

S. HOLYCK HUNCHUCK

Review of

Jonathan F. Vance. 2006. *Building Canada: People and Projects that Shaped the Nation*. Toronto: Penguin.

Pp. 310, with introduction, epilogue, list of photography credits, further reading list, index, black-and-white illus., paper \$25, ISBN 0-14-305528-1.

Building Canada: People and Projects that Shaped the Nation is unlike any other architectural history of the country. From its dedication,

not to the architects, designers, and politicians who gathered public acclaim for these projects, but for the workers who actually built them, and especially to those who lost their lives in the endeavours (n.p.),

to the epilogue, in which the traveller is reminded to consider the occupational hazards of building construction (298-99), the book is framed by death. Its author, Jonathan F. Vance, is a professor of military history at the University of Western Ontario, where he is also the Canada Research Chair in Conflict and Culture, and *Building Canada* can be seen as an expansion of his earlier work on Canadian war memorials. It has much to recommend it, albeit with some significant reservations.

In *Building Canada*, Vance mourns not only the real loss of life that so often accompanies the physical act of making the built environment, but also a lost philosophy of Canadian civic nationalism, especially as played out in buildings and infrastructures. "While some of the [period] rhetoric that surrounded these projects may seem laughable to our jaded, postmodern sensibilities," he says, "the sentiment behind them was authentic and heartfelt." He adds,

the men and women who drift in and out of these pages believed passionately in the importance of building a nation with a strong sense of itself; they also believed that highways, telephone lines, and concert halls could achieve that end. (xvi)

Vance demonstrates his position through four themes that cover twelve subjects: Canada's transportation infrastructure is discussed with reference to bridges, roads and airports, while community buildings are explored through provincial legislatures, Châteauesque railway hotels (and other buildings) and Centennial concert halls. The modernization of rural Canada is described through post offices, telephone networks and electrification; and the volume is rounded out with a survey of

what he terms "national icons," in the form of Prairie grain elevators, monumental sculpture and memorials to the First World War.

The book is above all a popular history, but the fit between this genre and the author's scholarship seems awkward. Vance's research appears to have been exhaustive; his ideas are interesting and the narrative often takes the form of compelling storytelling. However, editorial choices that have resulted in a dearth of illustrations, absence of footnotes and overly-colloquial use of language may—at least to some readers—amount to a disservice to the author's background and the subjects of this study.

Consequently, *Building Canada* appears to have been written by two distinct authors. The approach of one is scholarly, with a sense of nuance and an eye for the perfect quotation. The passages written in this voice are effective, impressive and, on occasion, moving. Vance argues that the purpose of First World War memorials, for example, lies not merely in their impact on public memory, but to collective empathy. He says,

They stand as mute testimony to the need of communities to come to terms with the losses suffered in the most devastating war Canada has ever fought.... [They] reminded Canadians that they didn't mourn alone, and that the pain they experienced was also felt by others they would likely never meet. (xvi)

Similarly, his description of Canadians' mood after the Great War provides insight into the drive to modernize the countryside with access to electricity and telephone service. He argues,

It was obvious that people wanted a better country. They had been promised that once the enemy was beaten, a 'land fit for heroes,' but that Utopia never materialized. On the contrary, post-1918 Canada was even more mean and grasping than pre-War Canada had been. (213)

Vance's accounts of workplace disaster also give one pause. His description of the June 29, 1906, collapse of the Quebec Bridge, connecting Quebec

City on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River with Lévis on the south side, is one example. Dozens of workers were killed instantly while many others could not be saved. As he describes it,

In no more than fifteen seconds, 19,000 tons of steel crashed down, taking the lives of 86 workers. Some of them lay trapped and wounded in the wreckage of the bridge for hours because there was no equipment to save them. As their mates watched helplessly, the river slowly rose and drowned them. (15)

The deaths from this engineering failure became a national scandal and the subject of a Royal Commission. The victims were by no means the last in the history of building the Canadian nation. As Vance notes, “[n]one of these projects was entirely free of controversy, and there are lots of tawdry tales of mismanagement, skulduggery, and corruption” (xvii). The Quebec Bridge fell apart the first time precisely because of these factors—only to collapse a second time in September, 1916, when it killed another 13 construction workers. The author’s use of such details contributes an empathetic note to what could have been just a dry recitation of engineering statistics, construction deadlines and political minutiae.

However, the second voice is, to be generous, casual. In many passages, the text reads as a verbatim transcription of lecture notes. Here, Vance’s writing is not only informally composed, complete with unfinished sentences and barely-relevant asides, but it contains language that is so colloquial as to border on the glib and cliché. Numerous sentences begin with conjunctive clauses, giving the impression, however undeserved, that some of the arguments are uncertain and ill-researched. In other instances, the author’s sincerity is brought into question by the seeming reluctance to resist a cheap laugh. The lives of Canadian agricultural workers after the First World War were arduous and isolated, especially when compared with urban Canada, but those important struggles to upgrade their conditions are clustered under the cynical title, “How Ya Gonna Keep Them Down On The Farm?” (148-223). In a similar vein, the Right Honourable John Diefenbaker, Prime Minister of Canada from 1958 to 1963—and a key figure in setting up what was to become the Centennial projects of the middle to late 1960s—is called “Dief” (127). The use of clichés adds to the casual nature of Vance’s prose: in a few pages within the chapter on the postal service, the reader is told that 19th century rural Canada got “the short end of the

stick” (156), the “perks” of being a rural postmaster were “not to be sneezed at” (both 154), while the “ears” of government members “pricked up,” with the Kings riding prepared to be a “guinea pig” for mail delivery (all 160).

These are relatively minor criticisms, because along with the two-voiced narration, it is the lack of illustrations and the omission of footnotes that comprise the greatest drawbacks of the book. *Building Canada* describes a history of monumental efforts from St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador to Victoria, British Columbia to Iqaluit, Nunavut, and it spans the period from the early 19th century to the present, but the book contains no maps or architectural drawings and only twelve, small, black-and-white photographs. This is a curious editorial decision, given the visual nature of the built environment. Moreover, most, if not all, of these projects were heavily documented at the time, and many—particularly bridges, the Châteauesque style, provincial legislatures, and grain elevators—have been since much studied, painted, sketched and photographed. Vance could easily have chosen hundreds of pictures to accompany the projects he describes; the reader is left to ponder the wisdom of this editorial choice.

If the aim of the book is to be a popular history, illustrations culled from this vast archive would be an expedient and enriching way to add to the book’s public accessibility. The author does not disclose the reasons for not including more images, but he explains that footnotes were excluded “for the ease of the reader” (300). However, since a typical page contains up to 10 references and unattributed quotations, many readers would appreciate being able to trace Vance’s sources—and in so doing, engage themselves more fully (and “easily”) with the text and his ideas. To be fair, the author does provide a brief “Further Reading” chapter at the end of the book (300-09), but this extremely condensed form of a literature review is no substitute for full footnotes or endnotes. This point is driven home by the author’s sometimes overly-digressive details. To cite one example, entire paragraphs are devoted to the phallic symbolism of the CN Tower in Toronto—including the heights of the people who attended its opening in 1976 (276-77). Such ephemera might be mildly amusing in a casual conversation, but they leave the reader of this book with the sense that, even in a popular history, footnotes may be the only appropriate way to proceed.

At its best, *Building Canada* is an often-entertaining history, written with sensitivity in an

engaging style. Vance's approach to the subject will allow many readers who are unfamiliar with the monumental achievements in the Canadian built environment to acquaint themselves with key aspects of the country's architecture and infrastructure, while others who are specialists in one field, such as political history, will be able to see politics as manifest in the architecture of the country. Conversely, architectural historians will have the opportunity to consider what could be learned from the history of political ideas and social movements. Vance is also to be thanked for bringing the discussion of empathy back into architectural discourse, and for resurrecting significant figures, such as Emanuel Hahn, sculptor of war memorials, and Adam Beck, the "tireless champion" (205) of public electrical utilities, from undeserved obscurity into popular recognition. Unfortunately, almost all labourers go unnamed, including the ones who died on the major construction projects that are featured in the book and whose memories we are specifically asked to honour (298-99).

Indeed, despite the numerous references to workplace injury and worker death, this is no labour history. Equally worth mentioning is the fact that *Building Canada* presents an exclusively Anglo-French version of events. Canada would have very little architecture or infrastructure from the early 19th century to the present if there were no immigrant labourers in the construction trades

and, given the scope of this book, the scale of the projects it examines, and the oral accounts it records of some workers, a fuller version would necessarily involve at least a passing reference to multicultural and immigrant history—or an explanation of the editorial decision to exclude it. Further to this point, some glaring (and easily fact-checked) errors stand out when ethnicity comes into discussion: the Sikorsky helicopter that assembled the mast of the CN Tower was Ukrainian-American in provenance, not "Russian" (275), and the "great Italian architect" was Andrea Palladio, not "Paladdio" (4).

These criticisms notwithstanding, *Building Canada* is worth reading. Vance's ideas deserve a broad audience and the author may wish to consider adapting the book for other media. It could well serve as a script for a television series on Canadian architecture, but such a project would require, at the very least, many more sources of visual imagery than the few photographs Vance makes available. Similarly, *Building Canada* has potential to form the basis of an introductory course in Canadian Studies, particularly for teachers who are interested in the material history of the country, but any scholarly use of the book would necessitate that the author revise some of the more colloquial writing, to perhaps acknowledge the role of immigrant labourers and, especially, to reverse the decision not to footnote his sources.

References

Vance, Jonathan F. 1997. *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

———. 2005. Documents in Stone and Bronze: Monu-

ments and Memorials as Historical Sources. In *Building New Bridges/Bâtir des Nouveaux Ponts: Sources, Methods, and Interdisciplinarity/Sources, Méthodes et Interdisciplinarité*, eds. Jeff Keshen and Sylvie Perrier, 185-95. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.

COLIN RIPLEY

Review of

Lesansky, D. Medina and Brian McLaren. 2004. *Architecture and Tourism: Perception, Performance and Place*. Oxford, New York: Berg.

Pp. 275, 45 black and white figures, soft cover, ISBN 1859737099

Architecture and Tourism: Perception, Performance and Place is a wide-ranging collection of articles about, in Lesansky's words, "the reciprocal relationship between the modern practice of tourism and the built environment." The chapters, born as presentations to the College Art Association annual meeting

in 2002 are, in essence, a series of case studies. The subjects being studied vary widely both geographically—from Rome to Mauritius—and temporally, from the 18th century to the present day, while the ideas being considered take up a fairly narrow bandwidth. Most, if not all of the chapters, deal primarily