

Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

James T. Angus — *A Respectable Ditch. A History of the Trent-Severn Waterway, 1833-1920*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988. Pp. xiv, 455.

Among North America's great man-made waterways is the Trent-Severn which runs from eastern Lake Ontario to Georgian Bay on Lake Huron. Today, this canal system is perhaps the most popular recreational corridor in Canada. It began, however, simply as an attempt to bolster traditional local industries and agriculture. Furthermore, in his chronicle of the Trent-Severn's development, Prof. James T. Angus maintains that it was "pork-barrel politics" (171) which sustained the project, a thesis which he conclusively proves. His tale of "one of the most expensive political boondoggles in Canadian history" (34) is told with narrative skill, humour and scholarly precision, clearly showing how influences from the "grass roots" affected national and provincial policies and how major economic and political changes affected one small part of Canada.

Local pressure for locks, dams, log slides, etc. led to huge delegations going to Ottawa to lobby their M.P.s. Especially the Trent Valley Canal Association (formed in 1879) exerted "ceaseless pressure" (159). Waterway promoters maintained that, among other advantages, the Trent would offer wheat and timber a safer and cheaper avenue to St. Lawrence ports than the Lake Erie-Welland Canal route.

Governments were reluctant, however, to invest in the waterway. Yet when an election approached, the party in power would suddenly sponsor surveys, set aside moneys, begin projects — which were usually abandoned when they were no longer politically useful. Ottawa indulged in "promises, stalling devices, pressure tactics, and election-eve decisions" (213). For example, contractors and engineers who were not supporters of the ruling party rarely got contracts or appointments; but even for loyal supporters, funds were slow to appear. Both Macdonald and Laurier extended construction work over many years, to assure their continuance in power.

The canal's initial purposes were imperfectly realized because the forests were soon harvested and not "one kernel of wheat" ever passed down it (239). Eventually, whereas hydro-power led to the completion of the waterway after 1907, the tourist trade became the most lucrative 20th century source of local canal-based profit.

This is not a social history, but "a book about politics..." (xi). Therefore, social and technological histories of the waterway are still necessary. Nevertheless, this story of businessmen and politicians is engrossing without being superficially "entertaining", scholarly without being abstruse. Prof. Angus' research has been painstaking and very productive. He has worked in the National Archives, Ontario Archives, Toronto and Peterborough public libraries, and Trent-Severn Waterway headquarters, examining government records, public accounts, House of Commons debates, newspaper stories, letters and private papers. His bibliography also contains many relevant secondary sources. Not only is his style clear and readable, but Prof. Angus' narrative

and descriptive skills are also evident in vivid pictures of the Trent's timber booms and jams, of the remarkable brawling among contractors and engineers, and of the opening and first operation of the Peterborough lift lock. He offers a convincing appreciation of the work of Nichol Hugh Baird who "created the canal" (94). The characters of Baird and his fellow engineer Hamilton Hartley Killaly are strongly recreated as is that of superintendent Richard B. Rogers. He also presents a good clear description of the technology involved in the operation of a hydraulic lift lock. The many illustrations are placed conveniently at suitable spots throughout the book.

Several points are especially fascinating. Water pollution on the Trent was a problem in the mid-19th century, but legislative efforts were made to eliminate it. The ravaging of the landscape also began then, too, for the canal caused severe environmental damage in the flooding of forested areas such as the Simcoe-Balsam lake division. It is, however, the political circus which astonishes. For example, Sir William Mulock, a minister in one of Laurier's governments, conceived a plan to build a canal along the shallow Holland River to serve his Newmarket constituents. "Mulock's Madness" wasted a million dollars of public money. In this "grossest and most expensive boondoggle of them all" (293), the locks were finished, but the channel itself was never built. Then there is the paradox of the federal Liberal party championing private development of hydro-electric power on the Trent, while provincial Conservatives favored public ownership.

The book has some weaknesses. Angus writes that in the Trent's construction, "it was only the means that were sometimes reprehensible; the end was always noble" (xii). Yet very early in the chronicle, he offers evidence which contradicts this claim. For example, all the members of the government commission appointed in 1833 to study ways to aid navigation on the Otonabee River "had vested interests" in the area. Angus admits this was a "blatant misuse of political power" (4). What was the "noble end" of such machinations beyond personal profit and, as he constantly proves later, political gain?

Some technical terms, undefined, have the reader reaching for a dictionary. There are typographical errors, especially toward the end of the book. The well-reproduced illustrations do not include portraits of the "little-known Canadians who, ...promoted the scheme..." (xii). Were there no pictures available of, for example, Thomas S. Rubidge (canal superintendent), Alex Grant (superintending engineer), or J.G.G. Kerry (sponsor of the Trent hydro-power system)?

The maps could be larger and more detailed. Some have very fine print, but do not fill the whole page. This book deserves to be widely read, but even long-time Ontario natives will not know some of the sites where Prof. Angus' saga occurs. References are made in the text to places not shown on the maps. For example, frequent mention is made in Chapter 26 of Ragged Rapids and the Nottawasaga River, neither of which appear on any of the maps. More maps of small areas set into the text or into the larger maps would help.

Important figures, when they first appear in the narrative, are not always described adequately. For example, when a man identified simply as Rogers, an engineer, is introduced (99), no hint is given that R.B. Rogers will turn out to be an extremely important individual. Less important figures such as contractors J.B. Fuller and J.A. Aylmer are introduced into the narrative without being identified. Thus, when they reappear in the story, the reader does not recall their previous roles.

This, however, is nit-picking. There are two more serious weaknesses. The fascinating narrative comes to an abrupt halt without a comparison of the Trent project with other canal-building projects and public works, or with the development of tourism or of hydro-power elsewhere in Canada. There is not even a recapitulation of themes. A more satisfying conclusion would also inform the reader about what has happened to the Trent since 1920. The author writes: "Given the millions of dollars it has poured into the economy, to say nothing of the thousands of man-hours of pleasure it has given to its users, the canal is worth every cent the politicians reluctantly spent on it" (406). Readers outside Ontario may not understand this point at all.

Although Prof. Angus is sensitive to the injustice of ethnic bigotry, he almost replicates the problem himself, because he cannot refrain from ethnic stereotyping. He implies that all Scots are "stubborn" (41), "tight-fisted" (145), "self-righteous" (146), "laconic" (174) and "frugal" (326). Nevertheless, he makes unexplained exceptions. For many years, the two operators of the Big Chute Marine Railway (one of them the author's father) were Scots. When Scotty and Jack are called "charming", "conscientious and dedicated", "friendly, co-operative...helpful" and witty (395-396), apparently with none of the aforementioned weaknesses, credibility is strained. Ethnic stereotypes (when not actually insulting) are clumsy tools of description or analysis. Where "the rule" is applied, one suspects prejudice, just as much as when it is not applied and exceptions are made.

These flaws aside, Prof. Angus' book, because of its lively style, attention to detail and narrative power, deserves to be in both university and public, as well as private, libraries.

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Peter Baskerville — *The Bank of Upper Canada*. Toronto: Champlain Society and Carleton University Press, 1987. Pp. clii, 397.

Over the past few years, in the general expansion of interest in Canadian business history, several studies focusing upon the history of individual chartered banks have appeared. This reviewer, like others who have pursued the path of banking history, has concentrated largely upon banks which still exist, or, failing that, has chosen institutions which were absorbed by banks that still function. The historical records of ongoing institutions have usually been retained in corporate archives. Accordingly, by choosing to study the right bank, the researcher could put himself in a position to be able to examine such crucial documents as internal correspondence or the minutes of the meetings of directors.

In this context, one has to give full credit to Peter Baskerville for having had the courage to take on the history of the Bank of Upper Canada. The first chartered bank in Ontario began its operations in 1822 before passing from the scene, in 1866, when its affairs were liquidated. Occasionally, the records of such liquidated banks have mysteriously made their way into archival collections. This possibility was precluded in the case of the Bank of Upper Canada when its papers were sold off to a paper