BOOK REVIEWS

A word about VAN Book Reviews. Readers of the Vernacular Architecture Newsletter are invited to inform the Review Editor of new books which should be reviewed in the Newsletter. In addition, the review section will in the future include reviews of relevant museum exhibits, films, videos and other "non-print" works that help make information and ideas about vernacular architecture available. Readers are invited, and encouraged, to bring such works to the attention of the Review Editor as well. Please direct correspondence to: Dr. Lauren B. Sickels-Taves; Architectural Conservation Biohistory International; 13140 Vernon Ave.; Huntington Woods, MI 48070; (248)545-4643, lstaves@ibm.net.

Thomas F. McIlwraith, *Looking for Old Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) Cloth $55.00, paper $19.95

While I was in architecture school in California during the early 1980s, one of my American classmates visited me at my parents' home in the heart of southwestern Ontario. "Now I understand your design projects," she pronounced upon arrival. Rather distressed at what I understood as a rather quick dismissal of my design abilities, I assumed that my friend's comment came directly from her only experience of Canada: the 120-mile stretch of Highway 401 which had brought her there. I thus concluded that she thought my design projects were like the landscapes visible from Highway 401: boring, monotonous, flat, lifeless, predictable.

Thomas P. McIlwraith is a geographer working at McMaster University, in the heart of southern Ontario. His new book, *Looking for Old Ontario*, is a passionate argument against seeing Canada's most populous province as dull. McIlwraith assumes, like me, that everybody finds Ontario boring. "The more one understands connections, and the more one is prepared to look at the land critically, the more quickly the notion that the countryside of southern Ontario lacks interest nay be put to rest," the author states up front in the introduction of the book. What follows is a four-part introductory geography lesson on how to read the landscape of Ontario, inspired by the likes of J. B. Jackson and William G. Hoskins.

Hardcore VAFers, of course, may need little convincing. In fact, many of McIlwraith's points are standard features of VAF fieldtrips. Landscapes reveal lives; changes to structures disclose phases of development between a building's conception and the present: fields, houses, and fences—understood as generic artifacts (a.k.a. types)—can inspire ways to see other artifacts and places. We know this. Such lessons practically constitute a VAF pledge of allegiance. And McIlwraith's 400-page plea to see his province as "interesting" may seem strangely familiar to longtime VAFers too. The more boring a place may seem to ordinary people, the more many of us VAFers want to go there.

To give him credit, McIlwraith also provides good specific local information: the provincial system of land survey and place naming, the Ontarian penchant for building in brick, and a glossary of fence types, to name only a few of his fascinating topics. My favorite section of the book is an insightful analysis of Ontario's borders, particularly its eastern boundary with Quebec. A single diagram explains the eastward transition from English to bilingual to French-only signs; the change from an Ontario skyline (grain elevators, water tanks, trees) to a more typical Quebec one (metal roofs church spire); and the expression of the concession system to the vestiges of the seigneurial system. I have needed this slide, like many others in the book, for years.

The reader gets a sense that the author has really experienced every place he writes about by the fact that he took most of the photographs himself (over nearly three decades) and that he makes direct use of his illustrations to underline his points. In this regard, *Looking for Old Ontario* will be a fine text for courses in field studies or even for teaching material culture.

VAFers who might wish a memento from Ottawa, the site of the 1995 VAF conference, will be disappointed in *Looking for Old Ontario*. In this regard the book's title is quite misleading. McIlwraith's real turf is only 1/10 of the present-day province, as he focuses only on the area south of Muskoka and Haliburton. Even more disturbing than his reduction of this huge province to 40-odd counties is his intentional omission of its major cities, particularly Toronto (Canada's largest city). Ontario is, after all, Canada's most highly urbanized province, with more than 80% of its population found in urban centres by the 1980s. On his distaste for the urbane, McIlwraith shares much with Hoskins, who saw urbanization and industrialization

as threats to his beloved countryside in *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955). "City landscapes," McIlwraith claims, "are inspired by more than the Ontario countryside, and that must be someone else's story." Too bad. In the section on preservation, the author laments the city's "attack" on rural Ontario.

Even readers who do not come from Ontario will enjoy *Looking for Old Ontario.* While the book may not push the limits of vernacular architecture studies, it is a very useful tool for persuading the uninitiated of the legibility of everyday places. McIlwraith's assertion, nonetheless, that "Ontarioness" means consistency, rather than dullness, will certainly please native readers like myself. No doubt my friend will say that's what she meant all along.

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Thomas J. Schlereth, *Reading the Road: U.S. 40 and the American Landscape.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997. 151 + xvii pp.

Thomas J. Schlereth's premise is straightforward: US 40 is a classic American road that has many stories to tell about our culture, past and present. His aim in *Reading the Road* is to show, using techniques of above-ground archaeology, how we may learn, understand, and appreciate those stories.

The title suggests a field guide, and the book is self-referenced as a field guide and road guide. It is partially successful in this primary purpose, but in attempting to be "many things simultaneously" it loses cohesiveness and becomes instead an entertaining historical melange of many road-related contexts.

Upon opening the book, the reader's first major discovery is that the book's focus is that stretch of US 40 which spans the state of Indiana. First published in 1985 under a different title by the Indiana Historical Society, the book has two main sections: "The Above-Ground Archaeology of the American Highway," a primer on this subject, and "A Road Guide to US 40 in Indiana, Past and Present," an application of knowledge presented in part 1 to a specific road.

After the main body of text, Schlereth adds an excellent essay on sources. This discussion, added since the 1985 edition, mentions about 200 sources, although works by landscape historians John Stilgoe and John B. Jackson are conspicuous by their absence, as is Chester Liebs's *Main Street to Miracle Mile.* The sources given are references to pursue specific subjects in greater depth.

Above-ground archaeology is a wonderful tool to gain insight into past patterns of cultural behavior—and can be fascinating detective work at that. The same methodology vernacular architecture enthusiasts use in "reading the building" can be applied to "reading the road"; the results are that details of historical contexts become visible through astute observation, and historical information not recorded elsewhere is made available. In examining the roadscape, Schlereth delves into such evidence as road dimensions, signage, gas station layout, and bridge design. He repeatedly shows that names of places, roads, and businesses give important clues to the past.

The two-part format at times interferes with clear exposition as the book progresses. For instance, part 1 has a brief history of the gas station, with diagrams of forms and four photographs, some showing stations along US 40 in Indiana. That is adequate for this one element of the roadscape. Part 2 adds to the general historical text, but adds only one photograph of a service station, causing the reader to use both sections to gain more complete comprehension.

Schlereth only hints at other noteworthy topics. He teases the reader with "Probably one of the most unsung, yet most vital, components of the road is the lowly culvert..." But there is no discussion beyond mention of a pioneer corrugated culvert company in Indiana, and mention that there exist "pipe, pipe arch, box, bridge, and arch culverts." Neither illustrations nor text shed light on the types, sizes, placements, ages, or significance of these forgotten elements.

The few maps provided are barely adequate for covering Indiana and for providing the context of the complete National Road (which became US 40) from Cumberland, Maryland, to Vandalia, Illinois. Schlereth gives only a little background on the endpoints and route of the entire original National Road begun in 1827, a clearly important element of American history. The far-reaching extensions toward the east and west coasts, added after the road's designation in 1925 as US 40, are neither shown nor discussed.

The book's most serious drawback is an inadequate selection of photographs. Several illustrations are excellent, showing, for example, remnants of service stations, a canal bed, a drive-in theatre, and a few roadscapes from aerial photography. A direct comparison of one section of US 40 near Richmond, Indiana, in 1952 and 1980 is outstanding. Documentary photos of streetscapes and other subjects are welcome. But there are several irrelevant photos, such