

HSTC Bulletin

Journal of the History of Canadian Science, Technology and Medicine
Revue d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine au Canada

hstc
bulletin

***Discovering Heritage Bridges on Ontario's Roads.* David J. Cuming, Erin, Boston Mills Press, 1984. Pp 95, illus., no notes, bibliography or index, softcover, \$9.95. ISBN 0-919882-61-4**

Norman R. Ball

Volume 8, Number 1 (26), juin-June 1984

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800185ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/800185ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

HSTC Publications

ISSN

0228-0086 (print)

1918-7742 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Ball, N. R. (1984). Review of [*Discovering Heritage Bridges on Ontario's Roads.* David J. Cuming, Erin, Boston Mills Press, 1984. Pp 95, illus., no notes, bibliography or index, softcover, \$9.95. ISBN 0-919882-61-4]. *HSTC Bulletin*, 8(1), 73-74. <https://doi.org/10.7202/800185ar>

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

Discovering Heritage Bridges on Ontario's Roads. David J. Cuming, Erin, Boston Mills Press, 1984. Pp 95, illus., no notes, bibliography or index, softcover, \$9.95. ISBN 0-919882-61-4.

Discovering Heritage Bridges on Ontario's Roads is an important work which links three strands all too rarely juxtaposed in Canadian studies: history of technology, public history and preservation of the built environment.

The four distinct parts of *Discovering Heritage Bridges* take the reader through a well-developed, easy-to-follow, logical sequence. Part 1, 'Design and Construction,' deals with form, materials and building processes. Clearly written, informative and presupposing no technical expertise on the part of the reader, this section stimulates analytical thinking about how and why bridges were built. Part 2, 'A Brief History of Road Bridge Building in Ontario from 1780 to the present,' is a good introduction to the major developments which resulted in Ontario's wide range of surviving bridge types and materials. Technological change is handled very well but the reviewer believes that Cuming has underestimated the importance of plank roads (p. 35).

Parts 3 and 4, 'Appreciating Road Bridges,' and 'Caring for our Heritage,' present the bridge as an element of the dynamic landscape which one can learn to read, understand and begin to think about preserving in part. Again, the writing and analysis are well-organized, lucid, succinct and thought-provoking. Parts 3 and 4 provide many good reasons why bridges are important cultural expressions and evidence which should be understood and cared for. Those wishing to marshal support for the preservation of a particular structure will certainly find Cuming's modes of analysis helpful and compelling.

Without resorting to stridency or unseemly uncritical enthusiasm, Cuming and the able contributing photographers present Ontario road bridges as important cultural documents worth study and preservation. It is an exceedingly important work which the reviewer hopes will be influential in terms of preservation, public perceptions, further scholarship and teaching.

The origins of *Discovering Heritage Bridges* compel further thought: it was written by a civil servant and published by a very successful non-academic press. Were academic presses not interested or not considered because of their perceived or actual slowness? Cuming works for the Heritage Branch of the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture. Similar departments and agencies constitute Canada's most important single source of research and employment in the history of Canadian technology. The current depressed job market notwithstanding, it is likely that public history career opportunities will outstrip academic ones. Moreover, historians able to

cope with the history of Canadian technology in addition to other aspects of Canadian history have an edge in certain job markets. To date, no university seems to be actively cognizant of this state of affairs. One hopes that eventually at least one Canadian institution will offer training in both the history of technology and public history. Perhaps the history of technology, with an emphasis on Canada, could be offered as an option in Canada's one graduate programme in public history. Alternately, professional-level public history instruction could be started in one of the few institutions that have admitted the history of technology. Canada's academic and public historians are too far apart. Both groups are the poorer for it but neither suffers as much as the students. Books such as *Discovering Heritage Bridges on Ontario's Roads* could help draw the two together by showing that readable public history and respectable intellectual standards are not mutually exclusive.

Despite its many merits as a good introductory book, *Discovering Heritage Bridges* suffers from a very serious and totally unnecessary deficiency. Cuming's short but very able piece of scholarly writing is inexcusably marred by the absence of any footnotes or bibliography. Much turgid, low-grade, heavily-documented intellectual waste is pumped out of historical agencies. Why, then, when something so superior comes out is it stripped of footnotes and bibliography? Do these appurtenances not instil confidence and allow others to build on what has been presented? Moreover, for an agency which is engaged in trying to raise the level of consciousness and professionalism of historic preservation is it not counterproductive, perhaps unprofessional and irresponsible, to subsidize the publication of pioneering work and then strip it of documentation? The lack of documentation is a serious flaw which limits the utility of an otherwise excellent work. Undoubtedly, the combination of attractive format and no documentation will cause some potential readers to pass by *Discovering Heritage Bridges* as just another piece of pretty picture book intellectual fluff. Why do these things happen? The incident is not isolated nor the questions rhetorical.

Norman R. Ball