H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sherry H. Olson, Patricia A. Thornton. *Peopling the North American City: Montreal, 1840-1900.* Carleton Library Series. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011. xvii + 524 pp. $95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-3830-6; $34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7735-3831-3.

Reviewed by Bettina Bradbury (York University - Dept. of History)

Published on H-HistGeog (February, 2013)

Commissioned by Robert M. Wilson

Going Big, Going Small: The Interpretive Delights of Miniature Montreal

Building on years of research and on their own articles about Montreal demography, housing, and much more, *Peopling the North American City* offers sparkling new insights into the urban geography, demography, and lives of the people of Montreal during the nineteenth century. This richly researched and passionate study takes readers into the houses and streets of Montreal and its three largest cultural groups. It is urban historical geography at its best, social science history with a heart and demography in spatial and historical context. Sherry H. Olson and Patricia A. Thornton offer a monograph that combines an experiment and dialogue about methodology and a reinterpretation of the dynamics of the peopling of the nineteenth-century North American city. Original, creative, and engaging, this is a book that I found compelling reading as a historian of Montreal, and that I believe will offer insights to scholars and students in a wide range of disciplines, interested in a multiplicity of themes and specific geographic and historical locations.

The central argument of the book is that nineteenth-century Montreal was characterized by three different demographic regimes that changed but remained distinctive. These "packages of observable behavior" were associated with families in the city's Catholic French-Canadian, English Protestant, and Irish Catholic populations. Related to that is their argument that "family life was the transmission belt for cultural difference" (p. 349). The major differences explored include: infant and child mortality (highest among French Canadian Catholics as a result of lower rates of breastfeeding); family formation, especially age at marriage (youngest among French Canadian Catholics, latest among Irish Catholics); fertility and the spacing and survival of children; connections to members of the extended family; and housing. Some of their findings echo those of other studies of Montreal and North American cities. In many areas they themselves have already offered pioneering interpretations in earlier work. They build brilliantly on those here, including their analyses of housing patterns and architecture. Other findings are new and important, visible because of the wide range of sources they have consulted; the innovative sampling methods they have used; and their deep rich knowledge of the city's housing, geography, and people. Charts and images throughout make patterns clearer, though I found some tables confusing. There is a Bruegel-like richness in the portraits of families, individuals, streets, housing, practices, and songs throughout the book. It is the individual family stories and the ways they are recounted that I found to be the most original and exciting aspect of the book. These complement and contradict the categories of analysis and the certainty of patterns described. They capture the authors' constant desire to show "thinking persons caught in some instant of engagement, celebration, grief or stocktaking," their insistence that "even in very tight circumstances, individuals were making choices, sometimes consciously, sometimes intuitively" (pp. 64, 25).

Behind the rich stories of individual families presented throughout the book and their truth claims lie their sampling strategies. Most important was their decision to seek to build rich family histories of a relatively small number of families across a sixty-year period. "Miniature Montreal" is the result of tracking individuals

with specific surnames, chosen to represent the three ethnic/religious groups they focus on, across a wide range of sources. It is presented here both as the source of their arguments and as a methodology that others might duplicate. The extent of research involved cannot be underestimated. This is one of the book's strengths, but also a reason that others might avoid duplicating the methodology. The sources generated by Quebec religious, governmental, and other institutions are particularly rich, and only some of them have parallels in other jurisdictions. Their methodology involved searching for mentions of people with the twelve chosen surnames mostly in the following records: all records of birth, deaths, and marriages; censuses between 1861 and 1901; cemetery registers; tax rolls in specific years; Lovell's city directories; and notarial files, which include marriage contracts, wills, rental and leasing agreements, inventories taken following a death and at some other times, and many other documents. Anyone who has examined Quebec notarial documents is acutely aware of both their amazing potential and the absence of any overall digital index, or indeed, for most records of anything other than a listing by letters of the alphabet. To cover this period, Olson had to search in the indexes and repertories of 350 notaries who practiced in Montreal between 1840 and 1875 alone. Even in jurisdictions with similar sources for which digital nominal indexes have been made this would be demanding research. Other samples complement "Miniature Montreal": a sample that follows children from births through their first year leading either to their death or their survival as shown in the Canadian censuses of 1861, 1881, and 1901; and a series of samples building on other researchers' samples of the 1901 Canadian census. All matching was done by hand. The resulting family histories allow them to use micro-data to answer big questions and to move readily across scales between the micro and the macro. One of my main critiques of this book is that in their defense of their method, they do not sufficiently acknowledge the extent of the research that was involved. The complexity of their sampling strategies meant that there were times when I was not sure which sample they were drawing upon.

Structurally the book begins by locating nineteenth-century Montreal within the broader North American context of geographical and social mobility, and introducing the method briefly and their intellectual and other debts. Successive chapters explore their tracking of the population; kinship and immigration into Montreal; the remarkably high death rates that characterized the city, especially for children; family formation; family economies; households; poverty and risk; social segregation; ongoing links with rural areas; and the transmission of cultural heritage through public displays and contests around issues of ethnicity and religion. I found the earlier chapters stronger than the later ones. Across these chapters the book's strengths lie in the ways they draw on their diverse sampling strategies to present dominant patterns and individual stories in the context of a city whose history they have come to know profoundly. I particularly liked their presentation of the "distinctive features of the Montreal housing market, with its annual leases and double- and triple-decker lodgings," as multiplying "interfaces, nourishing the continual creation of relatedness, the exchange and accumulation of social capital, and the secretion of resources for contingencies" (p. 235). They demonstrate why spring babies were more likely to die than summer babies because they were weaned in the summer months when contagion spread more readily than in the cold Montreal winters. They show us a range of different family decisions about residential structures, location, accumulating property, and inheritance that place such decisions at the heart of urban development.

I read this book as a Montreal historian much indebted to the work of both authors. I also read it as a feminist family historian, not a geographer. I think the book gives a superb sense of the city's urban geography and built environment and their transformations over the nineteenth century. I was frustrated at times by the ways their concern with justifying their methodology and presenting it as a model took precedence over the richness of their evidence. Culture is a central category in their analysis, yet I was uncomfortable about its usage for several reasons. First, the study appears to presume the three ethnic-religious groups whose differences it seeks to elucidate. Second, while combining all Montreal Protestants in one category produces the numbers necessary for various statistical analyses, it ignores the ways in which Montrealers of Scottish, American, British, or Irish origin distinguished themselves culturally from each other as well as potential differences in their practices and experiences. Furthermore, their definition of what culture means seemed to me to slip between acting as a synonym for ethnicity, reflecting a machine readable variable combining ethnicity and religion, and acknowledging cultures as complex sets of practices and beliefs. There are some wonderful illustrations that suggest the cultural productions of difference through images, as in the image of Peter Murphy attacking his wife, that go unmentioned in the text. I also thought that

the question of sexual relations and sexuality might have been explored more or interpreted differently. As many works of demography, Olson and Thornton's study seldom acknowledges that the sex act is necessary to conception and birth, or that negotiating the frequency of sex might be a source of tension among husbands and wives. As a result they situate sexuality outside marriage. Married couples exhibit fertility and engage in the "initiation of stopping behavior," while they "admit to the imperatives of sex," and "urgency of male sexuality," as shaping births outside marriage (pp. 143, 148).

These quibbles aside, this is a marvelous book. It will be of interest to urban and historical geographers, demographers, historians of families of cities and of Montreal, and all Montrealers interested in the history of their city.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-histgeog

Citation: Bettina Bradbury. Review of Olson, Sherry H.; Thornton, Patricia A., *Peopling the North American City: Montreal, 1840-1900.* H-HistGeog, H-Net Reviews. February, 2013.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38161

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.