

## *Narrow Gauge Through the Bush* By Rod Clarke

Christopher Andreae

Volume 100, Number 2, Fall 2008

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065703ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065703ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

### ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Andreae, C. (2008). Review of [*Narrow Gauge Through the Bush* By Rod Clarke]. *Ontario History*, 100(2), 242–244. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065703ar>

loot. They handed out captured British supplies, including agricultural implements and other goods that had been gathered and warehoused by Lieutenant Governor Simcoe but never dispersed to settlers.

Those interested in “myths” —soldiers crashing through the ice of Grenadier Pond, traditions of militia sacrifices and gallantry, captured supplies affecting the naval battle at Put In Bay on Lake Erie—will find much to ponder as Malcomson sifts the facts from the fantasies. Among the oft-debated questions he considers are who actually burned the Parliament buildings, what were the comparative strengths of the opposing forces, and how important was the whole affair in the ongoing war. Trivia buffs will delight in details of the scalp found in the Parliament building and of the death of U.S. General Pike with his Brock-like admonition to his troops: “Push on my brave fellows and avenge your general.”

Nonetheless, Malcomson is no debunker. His passion for accuracy does not mute his enthusiasm for the narrative. The whole affair was marked by myriad errors, miscalculations, and other evidences of human fallibility. Yet Malcomson is judicious without being judgmental, neither blaming nor scoffing as he presents the evidence. In the context of the entire War of 1812 (and, from a British perspective, the larger context of the Napoleonic wars) the American invasion of York may not have amounted to much, but, Malcomson insists, “the taking of a capital city is no small potatoes.” Despite major losses, for Americans the battle was significant and successful, being the first ever combined military operation of

the American army and navy. It had been executed with speed and precision, marred only by the totally unanticipated explosion. For Canadians, the defeat at York was not definitive. It influenced but in no way determined the course of a war that ended as it began, affirming and confirming the *status quo*. Malcomson begins and ends his book focusing on the town of York, but he rightly refrains from speculating on what might have been had the outcome of the war been different.

Once again Robin Brass Studio has published a work that is fully and accurately illustrated, artfully designed and a pleasure to read. Maps, in particular the hour-by-hour depictions of the progress of the battle, are clear and informative. Numerous archival images and modern photographs (many by Malcomson) enhance the written words throughout.

Here, at last, is a comprehensive, meticulously researched history of the battle of York. So much has been written that is shallow, biased and laden with legend. This brilliant book tells the whole story from both Canadian (i.e. British) and American points of view. It is basic reading, essential for understanding early Toronto as well as the War, and destined to become the definitive study of the subject.

Chris Raible, Creemore, Ontario

#### *Bibliography:*

Malcomson, Robert. *A Very Brilliant Affair: The Battle of Queenston Heights, 1812*. Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 2003.

Malcomson, Robert. *Lords of the Lakes: The Naval War on Lake Ontario, 1812-1814*. Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 1998.

### *Narrow Gauge Through the Bush*

By Rod Clarke. Streetsville, Ontario: Privately published, 2007. 400 pages. \$65.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-9784406-0-2. ([www.cvrco.com](http://www.cvrco.com))

**N***arrow Gauge Through the Bush* is an immense work of Ontario railroad history. Throughout more than 370 oversized pages, crammed with in-

formation, Clarke shows his deep commitment to highly detailed research. His subject is the Toronto, Grey & Bruce (TG&B) and the Toronto & Nipissing (T&N) Railways,

completed through rural Ontario between 1871 and 1877. The former reached north-westward from its namesake city to Owen Sound, with a branch line to Wingham and Teeswater; the latter ran northeastward from Toronto to Coboconk, with a branch to Sutton on Lake Simcoe. As the only narrow-gauge, common-carrier railways built in Ontario, the economics, technology and politics of their construction is of historical interest. Ostensibly independent, and written about as if they were separate entities, the two companies were in fact owned, promoted and operated by essentially the same cabal of Toronto business elite. And perhaps most importantly, these lines, like the rest of the railways built in nineteenth-century Ontario, had significant social and economic impact on the communities through which they passed. But since Clarke covers only the time in which they were independent companies, which had ended by 1883, much of that impact is not covered.

Clarke, rather, is most intrigued with technology, in particular the narrow, 3'6" gauge of the track. To the layman, the distance between the rails may seem a very arcane topic, but in fact, the "correct" distance was a subject of intense engineering debate throughout the nineteenth century. Narrow gauge—those lines with the rails less than 4'8½" apart (which was becoming the North American standard)—was one method of reducing construction costs, if not necessarily operational costs. Clarke provides a lengthy description of the technical and economic pros and cons of narrow gauge engineering, highlighted in a series of wonderfully executed drawings of locomotives, rolling stock and buildings. His research methods for obtaining accurate colours in an age of black-and-white photography, as described in Chapter 23, are fascinating.

Clarke's research reveals new information about the "Britishness" of these two railways' engineering standards. The appropriateness of British engineering vs. American was an ongoing debate among nineteenth-

## Narrow Gauge Through the Bush

*Ontario's Toronto Grey & Bruce and Toronto & Nipissing Railways*



century Canadian engineers. In addition to big-picture examples of differing engineering philosophies, Clarke ponders the most mundane of details. For example, I had never heard of the "Fang" bolt (p. 166), but it turns out to be a British way of doing trackwork, and very unsuitable in Canada for fastening North American style rails to ties.

Although the TG&B and T&N terminated in Toronto less than two or three kilometers apart, historians have long believed that there was never a physical connection between them. But as Clarke points out their interwoven ownership makes the apparent missing link along the Toronto waterfront curious. Clarke offers proof, for the first time, that a narrow-gauge track did indeed join the two companies together, allowing for efficiencies in the operation of both railways.

*Narrow Gauge through the Bush* is very focused on the building of the T&N and TG&B companies, and a general reader may have difficulty trying to place the two railways in a broader Ontario picture. Were they the longest or shortest of their kind? Were they relatively successful as narrow gauge lines go, and were their operations and traffic typical? It would have been helpful had Clarke alerted readers to Omer Lavalée's *Narrow Gauge Railways of Canada* and, for a wider North American context, George Hilton's seminal *American Narrow Gauge Railroads*. The technical strength of the book warrants such support from the literature.

I note two problems. First is the sheer

volume of data presented. Clarke appears to have included every bit of research he found, which makes for a considerably inflated text. His biographies of engineers, businessmen, politicians and others are certainly informative, and his account of Edmund Wragge, Chief Engineer for both railways, is of particular interest to me since information on nineteenth-century Canadian engineers is hard to find. But often these biographies are so long, and filled with so much extraneous matter, that I tended to lose the theme of the person's life. I suggest that any account of more than a short paragraph should have been placed in a biographical appendix. Similarly, Clarke's extensive quoting of primary material is mind numbing and thin on interpretation, and many of the quotations do not seem to be particularly relevant.

Secondly, weak editorial control disappoints me, creating a confusing text for the reader. Six chapters are, based on their titles, associated with organizing and funding the two companies; eight chapters are supposed to

cover various aspects of building the lines. But, for example, Chapter 14—"Organizing to build a new railway"—is partly biographical, partly about establishing the engineering staff and, above all, filled with verbatim quotations taking up more than half of the text. Fewer chapters, and offering more analysis, would have made the book much more readable.

Rod Clarke's *Narrow Gauge Through the Bush* contains new information about the TG&B and T&N railways and his drawings are tremendously valuable artefacts. In fact, it is Clarke's exquisite drawings that are the real strength of this book. .

Christopher Andreae  
Historica Research Limited

#### *Bibliography:*

Hilton, George W. *American Narrow Gauge Railroads*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Lavallée, Omer S.A. *Narrow Gauge Railways of Canada*. Montreal: Railfare Books, 1972.

### ***Craft Capitalism: Craftworkers and Early Industrialization in Hamilton, Ontario 1840-1872***

By Robert B. Kristofferson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. x + 326 pages. \$29.95 softcover. ISBN 0-8020-9408-7 ([www.utppublishing.com](http://www.utppublishing.com))

**T**his monograph is clearly written, with a core argument that is developed sequentially using considerable detail as evidence. Kristofferson takes an optimistic view of the craftsman's life, especially in the early 1870s, and presents an alternative to what he calls 'the dispossession model' that conveyed the proletarianization of craftworkers and heightened class conflict. His thesis is that many craftworkers in Hamilton in the period experienced considerable upward mobility in their craft, either as small or large proprietors or as supervisors and managers in the larger businesses. Thus they did well financially, had good relations

with employers, and gained a close-knit culture and a respectful status in the local society. Most Hamilton industrialists who led large companies started as craftsmen and understood their employees, respected their skills, had mutual interests with them, and often lived in the same residential areas. The reader learns a great deal about specific people in this early era, for the author vividly conveys the community in Hamilton in which the craftsmen lived and worked. He evokes the voices, activities and institutions of craftworkers, discussing the social groups they joined or directed, whether they were self-employed or employees, and the hours they worked.