

An Historian's Notebook: 100 Stories – Mostly Peterborough By Elwood H. Jones

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ate collective agreements. They victimized known union leaders, divided ethnic groups against each other and, in a series of strikes from 1903 to 1912, imported strikebreakers. They used their private police, municipal police, and the militia to confront strikers by force and in the courts. On 12 August 1909, a gun battle broke out between freight handlers and CPR police, the bloodiest labour riot in Canadian history. Up to forty men were wounded; twenty ringleaders were arrested, with nine convicted. Non-English immigrants became scapegoats for labour violence. A consensual approach to labour relations also failed. The CPR ignored the advice of the Conciliation Board of 1909, as did the Canadian Northern Railway in the 1912 coal handlers' strike.

Class polarization culminated in the 1913 Street Railwaymen's strike. Local middle-class politicians rejected the past practice of mediation through skilled workers and, instead, broke the union and established a low-wage model as a way to attract external investment. Better wages and working conditions for lesser-skilled workers had been achieved only once, in 1912. A prairie harvest labour shortage and socialist leadership with sympathy strikes at the docks made the difference, but a year later the political will to carry a general strike and maintain this victory could not be sustained.

These economic struggles gave rise to two labour political traditions in Thunder

Bay, between the Independent Labour Party, committed to reform based on craft unions, and those swayed by revolutionary socialism and its promise of unionizing lesser-skilled industrial workers.

This polarization would shape the Canadian class struggle into the 1940s, until muted by transformed economic conditions, a purge of the political left, and a more comprehensive industrial relations system.

Morrison tells a powerful story about the making of one working-class community against polarization by employers and the state (and not by Eastern and Southern European workers), as a leading feature of early Canadian industrial capitalism. Well-chosen photographs enrich the story. But this study, largely written in the 1970s, has its limits. *Labour Pains* does not cover the whole of the Thunder Bay working class, leaving aside the First Nations and gender categories, as well as the unorganized majority who voted Conservative or Liberal. Rather, *Labour Pains* focuses—and usefully so—on those members of the working class who consciously fought for equity and improvements in the new wage-earning era, and who generalized politically from this hard experience to test reform, and perhaps even revolution.

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An Historian's Notebook: 100 Stories – Mostly Peterborough

By Elwood H. Jones

Peterborough: Trent Valley Archives, 2010. 291 pages. \$40.00 softcover. ISBN 978-0-9810341-1-9 <www.trentvalleyarchives.com>

Ontario is filled with good stories, and *An Historian's Notebook* exemplifies the best in the art of story-telling. Elwood Jones, the historian of

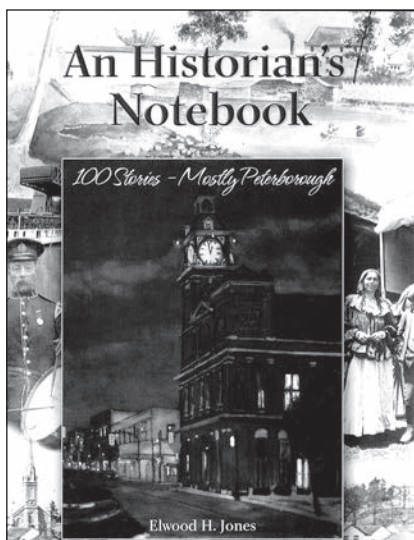
the title, has composed 100 essays that put Peterborough—from brass bands to genealogy to Red Fife wheat to ever so much more—into the reader's mind, invariably

with a surprise or two and a lingering sort of wisdom.

These are Jones's weekly columns published in the Peterborough *Examiner* through 2007 and 2008, so the material is readily available. But for most of us it is entirely new. I imagined a summary by categories, but "biography: 35" and "miscellaneous: 65" proved of little help. How does one classify elephants cavorting in the Otonabee, the dis-

used clockworks from a church tower, and which Mrs Lee of the six generals named Lee of the American Civil War came to Peterborough? This is indeed largely a biographical dictionary, and of ordinary, generic people whose lives are more important than their names, types who may be found in every town in Ontario. It is not the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, yet ever so valuable at its own scale. I would argue, furthermore, that the life stories of buildings—the Ashburnham Drill Shed, St John's Church, the Winch estate—are themselves biographical, and the evolution of bridge technology and fire brigade management not dissimilar. Paintings, drawings and photographs give place to the narration and nourishment to the mind's eye.

Jones frequently addresses heritage conservation too. Reform MPP James Hall's cemetery legislation in the 1850s is valuable background for the current role of the Ontario Historical Society in cemetery management. Destruction by fire is part of almost every building site, giving glimpses into heritage altered or lost; one ponders the replacement that seems bland today



but may be of heritage appeal tomorrow.

It is not so much the substance of *An Historian's Notebook* as it is the style that has caught my attention. By demonstrating the joys and rewards of historical research Jones makes readers want to care about which Mrs Lee may have come to Peterborough. The Lee story may be no more than an urban legend, but it helps define the place; you may know of similar myths in

your own town. Jones appreciates his access to what he describes as three excellent local newspapers, plus a range of manuscripts and fonds in the Trent Valley Archives, and he is an accomplished book fair and flea market sleuth. In almost every essay he acknowledges the TVA, an obvious destination for the avid local historian or genealogist. Jones also takes to the field, creating reasons for readers to go and stand where he stood, and see what he saw (or maybe something else). This interplay between field and file is essential to good story-telling. References work their way into the prose; there are no footnotes, but one feels well-informed and confident about Jones's use of sources. Should his lucid prose inadvertently initiate new urban legends, that would be jolly, and no author can control how others read between the lines.

An Historian's Notebook is written in a lively, conversational manner, befitting an author excited by a decorative gable on Mark Street or a new accession in the Archives. Chapter titles are catchy and beguiling: "the Peterborough pedestrian", for example. And I love the aspirate 'h' in

the title. Jones has arranged the essays in a rough chronology, and readers who proceed from cover to cover will get a quirky history of the town. But one can read the stories in any order, any time, much in the manner of the weekly column where they first appeared. I could wish that Jones had listed the publication dates of the essays, allowing me to appreciate the randomness of his experience, the way so much history comes to us. I admire a scholar who can jump deftly from topic to topic, and accept the resultant repetition. The names Dobbin and Duffus echo throughout, not a problem unless one tries to read the book in a single day. One really shouldn't.

A few essays stand out: Trent University's history through its landholdings, the Barnardo children reception centre, the big brass band war involving a bandmaster by the name of Rackett. Then there is the voter in Harvey Township whose rowboat capsized, whereupon he swam to the polling station to cast the tie-breaking vote in the 1875 provincial by-election. Jones marvels at a collection of old photos, offers thoughts on the Americanness of Peterborough, and explores heritage politics. And who can overlook Robertson Davies, *Examiner* publisher and voice of small-

town Ontario, admonishing a local historian who had lost his literary way? (Jones may consider himself fortunate not to be of the Davies era.)

Lingering questions: Why does the bibliography omit the names of publishers? Do we need the biography of the inventor of the pianoforte who died in England in 1832? And did the essay on Canadians' displeasure with the Brown-Macdonald coalition of 1864 give pause to Opposition leaders plotting in Ottawa late in 2009?

Jones has come up with an extraordinary book. One learns just about enough to write one's own ordinary history of Peterborough; in that sense *An Historian's Notebook* is a primary source. More than that, however, Jones offers entertainment and enlightenment sufficient to stir some readers to compile their own stories of village life in landscapes and eras yet to be recorded. Jones shows how an archive opens doors, and unselfishly shares a career of steering people through those doors into a world of surprises and fun, all of it making the study of history the great pleasure that all of us, I hope, feel.

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One Hundred Rings and Counting: Forestry Education and Forestry in Toronto and Canada, 1907-2007

By Mark Kuhlberg

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. xi + 334 pages. \$65.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-0-8020-9685-2 <www.utppublishing.com>

Before reading *One Hundred Rings and Counting*, I doubted that the history of one small faculty at one university could have wide appeal. However Professor Mark Kuhlberg of Laurentian University has largely dispelled my doubt

in this chronicle of the Faculty of Forestry at the University of Toronto. Forestry at U of T has been, at least at times, unloved by its own university and province and has dealt its share of obstinacy to higher-ups over its century-long history. Kuhlberg sup-