

Book Reviews

Comptes rendus de livres

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

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Marcil, Eileen Reid. *Tall Ships and Tankers: The History of Davie Shipbuilders*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997. xii + 604 pp., including appendices, notes, bibliography, glossary, list of ships, and indexes. Cloth \$45, ISBN 0-7710-5666-4. Available in French under the title *Au rythme desmarées*.

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 management style resulted in his skipping the country to take another job at General Dynamics Quincy Shipyard in Massachusetts.

Overall, the book carries out its basic 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 construction contracts and among those who made the shipyard work. The book is profusely illustrated 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 contextual 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 shipbuilders. 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 navale. 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 treatment 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 shipbuilding 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 consumption. 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 usually have very specific missions and limit the freedom of the author to tell the entire story. Considering these typical limitations, Dr Marcil has helped to save a large piece of shipbuilding history that would likely otherwise have been lost forever. Shipyards, like the companies that run them, are artifacts of human endeavor. They ought to be studied and fully interpreted, in context, for the benefit of generations to come.

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

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Benidickson, Jamie. *Idleness, Water and a Canoe: Reflections on Paddling for Pleasure*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. 299 pp., 30 illus. Cloth \$55.00, ISBN 0-8020-0945-X; paper \$17.95, ISBN 0-8020-7910-5.

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