 1855 and New York's Central Park 1858). No urgent urban crisis or social problems existed in predominantly agrarian Canada West in the 1850s, as they did elsewhere, to explain the appearance of Ontario's urban parks. Evidently, until the late 1880s when the pressure for public parks intensified in the United States, Ontario kept ahead of the Americans in the provision of outdoor recreational space. The early 1870s, for example, witnessed a noteworthy expansion of parks in towns and cities across Southern Ontario. In the absence of professional landscape architects, most of these new recreation areas were laid out and designed by amateurs. The province lacked a Frederick Law Olmsted. Not until the appearance after 1900 of the Boston-born, Montreal-based Frederick G. Todd did Canada possess a first-rate resident landscape architect. His influence on Ontario urban park design was of no little significance.

Professor Wright's interpretation of the mid nineteenth century rationale for public parks is not entirely convincing. He attributes the appearance of the first parks in the 1850s to the efforts of an Anglophile elite "attempting to duplicate in the New World the conditions in Britain from which they had so recently come." The primary purpose of the parks, he continues, was "beauty and nature appreciation" and "public health and morals." This is not a sufficient explanation. Even the documents quoted in the first volume (p. 67) suggest that both the civic boosterism of local businessmen seeking tourist dollars, and the reform inclinations of the middle class interested in social control, helped give rise to the initial parks. These themes might well have emerged more strongly had Wright undertaken a socio-economic analysis of the people petitioning for parks. Who, for instance, belonged to the Kingston Subscribers' Committee (1853)? Likewise, who were the members of civic groups like the Committee on Public Walks and Gardens set up by Toronto City Council in 1851? Since no information is provided about the membership of these groups, and no analysis attempted, the author is not persuasive when discussing motivation.

Wright's interpretive framework for the years from 1860 to 1914, the time frame of his second volume, is also problematical. "This was the period of romanticism," he asserts, "the period in which the newly-conceived urban parks were intended as places for exercise, instruction and psychic restoration." While applicable to the period prior to 1890, this

description will not suffice for the subsequent decades when the original romantic assumptions underlying the North American pleasure ground movement came under assault from new park philosophies. The ideas of the City Beautiful movement, the playground advocates and the so-called "reform park" enthusiasts successfully competed with, and to a large extent displaced, romantic park concepts. So did the working class demands for activity-oriented neighbourhood recreational space. There is precious little in Wright's book as to how or why all these competing impulses reshaped the urban park landscape.

Punctilious readers may be prompted to hurl these books in fury across a room upon encountering the appalling number of errors of spelling, grammar, consistency (especially in the footnoting apparatus), and accuracy of fact. To describe the writing style in these books as pedestrian would be generous. Those responsible for the editing of these histories have badly failed the author, and in doing so, have sunk their profession to a new low. One is also left with a host of questions of an editorial nature. Why do these volumes lack indexes? Why are the illustrations so weakly annotated? Why were some of the illustrations included at all? Why was the author permitted to include in the second volume, material that logically belongs in the other volumes? Why are the margins so enormous as to leave over half of each page blank? Such extravagance is a waste of the taxpayer's money. Finally, why was this study allowed to appear as a trilogy when one book would have sufficed? Volume one is only 109 pages in length with a mere 40 pages of narrative. This material could have been readily reduced to one introductory chapter in a single manuscript. A fifth of the first volume is devoted to definitions of park terms. Is there really a need for a twenty page appendix compiled from nine selected dictionaries published from 1785 to 1978, to document the evolving meaning of words like "garden" and "picnic"?

Wright's approach to his subject is very traditional. He focuses on the ideas and basic cultural assumptions of landscape architecture and, where possible, on the role of influential landscape designers like Olmsted and Todd. Similarly, emphasis is placed on the upper and middle class origins of parks. Regrettably, Wright has not incorporated a third and broader social model increasingly evident in British and American park historiography, an approach which takes into account popular and working class attitudes to parks and recreation. One would have to conclude from Wright's study that wage-earners had no role in the social competition for recreational space prior to 1914 — an untenable proposition.<sup>1</sup>

By the middle of volume one, this reviewer reached an unpleasant conclusion. Professor Wright has not mastered the craft of history. This is most evident in his lack of familiarity with the current state of the literature in Ontario and Canadian historical studies. There are no references to the

principal and relevant scholarly publications on the Canadian urban reform movement, the City Beautiful Movement, maternal feminism, Ontario political and natural resource history, and working class culture. It is difficult to believe that a study of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century urban park movement could be published without the context provided by these works. As an academic, Wright should not need reminding that before he attempts to contribute to historical knowledge, he must first master the existing literature in the field.

Gerald Killan  
King's College  
University of Western Ontario

---

#### Notes

1. For a splendid discussion of urban park historiography see Robert A.J. McDonald, "'Holy Retreat' or 'Practical Breathing Spot': Class Perceptions of Vancouver's Stanley Park, 1910-1913," *Canadian Historical Review*, LXV (June 1984): 127-53. McDonald's article is arguably the best single publication in Canadian urban park history and an outstanding example of the most recent social approach to the subject.

---

Cuming, David J. *Discovering Heritage Bridges on Ontario's Roads*. Erin: The Boston Mills Press, 1983. Pp. 95. Illustrations. \$9.95.

A conservation officer with the Heritage Branch, Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture, David Cuming is a professional town planner. He directs this book towards a very broad audience, and clearly its title is intended to engage the layperson. At the same time, Cuming's informed and systematic approach to his subject deserves the attention of urban scholars and especially heritage preservationists. Unfortunately, there is no index.

In the introduction Cuming presents his methodology. He sets out to establish the significance of heritage bridges in Ontario by considering their form, history and cultural importance, as well as the necessity to protect them. Cuming's study is clearly presented within the context of preserving the built environment. More specifically, he offers a thoughtful approach to understanding and managing an important and often problematic class of heritage structures. Unlike buildings, bridges are normally single-purpose structures. When a bridge becomes obsolete or redundant from a utilitarian standpoint, it is quite likely to be abandoned, dismantled or destroyed. Cuming's book should be required reading for preservationists who often face thorny problems about protecting such structures. It is also a very important source book for historians having to interpret the meaning and significance of early bridges.