A century ago, practically speaking, it was only Canadian Jews who cared to write and interpret their community’s history. They received very little encouragement or interest in this activity from university-based scholars in Canada. A generation ago, when Anctil began his scholarly work, the coming of Jewish studies to universities meant that the Jewish experience in Canada began to be interpreted by university-based scholars, many of whom were Jewish. Scholars with non-Jewish backgrounds tended not to become engaged in this field and Anctil, a non-Jewish francophone scholar deeply engaged in this study, was fairly unique at the time.

The scholarly situation prevalent a generation ago has changed. It is now the case that the academic study of the Jewish presence in Quebec attracts great interest from students regardless of their ethno-religious-linguistic heritage. This welcome process brings to the academic discussion of Jews in Quebec important new voices and perspectives. Anctil’s latest book most certainly marks a major milestone in this process. We can and should look forward to further enrichment and cross-pollination from this quarter.

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Bertolt Brecht once famously asked who built the pyramids. Ruth Bleasdale has spent much of her career answering even more probing questions about not just who built the canals and railways in mid-nineteenth century British North America and Canada, but what their life was like and how it changed over time. With great empathy and studious balance, this book carefully presents her findings. Initially, most labourers were immigrant Irish Catholics, but as early as the late 1840s their work camps were home to an increasingly varied mix of local residents, Americans, and Europeans. Despite the temporary nature of these camps, they were also home to many wives and children. If regional Irish factional identities marked many of the earliest labour struggles on the canals, this had already given way to more coordinated movements against mechanisation that challenged work place authority by the 1850s. In the much more diversified work forces of the 1870s, labourers successfully organized short-lived unions and even established alliances with skilled workers as they struggled for better wages in the bleak years of depression. Bleasdale concludes that it is in the lived experiences of these thousands of unskilled working men and women rather than amongst skilled male workers where we should look for the fertile ground that permitted the rapid growth of the Knights of Labour in the 1880s.
The structure of her argument flows from the choice of subject matter: this is not a book about the unskilled labourers who made up a fifth to a third of the period’s waged work force; it is a study of labourers building or enlarging canals in the Canadas and constructing railways in and to the Maritimes on large-scale public work projects. Logically then, it starts with the contractors, explains the problems inherent in the bidding process and the manifold difficulties most faced in completing their contracts. Once this stage is set, we are introduced through three chapters to the labour force, the work, and the living conditions. Each of these cover the entire period, and Bleasdale works hard to ensure we grasp the variety of situations people faced. The work may have been simple, but their lives were anything but. The qualitative changes suggested by these introductory chapters are examined in the heart of the book through the lens of first community and then struggle. Each merit two chapters in order to highlight how different the situation of the 1840s and 1850s was from that of the 1870s.

The evidential base for her argument is a careful culling of public records, census returns, and English-language newspapers and secondary literature. These are at best refractory sources, telling us far more about how labourers were viewed and very frequently feared by their social superiors than anything meaningful about the workers and their families themselves. Here is where Bleasdale’s empathy and scholarly expertise is most in evidence. She frequently speaks to us on behalf of her people, explaining why actions that were uniformly denounced in the press were often necessary and rational from the perspective of the labourers. She is particularly good at drawing out evidence of sympathetic relations between these labouring people and their temporary host communities. Understandably, it is for the Lachine and Welland canals, where work went on throughout the 1870s and early 1880s, that she can marshal the strongest evidence of community support. Hence the importance of her analysis of census enumerations of boarding houses, hotels, and even the occasional work camp in establishing the many local ties of workers in the more mobile sites from the late 1840s onwards.

This is an exemplary study in English Canadian labour history, a subfield that has long been one of our discipline’s greatest strengths. Labourers on the canals were never left out of our history, if only because the not infrequently murderous response of contractors and the state to their struggles ensured they could not be ignored. It has, however, largely been a two-dimensional presence, singularly lacking in historical depth. Bleasdale’s work changes all that. She has shown not only that these diverse people living in complex communities had a history, but that it mattered.

Why then did I close this book strangely unsatisfied? I suspect the source of my unease lies with her use of sources, which, I stress, conforms to the highest methodological standards within contemporary labour history. Thus, individual sources are not allowed to speak for themselves, and so their eloquent testimony of inequality is never heard, let alone rigorously examined. Instead, they are systematically mined for telling instances, which the knowing voice of the historian by a technique akin to alchemy then weaves into narrative gold. Now, synthesising a complex historical pattern out of widely disparate and dispersed
sources is standard academic historical practice because, by and large, bourgeois history is not overly concerned with inequality. I think labour history should be. Indeed, I think inequality might well be its raison d'être.

Call me old-fashioned, but I think a good labour history should make the reader angry, not just better informed and more critically aware than before, but angry. After all, inequality cut into the very sinew of labour. How and why a minority benefitted from socially constructing class, gender, and race, while qualitatively transforming our relationship with the rest of nature, and thereby irreparably damaging the life choices of the majority, need to be at the heart of labour history precisely because we are still living through those very same processes. These are political, not academic questions.

The rough labour chronicled in this book was on public works. For Bleasdale, this is an operational definition that facilitates a focus on a particular evolving work force. I well understand, but it was more than that. These people worked on projects defined as being in the public good. How the organisation of their labour worked so systemically against the common good, how and, above all, why it contributed to making a substantially more unequal world that was qualitatively more ecocidal are the questions we need answered. Thanks to Bleasdale’s pioneering study, we have a much better appreciation of the labour this will require.

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L’ouvrage d’Amélie Bourbeau est issu d’une thèse soutenue en 2010 sur la transformation du monde de la charité privée à Montréal entre le début des années 1930 et celui des années 1970. Selon l’auteure, cette période négligée par l’historiographie de la protection sociale au Québec a pourtant été décisive : jusqu’alors éparpillée en de multiples institutions mal financées et reposant sur l’initiative individuelle, la charité catholique s’est coordonnée au cours de ces quarante ou cinquante années, a rationalisé son financement, professionnalisé son recrutement et modernisé son travail social. Bref, en matière de protection sociale, la Révolution tranquille constitue une césure peut-être moins nette que ne le croit une historiographie trop préoccupée par la question de l’étatisation. Des tendances de fond ont préparé et rendu possible l’étatisation de l’assistance. Le monde de la charité catholique, souvent dépeint comme plus réfractaire à la rationalisation que ceux de la charité protestante ou juive, n’a pas échappé à un phénomène wébérien de bureaucratisation. L’enquête historique repose sur un travail documentaire convaincant qui a consisté à examiner à la fois des sources