

Introduction

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Volume 33, numéro 1, fall 2004

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1015670ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015670ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Gordon, A. (2004). Introduction: The New Cultural History and Urban History: Intersections. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 33(1), 3–7.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1015670ar>

Introduction

The New Cultural History and Urban History: Intersections

Alan Gordon

The theme of this issue of the *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* is "The New Cultural History and Urban History," a theme intended to answer a question about the place of the city in a recent trend in historical research. The aim of this issue is to demonstrate where the new cultural history offers insights for urban history. The articles in this issue demonstrate this potential, each in its own way. Yet, at the same time, each also suggests to cultural historians that studies grounded in the urban past help illuminate many of the broader questions that interest them. Among the basic assumptions underlying this issue is the belief that, for much of Western civilization in the 20th century, the city has been more than a scene for cultural expression. That is, the culture of modernity, a culture involving rapid social change, commodification, mass society, and fragmentation, did not just develop *in* the city. It is a culture of the city. This, I suggest, has been a missing element in the explosion of new research into such topics as historical memory, consumerism, and ritual, grouped together loosely as the "New Cultural History."¹

Of course, it is difficult to nail a definition of the new cultural history to the wall. The new cultural history is neither a school nor a movement. It is not a single approach and it does not encapsulate a specific methodology. Rather, the new cultural history represents a change in focus from looking for historical causation to exploring the meanings of things and events. It examines culture as a series of signifiers and, following Clifford Geertz, claims "the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."² New cultural historians, then, see their work as a way of understanding the past that emphasizes the ways that groups and individuals, in competition with one another, construct the meanings that guide their interpretations of the material world. Moreover, competition suggests that meaning is constructed in a plurality of ways and that there can be more than one meaning ascribed to the same event. No cultural event or artifact in this understanding has a monolithic meaning. This is an understanding of history that celebrates plurality within human societies and therefore embraces many different views of culture.

None of this suggests, as François Furet has proposed, that the new cultural history is nothing more than an unending pursuit of new topics.³ True, new cultural historians have opened the door to an increasing array of subjects for historical research. And some might complain that this has simply been a scramble to find new cultural practices to describe, be they cat massacres, carnivals, commemorations, or snacking. But behind this lies one of the great insights of the new cultural history: the banal, the everyday experience, the day-to-day actions of ordinary people, are seen not only as historically constructed, but as important to the understanding of power relations in human societies. Culture is an integral part of struggle and power. Following from the pioneering works of Michel Foucault, historians have begun to look for hidden clues to power relationships in the ways that categories of knowledge are constructed. The

new cultural history pushes Foucault's interest in prisons and asylums further into the mainstream of society, and develops his insights in an increasingly historicized context. Thus, the new cultural history is new in the sense that it represents a different way of thinking about certain questions. In particular, it questions power relationships as they are played out in everyday lives, usually of everyday people.

While it is difficult to pin down a single definition of the new cultural history, it is even harder to find a single origin for this turn in cultural history. Anthropologists, sociologists, literary theorists, architectural historians, Annalists, Marxists, Gramscians, and more can take credit (or accept blame) for the development of cultural history in the past decade and more. Much as it has an eclectic understanding of "culture" and the methodologies of historical study, this way of seeing the past takes inspiration from an eclectic set of precursors. It is now almost trite to trace the origins of the cultural turn to the Annales school, especially over a decade after Lynn Hunt's introduction to *The New Cultural History* drew that link for us.⁴ A more precise lineage would tie the new cultural history to the third generation of Annalists who came into their own in the 1970s, and whose conscious rejection of Fernand Braudel's *histoire totale* favoured the unusual and the marginal in recognition of the fragmentation of historical knowledge. This third generation, including Michel Vovelle, the later Philippe Ariès, and especially Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, began to focus increasingly on the idea of *mentalités*, a notion rooted in the origins of the Annales school. The founding Annalists, Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, in turn examined the possibilities of unbelief in the 16th century and belief in the miraculous, attempting to understand the relationships between the economy, society, and mass belief systems.⁵ Some might protest that *mentalité* is not uniquely Annaliste, but can be traced through the earlier works of Johan Huizinga and even Jacob Burckhardt.⁶ *Mentalité* itself offers no definition that will be satisfactory to everyone. However, for the new cultural history, it suggests focus on collective, rather than individual attitudes, the thought of ordinary people as well as educated people, and the structures of belief, the study of how people think about subjects as much as what they think about them. *Mentalité* is as much a Durkheimian notion as it is an Annaliste one.

It is perhaps ironic that, in the days of Febvre and Bloch, Marxist scholars rejected *mentalités*, complaining that they appeared to be unconnected to material reality. Following Marx directly led some to conclude that culture was but "superstructure," grafted on to the mode of production, twice removed. Yet, for the English-speaking world, the new cultural history owes its emergence to the work of ex-Marxists, neo-Marxists, or at the very least scholars who found some aspects of Marxism attractive. The new social history of the 1960s and 1970s, through influential journals such as *Past and Present*, introduced many of these Continental concepts to the English-speaking world. For traditionalists, this might seem odd. The new cultural history

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reverses the assumptions implicit in the Marxist critique of cultural history. It suggests that cultural practices can often resist social or economic forces and, more importantly, that they help shape social reality. To paraphrase Richard White, societies mediate the material world through their belief systems.⁷ These notions developed as followers of Marxism began to interpret the scribblings of Antonio Gramsci, whose insights directed them to pursue more nuanced understandings of power.

Gramsci's Marxism suggested that subaltern groups—everyday people—participated in negotiating their own position within hegemonic economic, social, political, and cultural structures. Marx, or more correctly a loose adherence to Marxist thinking, was not the only influence driving scholars to the study of power through cultural practice. But Marxism, Gramsci, and their applications to social history suggested the importance of examining the culture of the popular classes.

New cultural history has also been influenced by a series of interdisciplinary alliances that began in the 1970s, shifting away from linking history with politics and economics and finding new connections in anthropology and the humanities through the “linguistic turn” of the 1980s. The central element of the linguistic turn is the recognition of the centrality of language or text to the construction of social relations. The project was not to define reality as merely text, but to explain how reality was shaped by, and could only be understood through, language. Some writers drew radical conclusions from this insight, while others recoiled from its “otherworldly” dismissal of human agency.

Although anthropology and history have long been rivals in exploring the human past, cultural anthropology's attention to the symbols and meanings of cultural practice—symbolic anthropology—has been especially valuable for cultural historians. Indeed, Peter Burke has suggested the substitution of “anthropological history” for “new cultural history,” noting that novelty is a diminishing asset.⁸ But this might be too straightforward. The intellectual roots of the new cultural history are too eclectic—much like the studies themselves—to be so closely tied to one interdisciplinary movement. (Indeed, another aspect of this eclecticism is a willingness to borrow and mix theory from a variety of sources.) Still, the anthropological and sociological works of Raymond Williams, Pierre Bourdieu, Regina Bendix, and Clifford Geertz have greatly influenced cultural historians. Robert Darnton, despite being cautious about the “new” cultural history, announced that history's aim was to read for meaning.⁹ Geertz, in particular, has developed the method of “thick description,” which for historians suggests a microhistorical method of case studies and a close reading of evidence.¹⁰ The influence of Geertz's method, sometimes unconsciously, helped historians step back from the brink of discourse and linguistic theory and reintegrate their works with the empiricism that lies at the heart of historical argument. This is not to suggest that there are not problems associated with anthropological adaptations to history. Traditionally, many historians complained that anthropology ignored the role of the state, that it isolated communities from the larger power structures of

national societies. They have complained that anthropologists looked for common understandings and therefore missed the crucial strife among ethnicities, institutions, ideologies, and above all, classes. But the worst anthropological crime, in the eyes of many historians, has always been that it is an ahistorical discipline that tends to reify cultural practices as timeless and unchanging. On the other hand, anthropologists might point out that historians have corrupted Geertz's methodology in transferring it to a new discipline, and remain ignorant of the anthropological debates that preceded it. None of these criticisms are entirely fair, but historians borrowing these methods have tried to return to historicism, often through a conscious revival of narrative.

In Canada, the new cultural history has also been influenced by the “limited identities” approach. Although much maligned in recent years for its presumed aim to obliterate national history,¹¹ the limited identities approach anticipated the neo-pluralism of recent cultural histories. But this same neo-pluralism must lead cultural historians to see the historical construction of national meaning as one of many potential cultures. It is not a case of denying the national framework. Cultural historians might go further and reject the dichotomy altogether, seeing such categories as fluid, simultaneous, and above all, constructed. But at the very least, cultural history can reveal the competition by which the national and the “limited” interact, much as H. V. Nelles implied in *The Art of Nation-Building* or G. R. Friesen argues more directly in *Citizens and Nation*.¹² Neither work is specifically an urban history; however, there is, as Mary Corbin Sies suggests, a chance to energize urban history through attention to these intersections of categories.¹³

If it cannot be pinned down with an easy definition, or be traced to a clear set of origins, one thing is clear in the new cultural history: it is primarily concerned with expressions of power. It represents, as Georg Iggers suggests, social historians' return to politics.¹⁴ (Indeed, in this sense the new cultural history is not a radical break from social history but a change in emphasis or a different way of thinking about similar questions.) But unlike older political history, the new cultural history's concern with politics, when openly about traditional politics, turns to questions of citizenship, political identity, and political culture, such as Vincent Robert's study of urban demonstrations in Lyon.¹⁵ The suggestion is that political history must be more democratic than traditional political history and read “the people” back into political behaviour. The new cultural history, then, can be characterized as history from below. It is the history of the everyday or of the culture of everyday things. And it asks questions about collective thought, in particular about mentalities, collective memories, and mass behaviour. The most widespread method, though not the only one, adapts Geertz's case studies and descriptive method, revealing a tendency towards microhistory. Immediately urbanists should see one obvious intersection with urban history. As Charles Tilley suggests, urban historians are uncomfortable with grand schemes, and love the particulars.¹⁶

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A few years back, Gilbert Stelter began searching for these sorts of intersections in a book review I commissioned for *H-Urban*. Stelter argued that the new cultural history takes a step beyond an older cultural history and that, with specific reference to urban history, it views cities as communities “based on difference.”¹⁷ Stelter identified as particularly effective urban adaptations of the new cultural history Allan Pred’s study of language, Alan Mayne’s conceptualization of the slum as an imagined space, and Carl Smith’s exploration of *mentalités* in Chicago.¹⁸ Since then, a wide variety of titles could be added to the list. Taken together, these works suggest that cities are themselves agents in the historical construction of meaning, and that to ignore the specifics of urban contexts is to miss a crucial dimension. For Canadian historians, I would suggest that the new cultural history crosses with urban history in at least three main intersections: consumerism, public space, and collective identity.

A new generation of scholars has become interested in consumerism and has grasped the interplay of consumption and cultural identity in American cities. Works by Lizabeth Cohen, Richard Longstreth, and Chester Liebs demonstrate the connection between urban form and consumer behaviour.¹⁹ Much of this research has zeroed in on the ubiquitous use of the automobile, for in the late 20th century, nothing was more “everyday” than driving.²⁰ Canadians are also beginning to investigate the interconnection of mass consumer society and urban life. Consumer history intersects urban history by helping to explain the processes of urban change and, most importantly, how people construct the meaning of urban change. There is no claim that consumerism explains everything about urban change. Rather, scholars rely on the insights gained from the history of consumption to learn about how urban change is transacted and how consumer behaviour and expectations have been translated into the built urban environment, both as physical form and as an expression of the culture of modernity.²¹ Steve Penfold’s contribution to this issue captures this interplay in the context of suburbanization and a contradictory resistance to and embrace of 20th-century “progress.” But reading the term *consumption* broadly, historians now recognize that citizens “consume” urban institutions and urban life in this complex and often contradictory manner. In societies rooted in liberal capitalism, virtually all aspects of life can become commercialized. Nowhere is this more clear than in areas of leisure and recreation.

Recreation and leisure have always been part of rural life, but in the city they took new forms and became more highly organized and constrained in both time and space. Keith Walden has explored how the Toronto Industrial Exhibition helped shape understandings as Toronto was transformed by industrial capitalism, technology, and new values that include consumerism. Public libraries, public gardens and parks, beaches, and waterfronts are not just areas for relaxation, but sites of conflict as different groups and individuals attempt to construct their urban environment.²² As Yvan Lamonde suggests later in this

issue, these cultural institutions were entwined with the urban and political cultures of Canada’s emerging liberal democracy. Reading culture developed out of urban commercial ventures, but was foundational in public life.

Much of this work connects to research into public space. Following the translation of the writings of Jürgen Habermas into other languages, scholars around the Western world have developed more complex understandings of the importance of the public sphere in liberalism. In the context of urban history, it appears that broader forces shape the spaces we live in, and these spaces themselves guide, although often unconsciously, our thoughts and behaviour. Studies of the historical construction of public space are thus a major thrust of the new cultural history and urban history. But recent interest in space in cities has tended to focus on the symbolic: the tendency has been to examine images, language, and behaviours in public space, rather than look at the material environment itself. Neighbourhoods are “imagined,” at least in people’s perceptions of them. Space is both a physical area *and* a cultural construct to be delimited by parades and demonstrations, and “place” carries a certain power of its own to invoke memories.²³ Again, there is an often contradictory dynamic in the interpretation of public space, as people both embrace and resist change. In this issue, Filippo De Pieri and Paolo Scrivano examine the creation of a “historic” space in the centre of an Italian city. Thus, we learn from their investigation of Bologna that the construction of space is also related to the construction of our identities and the imagination of our collective pasts as urbanites. This is particularly important for urbanists because of the new cultural history’s interest in carnival and ritual. Such events invariably take place in public space, and the spaces themselves help transcribe meanings onto the rituals, grafting specific places onto group identities.²⁴

Public memory and collective identities are inextricably entwined. So too is there an obvious intersection with public space. In my own work I argue that by constructing public memories different social groups (or more particularly the self-styled representatives of different social groups) helped establish legitimacy in the public spaces of Montreal.²⁵ Ronald Rudin has taken a different tack, showing how memories were negotiated over time *and* space, and situated directly in the urban context. Rudin makes Quebec City, the place, integral to his argument, showing how contemporary local competitions and contexts guided commemorative events.²⁶ Following from this understanding, Greg Marquis’s contribution to this issue narrates the dynamism of urbanites’ identities through time, revealing a growing professionalization of memory-making that coincided with challenges to earlier discourses and paradoxically exposed a more “democratic” tradition of memory in Saint John.

This brief introduction is not intended as an exhaustive survey of the literature of the new cultural history, nor even of its application to urban history. Rather, it is intended as an entreaty to think about cities in new and exciting ways. In the pages that follow, readers will uncover only a brief introduction to the varieties of

ways that the new cultural history can inform our understanding of the urban past. Our focus is on Canadian writers, although not exclusively, as a reflection of this journal's reach. But the lessons that we hope can be taken from these pages are applicable in any national or regional setting. It is an honour to present them.

Notes

1. Readers looking for a more thorough urban historiography are invited to consider Timothy Gilfoyle, "White Cities, Linguistic Turns, and Disneylands: The New Paradigms of Urban History," *Reviews in American History* 26, no. 1 (1998): 175–204; François Guérard, "L'histoire urbaine au Québec : la recherche récente à la maîtrise et au doctorat," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 54, no. 2 (automne 2000): 247–68; Claire Poitras, "L'histoire urbaine au Québec durant les années 1990 : de nouvelles tendances?" *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 54, no. 2 (automne 2000): 219–48; Mary Corbin Sies, "North American Urban History: The Everyday Politics and Spatial Logics of Metropolitan Life," *Urban History Review* 32, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 28–42 (hereafter *UHR*).
2. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in his *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.
3. François Furet, "Beyond the Annales," *Journal of Modern History* 55, no. 3 (September 1983): 405.
4. Lynn Hunt, "Introduction," in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt and Aletta Biersack (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 6–7.
5. Lucien Febvre, *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVI^e siècle, la religion de Rabelais* (Paris : A Michel, 1942); Marc Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges : étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale, particulièrement en France et en Angleterre* (Paris: A. Colin, 1961).
6. See, for example, Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: Penguin Books, 1990); Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, trans. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
7. Richard White, *Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), xiii–xix.
8. Peter Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 191–92.
9. Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage, 1985), 3. Darnton did suggest that meaning was also the concern of intellectual history. See his "Intellectual and Cultural History," in *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, ed. Michael Kammen (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 348.
10. Geertz, "Thick Description"; see also Nancy Steiber, "Microhistory of the Modern City: Urban Space, Its Use and Representation," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (September 1999): 382–91.
11. See, for example, J. L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1998) and Ramsay Cook, "Identities Are Not Like Hats," *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 2 (June 2000): 260–92.
12. H. V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec's Tercentenary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Gerald Friesen, *Citizens and Nation: An Essay on History, Communication, and Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).
13. Sies, "North American Urban History," 28.
14. Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), 137. See also James F. McMillan, "Social History, 'New

- Cultural History,' and the Rediscovery of Politics: Some Recent Work on Modern France," *Journal of Modern History* 66, no. 4 (December 1994): 755–72.
15. Vincent Robert, *Les chemins de la manifestation, 1848–1914* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1996).
16. Charles Tilly, "What Good Is Urban History," *Journal of Urban History* 22, no. 6 (September 1996): 715.
17. Gilbert Stelter, "The New Cultural History and Urban History: Review of Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture*," H-Urban, H-Net Reviews, August 1998, <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=4983902515265>.
18. Allan Pred, *Lost Words and Lost Worlds: Modernity and the Language of Everyday Life in Late Nineteenth-Century Stockholm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Alan Mayne, *The Imagined Slum: Newspaper Representation in Three Cities, 1870–1914* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993); Carl Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, The Haymarket Bomb and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
19. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003); Richard Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles, 1920–1950* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997); Chester Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (Boston: Little Brown, 1985).
20. See, for instance, James Flink, *The Car Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1975); Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Mass Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Donald Finlay Davis, *Conspicuous Production: Automobiles and Elites in Detroit, 1899–1930* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988). For a Canadian context, consider G. T. Bloomfield, "No Parking Here to Corner: London Reshaped by the Automobile, 1911–1961," *UHR* 18, no. 2 (October 1989): 150; Yves Bussière, "L'automobile et l'expansion des banlieues: Le cas de Montréal, 1901–2001," *UHR* (octobre 1989): 159–65; Stephen Davies, "Reckless Walking Must Be Discouraged: The Automobile Revolution and the Shaping of Modern Urban Canada," *UHR* 18, no. 2 (October 1989): 123–38. See also Veronica Strong-Boag, "Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1945–1960," *Canadian Historical Review* 72, no. 4 (December 1991): 471–504; and Donald Davis and Barbara Lorenzkowski, "A Platform for Gender Tensions: Women Working and Riding on Canadian Urban Public Transit in the 1940s," *Canadian Historical Review* 79, no. 3 (September 1998): 431–65.
21. See, for example, Michel Comeau, "Les grands magasins de la rue Sainte-Catherine à Montréal : des lieux de modernisation, d'homogénéisation et de différenciation des modes de consommation," *Revue d'histoire matérielle* (printemps 1995): 58–68; Douglas Bailie, "Cinemas in the City: Edmonton from the Nickelodeon to the Multiplex," *Prairie Forum* 12, no. 2 (1996): 239–62; Claire Poitras, "Tertiarisation et transformation de l'espace urbain : la rue McGill à Montréal (1842–1934)," *UHR* 31, no. 2 (printemps 2003) : 3–17; Paul Moore, "Movie Palaces on Canadian Downtown Main Streets," *UHR* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 3–20.
22. Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997). See also Sylvie Dufresne, "Attractions, curiosités, carnivals d'hiver, expositions agricoles et industrielles : le loisir à Montréal au XIX^e siècle," in *Montréal au XIX^e siècle*, ed. J.-R. Brault (Ottawa: LEMÉAC, 1990), 233–67; Hervé Gagnon, "Divertissement et patriotisme: la genèse des musées d'histoire à Montréal au XIX^e siècle," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 48, no. 3 (hiver 1995): 317–50; Patrice Groulx and Alain Roy, "Les lieux historiques de la région du Québec comme lieux d'expression identitaire," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 48, no. 4 (printemps 1995) : 527–41; Michèle Dagenais, "Vie culturelle et pouvoirs publics locaux : La fondation de la bibliothèque municipale de Montréal," *UHR* 24, no. 2

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- (Mars 1996): 40–56; Ken Cruikshank and Nancy Bouchier, "The heritage of the people closed against them": Class, Environment, and the Shaping of Burlington Beach, 1870s–1980s," *UHR* (October 2001): 40–55.
23. Meredith Watkins, "The Cemetery and Cultural Memory: Montreal, 1860–1900," *UHR* 31, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 52–62. See also Peter Goheen, "Symbols in the Streets: Parades in Victorian Urban Canada," *UHR* 18, no. 3 (February 1990): 237–43.
24. See, in particular, Delores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), and Stéphanie Gerson, *The Pride of Place: Local Memories and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003).
- For a Canadian example see Jean-Claude Marsan, "La préservation du patrimoine urbain," in *Les chemins de la mémoire*, ed. P.-L. Martin (Quebec: Ministère des biens culturelles, 1990), 2:1–12.
25. Alan Gordon, *Making Public Pasts: The Contested Terrain of Montreal's Public Memories, 1891–1930* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).
26. Ronald Rudin, *Founding Fathers: The Celebration of Champlain and Laval in the Streets of Quebec, 1878–1908* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003). Curiously, some reviewers have ignored Rudin's attention to the specific urban context of Quebec City.