Is there anything new to say about the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919? The answer is a resounding affirmative. Reinhold Kramer and Tom Mitchell re-write the narrative of the strike by putting at the centre of events the Citizens’ Committee of One Thousand and its principal leader, A.J. Andrews. Andrews and two other leaders of the Citizens, Isaac Pitblado and Travers Sweatman, were lawyers, not captains of industry, although they had close personal and professional ties to the business elite of Winnipeg. Their professional occupation was important, for it allowed them to pretend to be neutral—“I was never a capitalist,” said Pitblado (60)—and to offer a legal façade to their actions in defence of bourgeois hegemony. The lawyers’ intervention in the events of 1919 occurred at several levels: it was political, ideological, and legal, and in the fascinating and credible narrative of Kramer and Mitchell, the intervention was successful. The Citizens achieved their goals of crushing the strike, punishing the strike leaders, and reaffirming the freedom of capital in the economic system.

Previous histories of the strike, and of the labour revolt of 1919 as a whole, have focused on workers, strike leaders, politicians, and the conditions of labour in the economy of early twentieth-century Canada. The Citizens appeared in the story as important but largely unknown opponents of the strike. In this deeply researched book (there are 100 pages of footnotes), Kramer and Mitchell re-write the story by using a range of sources, including newly discovered and extensive correspondence between A. J. Andrews and the Acting Minister of Justice in the Dominion government, Arthur
Meighen. The Citizens emerge from the shadows to play a critical role in a multi-sided interaction among three levels of government, police, militia, the courts, and the strikers.

There were not a thousand Citizens; only thirty-four had any real voice, and a much smaller number took decisions for the group. Key to their action was the manipulation of the two federal ministers, Meighen and Gideon Robertson. Six days after the strike began, Andrews led a delegation that met Meighen and Robertson at Fort William and told them that a Bolshevik revolution was in progress in Winnipeg. Andrews persuaded Meighen to allow him to “represent” the federal government in Winnipeg, and Andrews interpreted the mandate to his own advantage, styling himself as the agent of government. Andrews persuaded Meighen to revise the amendment to the Immigration Act to allow the deportation of British-born strikers. He drafted Mayor Gray’s proclamation against parades. When a negotiated settlement to the strike seemed possible he intervened to limit the risk of anything other than total victory. It was Andrews who ordered the arrest of strike leaders and decided whom to arrest; it was Andrews who led the criminal prosecution of strike leaders, despite the fact that the administration of criminal justice was a provincial responsibility. It was Andrews who ordered that the Western Labour News be shut down. For these and many other services Andrews submitted a claim for substantial legal fees to the federal government. When the state trembled and politicians hesitated to deploy the full force of military and legal power, Andrews and other leaders of the Citizens used their influence to revive fears and stiffen spines.

Do Kramer and Mitchell overstate the case for Citizens’ influence? I do not think so, for they acknowledge that politicians and judges were willing to be persuaded by men who shared the Citizens’ values and class position. Furthermore, the authors situate the influence of Andrews and his colleagues in a context that frames actions and events. This book is about ideology, rhetoric, and the successful deployment of shared languages of rule. The Citizens’ rhetoric of counter-revolution had roots in religion, in concepts of British liberty going back to Hobbes and Locke, in a nineteenth-century idiom of
honour, and in the ideology of the self-made man. The rhetoric of “citizen” was both a camouflage, concealing class interest, and a weapon, counter-posing the British subject to its “alien” enemy. In the pages of the *Winnipeg Citizen*, which we now know to have been edited by two leaders of the Citizens’ Committee, the Citizens directed their rhetorical campaign and sought to shape the historical record as events unfolded. And here too they achieved some success, compelling the strikers to respond with their own defence of British liberties and constitutional rights.

This book endows the story of the strike with fresh doses of irony. The name—Citizens’ Committee of One Thousand—reflects the principle that the less inclusive the group, the more inclusive the name. Private citizens who accused workers of fomenting revolution and usurping the powers of the state were themselves assuming the name and mantle of the state, and were paid for doing so. The defenders of freedom suppressed newspapers and sent public speakers to jail. Legislation designed to facilitate immigration was used to deport people. The ironies are embedded in the history of a social and political order working its way through an acute crisis. The crisis ended in 1919, but the battle over rights, liberties and the meaning of the strike would continue long after the events of that year. The history of that distant conflict is now up-dated for the early twenty-first century, in a study that should be read by all Canadians who seek to understand our country and its evolving relations between state and citizen.

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