

The Canadian Niagara Power Company Story By Norman Ball

Mark Fram

Volume 99, Number 1, Spring 2007

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065807ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065807ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Fram, M. (2007). Review of [*The Canadian Niagara Power Company Story* By Norman Ball]. *Ontario History*, 99(1), 125–128.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1065807ar>

Ford existed outside normative categories of race and gender.

Brode argues that Ford gradually won the sympathies of a public that was enthralled with the gory details of this case. He writes about how she was portrayed as the victim of unfair interrogation in a police sweatbox. Many observers began to believe that there was at least the possibility that Ford had been insulted by Westwood. Such believers understood that murder was her only recourse in a society where men of Westwood's stature were rarely charged with rape. Another factor in Ford's defense arsenal, argues Brode, was the prevalence of ideas about Blacks' inability to control wild impulses born of racial instincts. These factors coalesced to secure Ford's acquittal, based on the principle that underdogs like her were entitled to the chivalrous protection extended to women and others whom male elites deemed less fortunate. Chivalry carried the day even though for the bulk of the trial the Crown was represented by one of the most formidable legal minds of the twentieth century, Britton Bath Osler. He tried without success to prove that Ford was Westwood's spurned lover.

Brode's work is eloquently written and easily accessible, and will appeal to a broad cross-section of readers. *Death in the Queen*

City popularizes a little known case in the annals of Canadian legal and social history, and by reading it Canadians will confront such unsettling aspects of our past as racial strife, class conflict and gender conflict. Academic specialists will not find much that is new here, however. The case of Clara Ford is well known among scholars in Canadian legal and social history, thanks to the earlier work of Carolyn Strange, to whom Brode is deeply indebted. His arguments largely defer to her interpretation and analysis. Brode's real contribution is in the several biographical gems he has unearthed about Ford. Her subaltern status, her criminality and her gender ambiguity each pose a significant challenge to historians of Black Canadian women who have traditionally trained their gazes on Ford's far more respectable sisters.

Barrington Walker,
Queen's University

Bibliography:

Carolyn Strange, "Wounded Womanhood and Dead Men: Chivalry and the Trials of Clara Ford and Carrie Davies," in Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, eds., *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 149-88.

The Canadian Niagara Power Company Story

By Norman Ball. Erin, Ontario: The Boston Mills Press, 2005. 318 pp. \$49.95 hardcover. ISBN 1-55046-462-0.

This book is both a history of a company that no longer exists and a story of an extraordinary work of engineering and architecture whose future is in doubt. Great credit goes to FortisOntario, a young company that has inherited both the Rankine

generating station built at Niagara Falls at the beginning of the twentieth century and the Canadian Niagara Power Company (CNPC) that built it. To commemorate the centenary of the first power out of the station in 1905, FortisOntario commissioned Norman Ball, a respected historian and scholar of matters technological, to produce a handsome illustrated book compiling many facets of local history, techni-

cal explanation, anecdotal reminiscence and company lore.

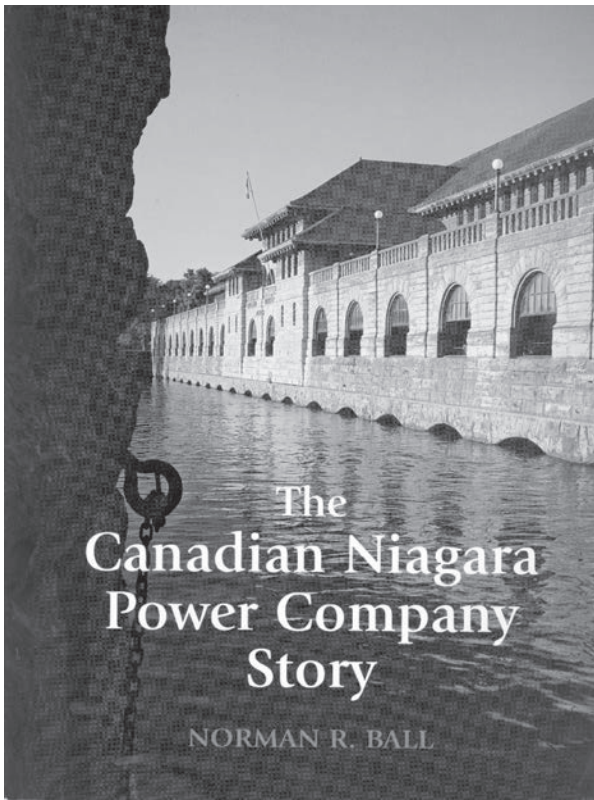
Dr. Ball is a skilled compiler and writer. *Niagara Power* covers a wide range, from early corporate chicanery to the 25-cycle problem, ice storms, postcard billing systems, and ultimately the uncertain prospects for an operating but obsolescent plant. Ball explains technical matters in simple language and points to external sources for the more complex matters. He describes, and illustrates comprehensively, the landscape and society of industrial power users and rural consumers from Niagara to Fort Erie in the middle of the twentieth century. Period views span more than a century, including a selection of company-archive photographs of subjects such as power-line work and electrical appliances. Rare satirical illustrations on the threats of Niagara Falls industrialization around 1900 have 21st-century resonance. Industry, technology, economy and community are all essential to clarify the CNPC and Rankine stories, and *Niagara Power* touches on them all. Its notes, acknowledgements and bibliography should encourage scholars to delve further into archival and secondary sources, a thoroughly commendable educational goal.

Despite the abundant illustrations, however, Ball's presentation of the material history of the place where the power comes from is weak. Modern-day maps are absent, and a single thirty-year-old aerial photograph barely hints at the station's environment. There are no views of the complete building today, no hint of the impressive sprawl of the powerhouse below a forested embankment and fronted by a calm pond of astonishing azure – a site that still looks amazingly like the artist's impressions reproduced in the book. Technically-inclined readers will regret the absence of diagrams that show how the sta-

tion actually works. And apart from the endpapers, Ball offers little visual idea of the building's location in relation to the Falls. The Rankine powerhouse must be among the most photographed buildings in history, sitting in the upper right-hand corner of countless billions of tourist snapshots of the Horseshoe Falls. But the book does little to account for that view and the cooperative foresight of its creation, except as one condition of a contract.

The presentation of the early business history of CNPC hardly steps outside what seems to be in the company's own files, leaving readers to seek contextual information in such standard works as those of Merrill Denison, Tom Naylor and H.V. Nelles. This absence is puzzling, for Fort Ontario seems to be proud of its formative role in the earliest years of Ontario's electrical industry. As checkered as competitive maneuverings and political controversies of the day may have been, the CNPC and its powerhouse are still running while its competitors are either gone or fragmented, and even Ontario Hydro is no more. The sketchiness of that early period is in stark contrast with Ball's embracing coverage of community and other matters during the comparatively stable decades afterwards.

The architectural account is, unhappily, even skimpier. Is there really no more to know about Algernon S. Bell, apparent good friend to the Hudson Valley capitalists and an architect of posh mansions, who nevertheless managed to work with civil and electrical engineers to produce a quite stunning presence in the park? The Rankine plant is arguably a much better fit in the romantic park landscape than E.J. Lennox's classical-revival commercial monument for the Toronto Power station next door, and even more impressive than the hulking McKim, Mead and White powerhouses on the American side of the river, long since



demolished. An architect's trail can be a big help in charting the corporate webs of these latter-day robber barons, and when necessary in defending the building as a heritage asset. On the basis of a single letter from a company executive, Ball speculates that the Niagara Park Commissioners (NPC) were seeking from CNPC something that looked more like the first 1903 phase of the showy Toronto Power station, and that the crafty CNPC board did not reveal its exterior designs until the building was under construction. Yet we know that the NPC's own 1892 powerhouse stood nearby, right at the Falls, and had the fashionable Richardsonian rusticated walls and hipped roof much like those of the Rankine station. Furthermore, there exists (in what was the archive of Ontario Hy-

dro) the hugely ambitious plan, produced during CNPC's "monopoly" period (1892-1899), for *four* powerhouses of precisely the same plan and appearance as the Rankine building, arrayed along a power canal from the Dufferin Islands to the Falls. The Park Commissioners knew what the Rankine powerhouse was going to look like years before it was built, and they evidently loved this style. After the CNPC lost its monopoly it was the new rivals, especially the Electrical Development Company's Toronto Power development, that faced tough reviews from the Park Commissioners. The executive's letter might make a good anecdote, but it doesn't satisfy as evidence.

Ball makes it quite clear that the Canadian Niagara Power Company story will end in 2009, when electrical production ceases at Rankine. If the building is to survive beyond, for whatever purpose, it needs to have those pieces of biography, architecture and setting all very carefully lined up and strongly argued. If not, the authorities will not be very much impressed with the idea of conserving the powerhouse itself or with respecting its special architecture and landscape amidst future developments in the park. Since Ball concludes on a rather wistful note, and even the company president's preface carries slightly memorial overtones, it is unclear if preservation and reuse of the Rankine powerhouse motivated the book project. Neither writer advocates firmly that the building should remain in place after 2009; it's all in the hands of Niagara Parks. That tone ought to arouse genuine nervousness, for Niagara Parks demolished the 1892 generating sta-

tion in the 1980s, and the Toronto Power station remains abandoned and rusting by the rapids after more than three decades. It is not too much to ask that a book of this kind should do a bit more than celebrate the history of a company and its people; it should also make a strong case for the historic place itself.

In sum, *Niagara Power* is a worthy documentation of parts of the history of the Canadian Niagara Power Company by itself, but a less successful account of the origins and physical presence of its generating station at the lip of Niagara Falls. We can hope that the powerhouse will still be around for a second and augmented edition of the book when the time comes.

Mark Fram
University of Toronto

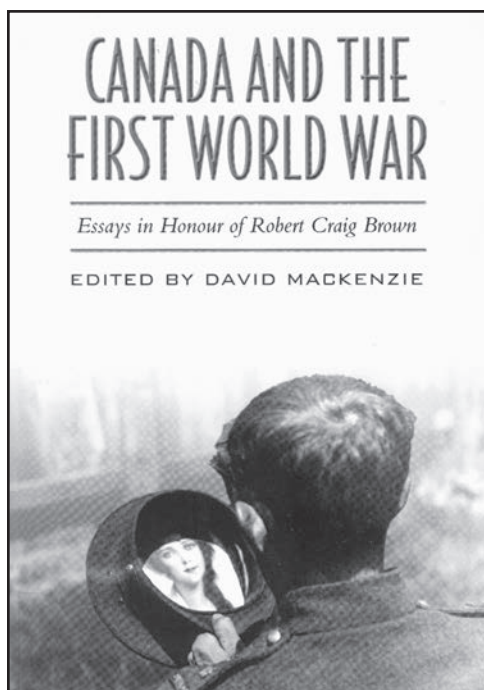
Canada and the First World War: Essays in Honour of Robert Craig Brown

Edited by David MacKenzie. University of Toronto Press, 2005. xii + 452 pp. Illustrated. \$65.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-8020-3573-6. \$29.95 softcover. ISBN 0-8020-8445-1.

This collection of essays in honour of one of Canada's foremost historians, R. Craig Brown, indeed is a *festschrift*. But it is much more than that; it is also a volume that concentrates solely on the experience of Canada and Canadians in the Great War. As such it has far more utility and likely afterlife than the usual compendium of disparate papers. Furthermore, the basic theme of all fifteen contributions is to test the conventional wisdom that the Great War was the jolting catalyst for the transformation of Canada. This inspira-

Bibliography:

- Denison, Merrill. *The People's Power: The History of Ontario Hydro*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1960.
- Fram, Mark, "Niagara's Falls, Toronto's power: the value and conservation of a monumental hydro-electric generating station," in Fram, Mark, and John Weiler, eds. *Continuity with Change*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1984, 257–321.
- Naylor, R. T. *The History of Canadian Business, 1867-1914*. Montreal; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006; originally published Toronto: Lorimer, 1975.
- Nelles, H.V. *The Politics of Development: Forests, Mines and Hydro-electric Power in Ontario, 1849-1941*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1974.



tion comes from Craig Brown and Ramsay Cook's book of thirty years ago, *Canada: a*