

Cynthia R. Comacchio. *The Infinite Bonds of Family: Domesticity in Canada, 1850-1940.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. Pp. 180.

As part of the Themes in Canadian Social History Series, edited by Craig Heron and Franca Iacovetta, Cynthia Comacchio's highly readable and incisively interpreted analysis of the place and importance of family in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canadian history is a welcome addition to the historiography on this subject. This first historical overview of domestic life in Canada is intended primarily for the undergraduate student, but it will also be useful as a general introduction to the field. Consistent with its expected clientele, the text is not broken with notes, and bibliographic considerations are reserved for an accessible concluding essay.

In an attempt to chart the similarities and changes over the course of this near-century, Comacchio elucidates two significant continuities: first, the persistent belief that the family was in crisis, however differently that crisis was defined; and second, the notion that the best solution for that crisis was a family model based on the gender-defined, male-breadwinner ideal. As she clearly demonstrates, the fit between ideal and reality was profoundly influenced by class, occupational status of the family head, geographic region, ethnic background, race, and time period. Within these major patterns of domestic formation, however, Comacchio identifies four notable influences which reconfigured domestic relations in Canada during this period: economic changes and particularly the shift from domestic to factory production; demographic alterations, particularly the decline of family size; changes in the socio-economic status of women; and adjustments in the relationship between the private sphere, in the form of the "family," and the public, in the guise of the "state."

The book identifies a series of "punctuation points" that shook the structure of the family over three general periods. But rather than making the crisis of any given period the focus of examination, Comacchio prefers to seek the long-range repercussions of change on the family. In the first of these periods, beginning approximately in 1850, pioneer society developed a form of government which took on an increasingly interventionist role in moulding the new citizenry. Married women were slowly deprived of their previously central role in domestic production as the model of the male breadwinner slowly took hold. So too did the close association become imbedded between childhood and

schooling, and adolescence with familial dependence. This middle-class family model became a “benchmark of personal respectability and national success” (p. 47). A second period, from the beginning of World War One to the beginning of the Great Depression in the late 1920s, saw the modernization of the Canadian family when it fell heir to increasingly interventionist edicts as the state sought to protect its most vulnerable elements. Despite a period of great instability, including the rise and fall of the era’s western populist party, a declining birth rate, the rise of “the girl of the new day,” the role of advertising and mass media images in determining new formulae for manliness and femininity, and demonstrably inadequate means to reintegrate soldiers into mainstream Canadian society, the family continued to transmute through a higher marriage rate, a lower birth rate, and distinct regional differences. A third period extended from the 1930s to the beginning of the Second World War. Many Canadian families experienced searing distress as they struggled merely to survive the economic challenges of the era.

As she does for all periods, Comacchio ably surveys the impact of the depression on all members of the family: many men lost their “provider” role, reducing them to a transient lifestyle in search of work, or to that of a “voluntary spectator” in a domestic realm with which they were largely unfamiliar; women were forced out of the home into breadwinner positions, changing their routines and identities; children lost the luxury of an irresponsible childhood; adolescents found themselves “trapped in a limbo of frustrated expectations”; and the fearfully insecure elderly were ever closer to the line between dignified life and impoverishment.

Comacchio manages to ground her analysis in a wide secondary literature, a large number of revealing profiles, illuminating primary sources, and the historiographic debates in the field, all in about 150 pages. One of the particular values of this gracefully written book is the author’s concern to trace the intersections of family and national history in Canada, with a special view of the many metaphorical meanings of family as it has co-existed with and challenged other fundamental institutions in Canadian society. One of these institutions, of course, was the educational system, both formal and informal. She successfully argues that the family is imbued with more symbolic importance than most of our institutions, however, operating as the site of our earliest experiences and the wellspring of many of our deepest emotions.

A second achievement of her book is the degree of inclusivity in terms of regional, racial, and ethnic representation. Comacchio

outlines the conventional political and economic changes associated with each period, and thereafter interprets these changes through the experiences of majority and selected marginalized groups, contrasting their perceptions and experiences. Hence, not all sectors are treated in any given period or crisis, and yet those who experienced the greatest privilege or penalty at the hands of political edict or economic downturn are discussed, often in contrast to the ideal presented during that age. For example, Comacchio notes that widespread concerns amongst civic leaders about the poor or “disorganized” family, particularly during periods when families were unable to maintain themselves independently, readily convinced them to supplant parents whose family constructions were thought to be deficient and in need of remediation. She points out that amendments to the Indian Act in 1895 made school attendance compulsory for all Indian children under sixteen, with most being sent to industrial or boarding schools. That the uprooting of children from their families was accompanied by pain and even violence was ignored on the assumption that inadequate familial models would be supplanted by improved versions, somehow offered in institutional settings. This official approach with First Nations children and their families was further refined with other sectors of the population when the state took an intrusive role with poor and immigrant families, setting standards for effective parenting and a proper home life. In so doing, the state defined minimum legal, economic, and moral standards for child welfare, health, education, and behaviour, and, ultimately, the ideal citizen. It also resulted in a change of rhetorical focus from parental rights to parental responsibilities and children’s rights. While this change fundamentally reoriented public conceptions of familial duties, the actual degree of state involvement through much of this period was limited. However, the stage was set for increasing amounts of government bureaucratization that would permit this rhetoric to be realized more fully by the Second World War.

It should be clear that this is a work of considerable merit, and of obvious use at several levels of the educational enterprise. The only major concern to be noted is one of editorial policy applying to the entire series. The lack of textual notes, while improving flow, makes the charting of historiographic positions difficult to follow, and even the secondary literature appear disconnected as noteworthy historians are invisible within the academic debates. Nevertheless, this current, balanced, and sensitively rendered

source will be very useful to those teaching social history or the history of the family.

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Marie-Paule Malouin (dir.). *L'univers des enfants en difficulté au Québec entre 1940 et 1960*. Montréal: Bellarmin, 1996. 458 p.

La recherche confiée à Marie-Paule Malouin a été commandée en 1992 par la Conférence religieuse canadienne—région du Québec, en réaction aux récriminations des orphelins internés à l'intérieur des établissements de prise en charge de l'enfance malheureuse dirigés par des communautés religieuses au cours des décennies 1940 et 1950. Elle aura finalement permis la réalisation d'une première synthèse portant sur une réalité récente difficile encore largement inexplorée par les historiens et historiennes. Globalement, l'étude visait à éclairer le contexte dans lequel ont évolué les responsables de cette prise en charge. Un immense défi pour l'équipe de recherche qui a dû composer avec des matériaux fragmentaires, les travaux déjà réalisés, et combler les lacunes par la consultation de documents d'archives. Idéalement, la reconstitution devait permettre « à la société québécoise de progresser dans sa perception des plus démunis et dans la mise en œuvre de moyens de leur venir en aide » (p.13).

Soucieuse de réaliser, malgré l'évidente visée défensive de la commande, une analyse objective des interventions des acteurs concernés, l'auteure a abordé le sujet sous une triple perspective. D'abord celle des relations entre l'Église et l'État, les deux institutions se partageant la responsabilité des enfants abandonnés; puis, celle des rapports entre les classes sociales, les jeunes assistés appartenant majoritairement aux groupes les plus défavorisés. Enfin, la dynamique des relations entre les sexes constitue le troisième axe envisagé pour expliquer l'état des pratiques observées dans les établissements d'intervention auprès de l'enfance en difficulté entre 1940 et 1960. Mentionnons d'emblée que le recours à cette perspective élargie n'est certainement pas superflu, puisque la multiplicité des acteurs impliqués et des enjeux