

Barbara R. Robertson, *Sawpower: Making Lumber in the Sawmills of Nova Scotia*

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Barbara R. Robertson. *Sawpower: Making Lumber in the Sawmills of Nova Scotia*. Halifax: Nimbus Publishing and Nova Scotia Museum, 1986. 244 pp., ill. Paper \$19.95, ISBN 0-920852-53-X.

It has become somewhat of a cliché to say that the nineteenth century was a century of wood, wind and water. Yet there have been relatively few studies that examine the most common application of that technology in communities in North America—the sawmill. Barbara Robertson of the Nova Scotia Museum has filled a gap in the literature with the publication of *Sawpower*.

Her intention has been to investigate the whole of this wood-based technology, not just the sawmill itself, but the power sources and specialized equipment used, the products produced, and the men and women who worked in the mills. The result is a fascinating study whose value extends well beyond the boundaries of Nova Scotia. The technology of “making lumber” was similar throughout North America and this study is sufficiently general that it should be a useful approach to be followed whether the study of “making lumber” concerns Pictou County, or the Haliburton Highlands in Ontario or the Alberta foothills.

Many of the earlier studies of the exploitation of the forests of North America, such as those of A.R.M. Lower, concentrate on the export trade of square timber and deals. Robertson's book is concerned more with the forest industry that was (and indeed still is) found in almost every small community in North America. Robertson picks up on many of the themes of Graeme Wynn's chapter titled “The Rise of Sawmills” in his *Timber Colony: A Historical Geography of Early Nineteenth Century New Brunswick* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981, pp. 87–112), but she has expanded the study into many areas which will be of interest to the material historian.

The volume deals extensively with technology without becoming overly technical. With respect to the mills the intricacies of flutter wheels, turbines and band saws are explained; the book also deals with the equipment used for secondary manufacturing of wood products. This secondary industry is in greater danger of being lost to material

historians than the mills themselves, of which a large number are still in operation or have been restored. Robertson writes of clothespin machines, sash and door factories, fruit basket manufacturing and the production of newel posts. The machines created for these specialized wood industries are covered in the volume and companies such as Robb Engineering (which made portable steam sawmills used all across the country) and Lloyd Manufacturing (which made specialized barrel-making machinery) receive extensive coverage.

The reader comes away from Robertson's book with a better understanding of the industrial diversity of Nova Scotia, which by the end of the First World War was falling victim to policies of centralization and a failure of entrepreneurship. *Sawpower* provides material examples of the extent of the de-industrialization of the Maritimes, which has been the subject of recent studies by such historians as Ernest R. Forbes and T.W. Acheson.

Sawpower goes beyond the romantic “old mill stream” approach of some recent volumes, and Robertson's treatment of steam-powered mills and the nineteenth-century industrialization of the wood industries opens new areas of interest to the material historian.

This volume is thorough. Robertson mentions some 489 individual establishments, either sawmills or manufacturing companies using wood technology. This figure does not include companies such as the Liverpool and Milton Tramway Company or the Colchester Timber Driving and Manufacturing Company, which were concerned primarily with transportation of wood products and whose stories are some of the unexpected gems of this volume. Robertson's excursions into some of these peripheral areas generally add to the volume but occasionally they are a distraction; such is the case with her coverage of the career of Emil Vossnack, who was involved with the Halifax Technical Institute.

The volume is exceptionally well illustrated; the photographs and maps provide support for the text and contain technological details that would be impossible to give in any other way. Robertson has on occasion made surprising use of the photographic material. One of the seventeen tables is an analysis of the

clothing of 309 on-site sawmill workers from pictures. The volume also contains an extensive bibliography, an extremely useful glossary of terms related to wood technology and a large fold-out map showing the location of mills and factories noted in the text.

In short, *Sawpower* is highly recommended for those with an interest in wood technology or with wood-technology equipment in their collections.

Debra McNabb, *Old Sydney Town: Historic Buildings of the North End*

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Debra McNabb. *Old Sydney Town: Historic Buildings of the North End*. Sydney, N.S.: Old Sydney Society, 1986. 102 pp., ill. Paper \$10.95, ISBN 0-9692642-1-6. Cloth, price not available, ISBN 0-9692642-0.

For most Maritimers, and indeed for most Canadians, the image of Sydney, Nova Scotia, is that of a down-at-the-heels, turn-of-the-century steel works casting a rusty pall over the skyline of a working-class city. This is the very heart of industrial Cape Breton—an often tormented outpost of Canada, beset by newsworthy environmental damage and chronic underemployment, periodic labour unrest, political cynicism and, what sociologists would call, “other social pathologies.” Yet in historical terms the city has a longer, more varied and, perhaps one might say, distinguished lineage, extending over two centuries to when it was founded by Joseph Frederick Walle DesBarres in 1785 as the capital of the Loyalist colony of Cape Breton.

For thirty-five years it served this important colonial function while also taking its place as a busy port and centre of trade within the Gulf of St. Lawrence rim, a subset of the larger North Atlantic trading orbit. The annexation of Cape Breton by Nova Scotia scotched Sydney's aspirations and colonial pretensions during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, but the movement after 1860 toward an industrial phase based on coal extraction, and later iron and steel, sustained its importance as one of the few larger urban places in Nova Scotia. Rightly or wrongly, present-day Sydney seems to be a prisoner to the dirty failing steeltown stereotype.

The purpose of this book is to challenge that image, to create for not only the citizens of Sydney but also anyone else who cares to learn a sense of that more varied history by focusing on the surviving built heritage of the

city's colonial quarter, the north end. This is then a work of celebration and consciousness raising—the effort of a local heritage society. Composed principally of elegantly rendered pen and ink illustrations of individual buildings drawn by Lewis Parker, and brief contextual biographies of each building prepared by Debra McNabb, the book falls into what is becoming a widely used formula for a genre of historical architectural work in this country. The focus of attention is on the building, its sequence of owners and uses, and the “lore” that is associated with it. In this case there is no apparent attempt to create a systematic order in the arrangement of entries; nor is this a guidebook for a walking tour as sometimes happens in books of this type.

It is important to respect the “sense-of-place” intentions of this book and this genre. Everyone interested in heritage preservation recognizes that there is a critical relationship between public recognition of the past in our midst and the opportunity for salvage, preservation and scholarly study of the material history. If the public are oblivious to their surroundings and the context of their creation, the pace of destruction will continue. Books like *Old Sydney Town* have an important part to play in the process of public education. In this regard, McNabb has struck an appropriate balance between a deeper, more analytically penetrating historical investigation of the social and settlement history and landscape of Sydney, and the more anecdotal thumbnail sketch of familiar but little understood buildings that fill a neighbourhood. One senses that McNabb knows her readers well and aims the account directly at the layperson.

For those with a professional or scholarly interest in architecture, the book has little to offer except in an indirect way. Individual buildings are not subjected to architectural analysis. Sensibly McNabb even steers away