Ontario Local Histories


With the almost simultaneous appearance of the above two volumes Ontario local historians – at last – can search for bibliographic references with the same facility as their colleagues in the other provinces. They are, in fact, in an even better position, as Mrs. Aitken’s bibliography encompasses books published up to 1977. In both cases the bibliographies are the culmination of a vast amount of previous work. For William E.E. Morley the research leading to Ontario and the Canadian North began some twenty years ago, with the support of the Centennial Commission and the Canada Council, and has already been highlighted by the appearance of the Atlantic Provinces (1967) and La Province de Québec (1971). These, with Bruce B. Peel’s Prairie Provinces to 1953 and the series of bibliographies being published on British Columbia by the University of Victoria, have been a real boon to local historians of the other provinces. Mrs. Barbara B. Aitken, too, has worked on Ontario bibliography for years, and previous editions of her book have been published by the Kingston Public Library.

Between them these two monographs cover Ontario local histories with no gap and only a slight, bibliographically necessary overlap, as Morley lists post-1950 editions of the books originally published in his period. The authors co-operated in their work, and Morley wrote the preface for Mrs. Aitken. Both bibliographies note select libraries in which copies are obtainable, both also provide a list of their printed bibliographic sources. Neither work, quite correctly, makes any attempt at critical assessment, a completely insuperable task. Both leave out slightly differing minor categories of publications.

There are, nevertheless, some distinct differences. Morley’s book is a full bibliography, complete with the technical details that a librarian might require, Aitken’s is more of a checklist, giving the basic information on the volumes that would be required by the working historian or the general reader. She frequently goes beyond these facts to include some data on the measurements of the book and the number of pages and has gone beyond printed works to list the microfilms of the elusive Tweedsmuir histories in the Public Archives of Ontario. Unlike Morley’s study, the Aitken collection contains no general index, but it has an appendix on church archives and a most useful listing of the publications of local historical societies.

The organizational arrangement adopted differs considerably. Morley uses a four-category geographical listing for Ontario: General Works; Regional Studies; Counties & Districts; Cities, Towns, & Townships. The North is divided into parallel sections. He further includes extensive cross references and a geographical index. For the benefit of the students who are not too conversant with Ontario, the county names might have been shown beside those of the smaller municipalities, especially where there could be any confusion, e.g. Dundas-Wentworth. Also, a map showing the boundaries of the
regions which are used for both Ontario and the North would be helpful; it may not always be obvious which communities should be placed in each region. The Aitken work has the entries arranged in one series; but, unfortunately, it does not have a geographical index, and the cross references are not as ample as might be desired. Although many sections contain ‘see also’ notations, there is no way of relating the smaller municipalities to their counties or districts. For instance, a person preparing a bibliography on Huron County would see the Huron Tract entries which follow those of the county immediately, and might look under Goderich as the county seat, but would not find the books under such headings as Clinton, Seaforth, and Zurich without spending a great deal of time checking all the possible entries in an atlas. Also, while the Huron Tract can be found easily with Huron County, it is not cross referenced under Perth, Wellington, or Waterloo Counties, where the works cited might also be relevant. This limitation on access could easily be corrected by further ‘see also’ entries, and it is to be hoped that the author will make more such entries in subsequent revisions as she continues her invaluable work of keeping this reference up to date.

The comprehensiveness of the two volumes remains a final point for discussion. The Aitken book contains more references, some 1,700 as opposed to 1,000 in Morley; but this is a comment on the increased historical writing in recent decades, not an indication that Morley has left anything out. Doubtless favourite works will be found missing in both studies; however, both are remarkably comprehensive and Morley's caveat, that an author 'may defer publication in a pedantic bid for completeness; but to small avail' is a most appropriate one; there will always be something else that could be added. We can be thankful that both these authors decided that they had attained sufficient completeness within their framework of selection and proceeded to publication.

It is all too rare for one good reference work to make its appearance, let alone two; nonetheless, thanks to Barbara Aitken and Bill Morley, that is what we have here. And what a difference from some recent bibliographic studies that have made their appearance; the Bibliographia Canadiana from Longmans is a disgrace, and the Ontario Historical Studies Series volume quite inadequate, although the forthcoming revision by Olga B. Bishop will doubtless be a very different story. With Aitken and Morley, by any comparison, we have two invaluable works, and the authors and the publishers are to be congratulated on their dedicated and satisfying efforts.

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