

Linda Mahood, *Thumbing a Ride: Hitchhikers, Hostels, and Counterculture in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2018). 332 pp. Cloth \$89.95, Paperback \$32.95.

As a summer student in the interior of BC, I would sometimes get drunk at home and then decide I wanted to call all my friends. I would hitch the ten miles into New Denver with my coins, make the calls, stop in at the pub, and then hitch back. It was normal practice around the town, but my friends were incredulous. “How,” they demanded, “can you just get into a car with any psycho?”

It was not always thus. There was a time when thousands of young people lined the Trans-Canada Highway, thumbs out, begging for rides. According to Linda Mahood, professor of History at the University of Guelph, it is a phenomenon that goes to the roots of a rootless Canada:

The wandering child has a unique place in the settler history of Canada. The equation of travel with colonial discovery, adventure narratives, and greater global awareness has long been associated with youth and nation building. The Dominion of Canada [...] is a nation built by tens of thousands of travelling apprentices, abandoned orphans, juvenile migrants, and refugees for whom the transition to adulthood is marked by saying goodbye to hearth and home, both psychologically and geographically, in order to seek their fortune, immigrate to a new country, marry, wander with a youth club or alone, or run away (6).

In the nineteen-twenties and thirties, hitching was a way for young Canadians to get out and see the world, and a way for adults to pick a child up and demonstrate the value of sharing. In 1932, a children’s columnist for the *Toronto Globe* argued hitchhiking “was an excellent opportunity for children to show their good manners when people showed them ‘small and large courtesies’” (26). Kids hitched to school, hitched back home, hitched to visit relatives, hitched to the baseball diamond or the watering hole. University students hitched to campus; workers who could not afford a car yet hitched to the factory.

At the same time, not everyone thought hitchhiking was a wholesome lesson in community values. Although some journalists noted a difference between wandering hobos and young people out for adventure, others simply saw young people out to take advantage of the system.

Following the Second World War, hitchhiking became deviant, associated

with beatniks and juvenile delinquents. Provinces from Nova Scotia to Ontario (and BC) banned soliciting rides from the side of the road—but the bans were useless. Come the sixties, hitching exploded, and became another battle site in the counter-culture, between “straights” and “heads,” the respectable versus the indolent, and between parents, some of whom had hitched in their youth, and the longhaired, alienated children they thought they had raised right.

Mahood vividly describes how the roads out of major cities would be jammed with young people hitching. By 1971, she writes, “the number of youth on Ontario highways and street corners reached the thousands. The *Globe and Mail* said that the roads ‘look like a re-enactment of the Children’s Crusade’” (158). Major junctions on the Trans-Canada, like Wawa, Ontario, would see lines of hippies waiting for rides, much to the consternation of locals. (A common urban legend told of a hitchhiker who waited so long for a ride in Wawa, he married a local waitress.)

In Dryden, outraged mothers “collected hundreds of signatures on a petition that said they ‘didn’t want hitchhikers pushing drugs to their children’” (158-9). City mayors pushed “anti-hippie” ordinances. Young hitchhikers were subject to the same vilification most countercultural young people got—they were smelly, stoned, and stupid—and, once the federal Transient Youth Inquiry discovered most of these kids were upper- and middle-class, “spoiled” was added too.

But some pushed back, and not the characters one might expect. Mahood describes how Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau burnished his countercultural bonafides by talking about his own adventures hitching across Europe and the Middle East. East-west travel across Canada, especially communal travel by young people, strengthened Trudeau’s vision of a single, united nation. Under the aegis of the Secretary of State, Trudeau’s Liberals created Transient Youth Services and “Summer ’71,” a summer jobs program that set out to create hostels, buses, and hitchhiking “kiosks” with info on rides and accommodations. (The kiosks and hostels went ahead, but the brightly coloured buses were too reminiscent of Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters for the Conservative opposition.)

But it was in youth hosteling that the counterculture and our hip new federal government would carve their strangest alliance. Since 1933, the Canadian Youth Hostels Association (CYHA) had provided cheap accommodations to traveling youth “à l’europpéenne,” with a focus on the outdoors and getting approval from parents, schools, and organizations like the Scouts. They were paid for by memberships and cheap accommodation fees. In 1970, the federal government set up the Independent Hostelling Association (IHA), where accommodations would be free and the rules looser, including a tolerance for smoking grass indoors. As a result, the IHA got the “heads” while the CYHA got the “straights.” For the next seven years, until the two organizations were merged, the two hostel associations would wage a vicious propaganda war against each other, with the IHA accusing the CYHA of being irrelevant and uptight, and the CHYA accusing the IHA of wasting tax dollars to house dope smokers.

As the book closes it takes on a tragic quality, as we learn of the countless young women (they are almost all women) who have gone missing on the highway, especially as hitching and “hooking” became indistinguishable to some men (and even some judges). Mahood reminds us of the case of Ingrid Bauer, a 14-year-old girl who hitched to her boyfriend’s house in 1972 and is still missing today. There was also Melissa Rehorek, who was found strangled two days after setting out on the 401 in 1976. And of course, there are the legions of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, many of them disappeared while hitching the “Highway of Tears” between Prince Rupert and Prince George, BC. Mahood’s work on this is thin, and I hope future research into the topic will take into account the federal government’s 2019 Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, at least the parts examining the nineteen-sixties and seventies.

Mahood read written accounts by and/or conducted interviews with 36 women and 42 men born between “roughly” 1946 and 1965. She has also done a solid job in the federal archives pulling up info on the “blue jean civil servants” and the other programs to help wayward youth.

But Mahood’s biggest coup is her use of the Canadian University Press wire—the news service used by campus newspapers across Canada, many of which had (and still have) radical or countercultural editorial policies. While the mainstream news archives have been searched repeatedly by historians and their keywords, the radical press of the sixties and seventies is often ignored, despite the fact it reflected a large segment of the Canadian population at the time and provided important counter-hegemonic arguments to the mainstream press. A particularly juicy find was scholar Ron Verzuh’s “Trip Tips” column in Simon Fraser University’s *The Peak*.

In 2003, I drove from Victoria to Ottawa to deliver a car, and had a chance to pay forward some of the rides I had gotten years earlier outside New Denver. The roads were thinner with kids than in the seventies, but they were there nonetheless—punk rockers going to the city for shows, summer students leaving their parks jobs, homeless kids and their dogs. But the highway is mostly empty. As one 18-year-old put it to me, “People are scared of us now, even though we’re the ones with the most to fear.”

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