

Doug Owram,

*Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby-Boom Generation*  
(Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1996)

Doug Owram has written an intelligent and interesting work which tells us much not only about his subject, the baby-boom generation in Canada from 1945 to 1973, but also about certain aspects of Canadian historiography. Owram begins his account with the end of the Second World War, and the postwar ideology of marriage and home, and moves on to discuss childcare theory, the suburban background, childhood leisure, and the vastly expanded education system of the fifties. He then goes on to discuss the cult of the teenager, the rise of sixties counter-culture and political radicalism, the sexual revolution and the fading of the sixties' promise. He concludes "the most striking thing about the story of the baby-boomers is that their great historical moment came before most of them were twenty-one. The generation that took so much pride in its youth now looks back with a degree of nostalgia to the time when all things lay before it and all things seemed possible." (315)

There has been little work on the sixties in Canada, and Owram's work does help fill an historiographical gap. There is no over-riding dynamic or theory in his work, except for the demographic reasons that began and end the baby-boom caesura (311), as well as expanded schools and universities. His account of the drug culture is balanced, in the way it criticises both anti-drug forces for failing to make important distinctions between various narcotics, and the young for ignoring drugs' real dangers. (202) In the same way, his accounts of the sexual revolution and the student left are neither gratuitously harsh nor falsely euphoric. The general tone is one of sober moderation, which largely presents the boomers as objects rather than subjects of their own lives. But there are three limitations in Owram's account. First, there is the foreshortened discussion of who the boomers actually were. Second, comparison with the United States, a recurrent theme throughout the book, is never fully engaged. Third, larger issues of the baby-boom generation are not thoroughly examined.

In the preface Owram defines the baby boom by its numbers, its affluence, and its radicalism. (x-xi) This therefore leaves out the non-wealthy and the non-radical (and, for that matter, the non-secular), and by his emphasis on suburbia leaves out not only the non-urban, but also the immigrant Canadian as well. Like all too many English-Canadian historians, he has not written a truly national story. "I cannot pretend, however, that this book has anything other than an English-Canadian perspective or focus." (xiv) Nor are regional differences carefully elucidated.

Part of this problem comes from Owram's sources. Much of it consists of newspaper and magazine articles, polls and government documents. There are child-care articles and plans for education reform, most of it based on American thinkers. There are sources from Scouts' magazines and religious papers in the brief discussion of those topics, while the chapters on youth radicalism rely on newspapers, student journals and the minutes of a number of select groups. The problem is that there has not been enough research for Owram to synthesize, with the consequence that youth tend to be viewed through this essentially middle-class lens. This is not to confirm or deny that a more thorough discussion of "limited identities" would have dramatically altered Owram's picture. But in places the absences are disconcerting. There are mentions of French-Canadian nationalism, and the Canadian nationalism of the student left, but there is no discussion of the wider process by which young Canadians felt they were part of a common and distinctly separate country. Politics tends to be ignored until sexy campus radicalism arrives, and it is defined in generational terms whose relevance after 1973 quickly dissipates.

There is also limited discussion of how young Canadians differed from young Americans. One of the problems with the book arises from the fact that it often has to piggyback on studies of the United States. No doubt this is because much of what happened to Canadian youth strongly resembled the experiences of American youth in many ways. If Owram's account of how Canadians encountered television (90-92), or toys (96-99) or rock and roll (152-56) is basically similar to how Americans encountered them (only that it happened slightly later) this is probably because this is what actually happened. The result does seem, like the discussion of youth culture (140), movie going (151) and delinquency (144-49), to be a discussion based on American books and events, garnished with a few editorials and polls. (144-49) But in these respects it would be foolish to deny the obvious convergences.

The problem that arises is that the scarcity of Canadian research requires the use of American experiences and sources. But because this is not a comparative history of the two countries, there are places where one expects contrasts and does not find them. The chapter on suburbia (54-83) cites the major American works, but it does not discuss the differences between the two countries' experience. It is of some importance for the fate of youth politics in both countries that in Canada the suburb was not the cornerstone of radical quarantine, and that the Progressive Conservatives were decisively beaten there in all four sixties elections. Owram notes that the sixties saw a collapse in Christian hegemony in Canada, but does not ask why this was not so marked as it was in the United States. More discussion of secularization would have been useful.

There are important books by American scholars on post-war domesticity, the rise of homophobia, pre-sixties experiences of premarital sex, abortion and unwed motherhood. But because there has been so little work done on Canadian experiences, Owram's treatment of these subjects is very brief. (18-20, 264) In a similar way, his work does not discuss many of the larger theoretical issues. The increase in sexual liberalization and mass culture are addressed with little with little analysis of the larger spiritual and psychic issues. Significantly, Christopher Lasch is mentioned only once (59); as Owram cites the title of *Haven in a Heartless World* with seemingly little appreciation of Lasch's irony. Matters of intellectual influence are also problematic. Owram writes about the debates on the treatment of children (34-45) and educational pedagogy (123-35) without the kind of research which would fully measure their influence. He is confined by his magazine sources *Maclean's*, *Chatelaine* and *Saturday Night*. The result is that Owram says that the new pedagogy was more liberal, somewhat more "child-centered" and that it spread a more liberal attitude among children. This, combined with Canada's increasing affluence, encouraged the optimism of youth. (134-35) This is not so much true, as truish, and also somewhat vague. Overall, *Born at the Right Time* reveals much, but nothing so much as the limitations of a certain stage in Canadian historiography.

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