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Revisiting Montreal's Age of Opulence

MACKAY SMITH PENS AN ELEGANT TRIBUTE TO OUR GOLDEN SQUARE MILE NEIGHBOURHOOD

By **Wayne Larsen**

More than a century ago, the Golden Square Mile was the epicentre of this city's grace and opulence, home to captains of industry and the grand monuments they built to themselves. From the mountainside mansions of tycoons and financiers to the comfortable townhouses occupied by their employees farther down the hill, the district once acknowledged as the wealthiest in Canada has lost much of its Victorian dignity — gradually replaced by the stores and office buildings that now comprise and characterize modern downtown Montreal.

Today, the average Montrealer would be hard pressed to define the Golden Square Mile by its exact boundaries; over the ensuing generations it has faded from both our view and consciousness to the point where it no longer represents a tangible district on the local map. The term, though rarely used today, still resonates with images of extreme wealth and rare luxury unknown anywhere else in Canada during the post-Confederation era.

But thanks to MacKay L. Smith's latest book, *Montreal's Golden Square Mile: A Historical Perspective*, that long-forgotten city of towering snow banks and horse-drawn sleigh rides under fur blankets has re-emerged. From Pine Ave. to Boul. René Lévesque between Côte-des-Neiges/Guy and University, Smith leads readers on a leisurely stroll through time, stopping at all the points of social and architectural interest along the way.

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If there's an old building within that area you have always wondered about, chances are that Smith has provided its history in this book.

Long since retired from a successful career in the laundry and dry-cleaning industry, Smith reinvented himself as a local historian and author of a series of handsome books that delve into Montreal's storied past, each time focusing on a particular piece of the historical mosaic. From the story of Montreal's Jewish community to an epic tour of Sherbrooke Street — which he appropriately dubbed the city's spine — Smith tackles each book project with the passion and enthusiasm that only a true native son can muster.

Smith's books are labours of love, and it shows on every page. This latest effort is no exception. One of the most striking features of Smith's work is the photography. Not only did he take most of the contemporary photos himself — in many cases waiting for the best effects of sunlight or time of year to provide the optimal view — he shunned the use of a digital camera. Instead, he used the now-old-fashioned 35mm slide film, which yields a sharper image. The result is a book filled with colour photos as opulent as the grand

old buildings they depict, sometimes even more striking when placed in juxtaposition with archive photos of the same site, most of which were culled from the McCord Museum's formidable Notman Collection.

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Stories are told through a well-organized, street by street narrative with just enough attention on each building to keep things interesting. Smith fills his book with a gallery of characters — the shakers, movers and Old-Money Victorians who drove not only the city's economy but the entire country's as well. Among them are shipping magnate Hugh Allan, whose imposing Ravenscrag estate at the top of Peel Street — which Smith chose as an appropriate cover image for this book — features an observation tower from which Allan kept a telescope trained on the comings and goings of his vessels down in the harbour, a few kilometres away.

While it can always be argued that the brick-and-mortar labourers and small-business owners were responsible for building Montreal every bit as much as the wealthy Square-Mile residents who populate this book, Smith leaves their stories in the hands of other historians. Here we meet the Drummond, Birks and Dandurand families among dozens of other familiar names that still resonate in today's Montreal, enshrined on street signs and a few surviving commercial institutions.

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But while the stories and deeds of these pioneering entrepreneurs and philanthropists are told with obvious affection and an unwavering attention to detail, the true stars of this book are the buildings — the grand old edifices that remain standing in silent testament to a bygone era that will never come again. Smith's melding of archival and contemporary photography with historical anecdote provides a breezy and most informative account of the architectural heritage of what will always be one of Montreal's grandest and most historically significant neighbourhoods, regardless of how much of it is gradually replaced by modern concerns.

Montreal's Golden Square Mile: A Historical Perspective by MacKay L. Smith is published by InfiniteBooks and is available in both English and French editions. For more information, go to infinitebooks.ca

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