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Book Review

Mining Country: A History of Canada's Mines and Miners. By John Sandlos and Arn Keeling. Lorimer, 2021. 192 pages.

Reviewed by Jedidiah Anderson, University of British Columbia

John Sandlos and Arn Keeling's image-soaked work on mining and miners in Canada is presented as a people's history. This matters because the authors work to weave voices and histories into their book that have often been excluded from the written account of who the miners of Canada are. Indigenous Peoples are rooted in the text from the beginning to the end, both as innovators and practitioners of mining as well as victims of its problematic role in Canadian colonialism. Sandlos and Keeling show that the history of mining is not just a story of technological triumphalism, while also demonstrating its essential and undeniable role in the function of our modern material lives.

Sandlos and Keeling quote Lewis Mumford at the beginning of their book, providing a critical subtext to a work that cannot delve too deeply into the implications of the history it depicts due to the enormous geographical and historical scope of the topic. This book is essentially an introductory text or primer that is useful to high school and undergraduate students, researchers, and non-academic readers alike. However, by evoking Northrop Frye and Lewis Mumford, the authors also signal that their book is rooted in a broader theoretical understanding of mining history, connecting their work to academic debate and axiological discourse. Mumford notably devoted a critically important section of his book *Technics and Civilization* to the role of mining in the development of “the machine” and the deleterious dehumanizing impacts of the mining industry on human civilization. He argued that the development of the early-modern mine formed a “concrete model of the conceptual world.”¹

Sandlos and Keeling's book is historical rather than philosophical in nature, but it is clear throughout that Mumford's ideas lurk beneath the surface. One could be convinced that Canada itself is a sort of organized large-scale mining operation, particularly after reading in the chapter "Mining and the Industrial Boom" that mining drove Canada's expansion, via rail and other means, into the most remote parts of the country. We are also made aware that Canada is a global hub of mining finance and corporate activity. In their conclusion, the authors point to the "material base for modern society" that mining provided in Canada.² Sandlos and Keeling avoid a purely "onward and upward" narrative of material progress, while also arguing that we cannot ignore the critical role of the industry in shaping the technological and corporate wealth Canadians take for granted today.

This book is essentially a survey of mining history in Canada, broken down into six historical periods, with each given its own chapter. The first chapter of the book, titled "Deep Roots," is arguably the most interesting due to the inclusion of a history that has typically been omitted from similar texts in the past. Rather than begin their story with the development of mining in Neolithic Europe, or with the arrival of European settlers in North America, the authors show that evidence exists of organized mining by Indigenous Peoples as far back as 10,000 years. Copper mining around Lake Superior was carried out by Indigenous miners for as long as 7,000 years before contact with Europeans—an archaeological discovery that has been suppressed or critiqued in the past due to racist assumptions regarding the capabilities of Indigenous Peoples.³

Throughout the text, Sandlos and Keeling refer to Canada's northern regions intentionally, illustrating the major role mining played and continues to play, in the exploitation and development of the Provincial Norths and all three territories. They show that this importance can also be traced back before contact with Europeans. For example, a trading and manufacturing complex for copper existed in Alaska and the Yukon, which involved the Chugach, Dena'ina, Tutchone, Tanana, Gwich'in, Eyak, and Tlingit. This resource of the Ahtna was later subsumed into settler commerce, first with Russians and then later Americans or Canadians. Likewise, early contact with a group of Inuit known as the "Copper Inuit" plays a major role in the early history of interactions between Indigenous Peoples and Europeans in what is now northern Canada.

Sandlos and Keeling note that most Canadians have more knowledge about the very-short Klondike gold rush than they do about the thousands of years of Indigenous mining that preceded such events. The arrival of mining in the North was typically associated with Europeans and the general beginning of "civilization." However, Sandlos and Keeling do not pretend that these older forms of mining are the same as industrial and mechanized mining imported

to Canada from Europe. Canada's integration into global markets as part of the British Empire meant that coal and iron drove its development into a nation-state, while other minerals like lead, zinc, gold, nickel, or uranium would fuel the state's expansion into the North.

Those familiar with the single-industry company towns that dominate Canadian history and social science discourse will find much of this book's core topical material to be well-presented. Sandlos and Keeling do not aim for a comprehensive or exhaustive history of every major mining operation in Canada. They instead give the reader illustrative accounts of operations that demonstrate various historical events and trends, whether regarding trade, colonization, labour rights, environmental degradation, wealth accumulation, war, or politics. The book's six chapters are structured on temporal periodizations, while each chapter's topical material focuses more on a variety of places or mining clusters. In each of these chapters, the North is specifically separated out as a region, often with a subtitle⁴. For example, the authors explore mining in Uranium City and northwest Saskatchewan as part of a section focused on mining in the Provincial Norths.

This book serves as a useful connecting sinew between northern Canadian history and Canadian history in general, but also literally illustrates, through selected images, Mumford's final warning on mining: "The classic curse of Midas became perhaps the dominant characteristic of the modern machine: whatever it touched was turned to gold and iron, and the machine was permitted to exist only where gold and iron could serve as foundation."⁵ Perhaps nowhere has this principle been more clearly illustrated than in northern Canada.

Notes

1. Lewis Mumford, *Technics & Civilization* (1934; reis., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 70.
2. John Sandlos and Arn Keeling, *Mining Country: A History of Canada's Mines and Miners* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 2021), 221.
3. *Ibid.*, 16–17.
4. *Ibid.*, 144.
5. Mumford, 77.

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