

Margaret McBurney and Mary Byers, *Tavern in the Town*

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Margaret McBurney and Mary Byers. *Tavern in the Town: Early Inns and Taverns of Ontario*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987. Photographs by Hugh Robertson. 259 pp., ill., biblio. Cloth \$29.95, ISBN 0-8020-5732-2.

An elderly informant from Perth once told me that Port Elmsely on the Rideau had once been known as "Barbados," for in the early days it had a reputation as the place of entry for rum and sugar for the local distilling trade. I never tried to confirm this on old maps but had no reason to doubt it. Certainly hard-spirit distilling was well under way in the Perth area by the mid-nineteenth century. This kind of locally "distilled" insight abounds in the book under review, for the authors have been extremely busy in the field. The excellent photographs by Hugh Robertson are supplemented by a text that will appeal to the general reader and that is rich in anecdote and incident. *Tavern in the Town* will do much to remind us that the place of spirits in pioneer Ontario was a considerable one and that the much maligned "blue laws" of later years were actually a reaction to perceived traditions of excess, rather than the natural reflection of an inherently prudish or tea-totalling society. Indeed, in some contemporary accounts cited in this volume, one might gain the impression that much of nineteenth-century Upper Canada/Ontario constituted a veritable alcoholic landscape. This interpretation of inns as only drinking places would be quite misleading, as the authors point out: "Until town halls were built later in the century the inn was often a community's only public building. Every imaginable activity took place there, — political meetings, sales of crown lands, distribution of lots, church services, Sunday school, courts sessions, township-council sessions and all public entertainments" (p.3). Inns popped up wherever roads developed, and hence, they became a paramount landmark in the pioneer landscape, along with the church.

The organization of this book is largely along geographic lines, defined by the major trails and access roads that first opened up the province—the Opeongo Road in the Ottawa Valley, Yonge Street running north out of Toronto, the Huron Road and the Talbot Trail,

among others. These access routes are used to further introduce certain specialized themes such as "the role of inns in settlement" or "stage coach travel." This is a useful approach for it keeps the book moving in different directions but with a cumulative effect of telling us a good deal about the broad social and economic role played by inns in pioneer society.

This is achieved largely through combining documentary sources with photographic and pictorial record. "At the heart of the system was the intrepid traveller" and it is through his eyes and writings as left in diaries, journals and books that the life of the tavern comes alive. In addition, we are informed about some of the realities of material life in these institutions. With respect to food and drink for example, it becomes clear that uniformity of product was not a feature of nineteenth-century life. Although many innkeepers claimed that their whisky was made from the very best grain, some consumers gave contrary testimony. One speculated that "frosty potatoes, hemlock, pumpkins and black mouldy rye" (p. 6) were likely used. Some old recipes are appended to the text with the strong suggestion that they are included for interest only.

In addition to those with an academic and architectural interest in the details of pioneer life, the regional weekend Rambler will also find this book useful. A reading of the chapter most relevant to the intended jaunt will provide some good side-trip information and an insight into what may be unique in the social history of taverns in that area. The authors have selected many buildings that are still extant and open to the public in one way or another, some being incorporated in pioneer villages. A legitimate caveat is extended concerning the interior furnishings of many of those not in museum contexts. Many suffer from the standard kind of romanticization of the past: "Such furnishings were usually a far cry from what is found in old inns that have been refurbished to serve the public today. The present amenities are delightful. The early ones were rarely more than primitive" (p. 7). A good bibliography for further reading and research concludes the book.