Eileen Reid Marcil, *Tall Ships and Tankers: The History of Davie Shipbuilders*

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One of the greatest artifacts of our maritime heritage is the shipyard. Eileen Reid Marcil has taken up her pen to document the long history of the Davie shipyard in Levis, Quebec, its family roots, its varied products, its changing management, and some of the people who have worked to keep the yard alive.

*Tall Ships and Tankers: The History of the Davie Shipbuilders,* the result of eight years of research and writing, had its conception at a chance meeting between the author and the marketing vice-president of MIL Davie. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the primary purpose of the book appears to be more related to marketing and public relations than to history. According to the book, the yard was then in the midst of major productivity improvement efforts that threatened management's relationship with labour. As a result, the book is given little opportunity to be an incisive historical analysis and interpretation. Instead of painting a detailed and integrated canvas of the complex history of a shipbuilding business, *Tall Ships and Tankers* endeavours to glorify the distant past, provide an apologia for the recent past, hold in fair light the efforts of management and work force to build and repair great ships (and oil platforms and other structures), and try to rally internal and external support for future work at the yard. It is no surprise then, that the author, in her preface, identifies the book's mission: "to be a factual account written primarily for the shipyard's past and present employees and their families."

The book is organized largely around the chronology of shipyard managers and owners, beginning with an overview of shipbuilding in colonial Quebec and a description of the development of the South Shore towns of Levis and Lauzon. When Allison Davie married shipbuilder George Taylor's daughter in 1825, a shipbuilding partnership was begun that eventually became Davie Shipbuilding. Taylor's Quebec shipbuilding establishment moved across the river in 1832 to Levis, to begin a long-lasting roller coaster of good and bad times in the ship building and repairing business. Davie family members, including Elizabeth Davie, remained central players in Quebec-area shipbuilding for one hundred and twenty-five years. Interestingly enough, between the Quebec and Levis yards, new ship construction occurred in only about twenty of the firm's first eighty-five years in business. The rest of the time, work came from ship salvage, repair, steamboat, and towing services.

After the First World War, Canada Steamship Lines became the owner of the business and operated the yard through difficult times and exciting times, even through the shipping company's takeover by Power Corporation, until 1976. The book follows the many management and ownership changes, up to the shipyard's present owner, the Dominion Bridge Corporation.

While there are long stretches of the book filled with prosaic listings of ships built mixed with résumés of managers and owners, there are occasionally intriguing pieces of historical reportage. Among them is, for example, the colourful description of the management style of Takis Veliotis, who was skilled in bringing industrial work to the yard and showing inter-
est in workers' family lives. He was also very
difficult to work with, and some of his man­
gement style resulted in his skipping the coun­
yry to take another job at General Dynamics
Quincy Shipyard in Massachusetts.

Overall, the book carries out its basic mis­
mission, and little more. It recounts the ups and
downs of shipbuilding work and identifies the
company's bright spots over a one hundred and
seventy-year history, both among the construc­
tion contracts and among those who made the
shipyard work. The book is profusely illus­
trated with images from countless sources. Yet,
there are almost no photographs of ships under
construction that would tell more about the
yard's technical approach to shipbuilding. To
the "shipyard's past and present employees
and their families," the book is a nice keepsake
for the generations who dedicated their lives to
building and repairing ships.

To the historian, though, Tall Ships and
Tankers is a disappointment. Even when
compared with other corporate histories, it
leaves much to be desired in its dearth of con­
textual treatment of the historical fabric.
Although it focuses on the dealings of upper
management, it is far from being a useful
business history of the sort provided by Moss
and Hume on the Harland and Wolff ship­
builders. Nor does this book have the depth of
a general history such as Lin Snow's history of
Bath Iron Works. Relatively little political
context is provided on both the provincial and
national levels. For example, there is no clue
given whether the ascendancy of the Parti
Québécois in 1976 had anything to do with the
shipyard's bad publicity and its subsequent
sale to a group of Quebec businessmen,
organized as the Société de construction de
nave. And, shouldn't we be surprised that
almost nothing is mentioned about the long
hegemony of British Protestants in a shipyard
full of French Catholics? Only minimal treat­
ment is given to the politics behind Canadian
shipbuilders' long subjection to and eventual
freedom from government preferences for
British shipbuilders. This reviewer also would
like to have seen more detailed history on the
organization and application of new ship­
building technologies.

The book falls particularly short, though, in
its handling of labour history. Not only was the
story of labour given short shrift, the book
needed more labour statistics, showing changes
in wage rates, employment figures, hours
worked, piecework policies, benefits, and the
like. Certainly, one important story that is
missing is whether or not women ever joined
the production force, particularly during the
Second World War.

It is painfully apparent that Dr Marcil had
limited access to corporate archives after the
Canada Steamship Lines period, and most of the
sources she used for the shipyard's last twenty
or so years were interviews and published
sources, usually cleansed for public consump­
tion. Despite the fact that the book is replete
with notes, few cite sources of information.

Corporate histories, commissioned by
corporations, are a difficult breed apart from
histories coming out of the academy. They usu­
ally have very specific missions and limit the
freedom of the author to tell the entire story.
Considering these typical limitations, Dr Mar­
cil has helped to save a large piece of ship­
building history that would likely otherwise
have been lost forever. Shipyards, like the com­
panies that run them, are artifacts of human
endeavor. They ought to be studied and fully
interpreted, in context, for the benefit of gen­
erations to come.

Jamie Benidickson, Idleness, Water and a Canoe: Reflections
on Paddling for Pleasure

HALLIE E. BOND

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. 299 pp., 30 illus. Cloth $55.00, ISBN 0-8020-0945-

Jamie Benidickson undertook a very ambitious
project, and a very worthwhile one — nothing
less than a “study of the place of the canoe in
Canadian life.” His subtitle reveals his general
approach, and the reader should keep this
approach in mind. While there is a good deal
of history in the book (much of it fascinating and
not well explored elsewhere) the book is indeed
"reflections," rather than a history, since the
usual standards of historical scholarship and