

## *The Queer Evangelist: A Socialist Clergy's Radically Honest Tale* by Cheri DiNovo

Devon Harding

Volume 114, numéro 1, spring 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088112ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1088112ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

### ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce compte rendu

Harding, D. (2022). Compte rendu de [*The Queer Evangelist: A Socialist Clergy's Radically Honest Tale* by Cheri DiNovo]. *Ontario History*, 114(1), 120–122.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1088112ar>

and the generations of criss-crossing communication which can make it difficult to follow. Some parts lack a narrative flow as the authors attempts to do justice to the minutia of their many materials—but the number of direct quotes taken from letters, articles, and stories does make some parts difficult to follow.

Kröller is to be commended for her exploration of the gendered relationships between family members and other intimate connections are well-explored in this book, specifically gender related to schooling, travel and career choices. She took on a monumental task to synthesize an enormous amount of material and pull out cohesive themes for each section, and yet she

still managed to include an intersectional lens to her analysis. A reoccurring theme that emerges in the author's exploration of the McIlwraith family is their emerging and evolving relationship with conceptions of empire—the author's engagement with this topic is admirable and ambitious. Each of the chapters could likely be a book in their own right, as it is clear that the author is incredibly familiar with the mass of materials which remain on the McIlwraith family and managed to tell a fascinating and nuanced story of family and empire.

Victoria Seta Cosby  
 Doctoral Candidate, History Department,  
 Queen's University

## *The Queer Evangelist* *A Socialist Clergy's Radically Honest Tale*

By Cheri DiNovo

Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2021, 212 pages. \$29.99 hardcover, \$15.99 e-book.  
 ISBN 978-1-77112-489-8 (hardcover), 978-1-77112-490-4 (EPUB) (<https://www.wlupress.wlu.ca/>)

Towards the end of Cheri DiNovo's *The Queer Evangelist: A Socialist Clergy's Radically Honest Tale*, the author writes that "leaving politics is like getting clean from methadrine—and I can compare... Everything seems more important than perhaps it is." (185) Indeed, this autobiography, split roughly evenly between DiNovo's life as a private citizen and career with the United Church and her long career in politics, could be summed up as a meditation on separating true personal and political reform from

an exhausting and traumatic sea of noise. DiNovo's story recounts everything from childhood abuse, to time spent living on the streets of Toronto, a period which provided the skills to thrive as a business woman in the '80s, her pursuit of (Christian) ministry, and her time as a New Democratic Party Member of Provincial Parliament. DiNovo passed more LGBTQ+ bills than any other Canadian politician, was a master of navigating backroom politics and grassroots activism, and was undermined by both external



smear campaigns and from within her own party. The comparison is apt, and DiNovo's ability to separate important victories and political takeaways from the noise reads less as the presentation of academic facts and more as a philosophical and theological exploration of surviving public service. It is, as it says on the tin, an honest tale.

It is also queer. This text asks the reader to "do the impossible," forcing a capitalist system to create victories through grassroots support and commitment to one's values. (207). DiNovo is queering a political process which she describes as undemocratic and which inspires defeatism in candidates from all parties. Worse, it is one in which "some 23-year-olds and the leader" guide left wing parties with a victory-or-nothing fatalism that prevents socialist ideas from seeing the light of day. (125) DiNovo's goal is to present a guide to reform while rejecting the very concept of all or nothing thinking, whether in a 'keep it realistic' liberalism or more revolutionary vein. "Like this tale of one woman's life, reforms are not nothing... We can hold two truths together: reform and revolution." (207) Her constant suggestions to NDP leadership that they support worker control of key industries lends her commitment to this balancing act quite a bit of credit. *The Queer Evangelist* does more than what it says on the tin, queering not just evangelism but party politics and socialist absolutism itself. DiNovo's point, delivered with humor and stark honesty, is that "winning or nothing means nothing, not even winning." (153) Whether or not readers agree with her approach to political praxis, the text's account of success without power will inspire reflection.

*The Queer Evangelist* is not a complete history of queer Toronto or of the negotiations which led to legislation such as the \$10 minimum wage or Toby's Law. DiNovo dis-

cusses many political victories and failures from her long career in provincial politics, but always from within her own perspective, reflecting the core lessons of her life as she remembers them rather than getting lost in a political play by play. These lessons are often centered around quotations from both colleagues from all parties and famous thinkers. More often these are from scripture, such as Matthew 5:11-13: "Blessed are you when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you," a verse which is used to tie the biographic and philosophical themes of the book together throughout. (93) The titular honesty of the book lies in the way DiNovo ties her religious, queer, traumatic, and political experiences into a single canvas: "At my queerest I'm a person of faith. At my most faithful I'm most queer. There's no separation." (196) *The Queer Evangelist* approaches the problem of biographic history by radically accepting its personal nature. While full of historical detail, DiNovo is more concerned with passing down approaches to finding purpose in a struggle with faith and class politics than she is in advancing any academic theory. DiNovo sometimes appear to be writing to young, often queer, often poor readers with a deep respect for their political awareness, after all, she was once that reader. She clearly interacts with them more as a minister than most academics do from behind a desk. It is part theology, part guidebook, part memoir, and I don't think it could have been written any other way. A more traditional history would say far less.

*The Queer Evangelist* offers a mix of political wisdom, frank social history, and theology that reads with the same propulsion as any great airport paperback. DiNovo has written a deeply personal history mixed with a treatise on finding personal and political hope. It somehow manages to remain grounded and with good humor.

It's the type of book that can only be written by someone having gone through the experiences it describes, and not by an outside observer. It might be best read by one of those backroom 23-year-olds, making topics that many understand only intellectually—the transfer of credit from women to men, the grind of party politics, the experience of homeless queer youth—a bit more real. In the present political moment, it also provides two challenging themes.

The first, that reform and revolution don't need to be contradictory, and the latter "the joy of sin," that "we're all joyously fallible traumatized, wanting humans. If we are loved by anyone and love anyone, our lives include holiness." If unconditional love and unconditional progress are DiNo-vo's evangelism, then *The Queer Evangelist* reads as very radical indeed.

Devon Harding

## *1968 in Canada*

### *A Year and Its Legacies*

By Michael K. Hawes, Andrew C. Holman, and Christopher Kirkey, eds.

Ottawa: Canadian Museum of History and University of Ottawa Press, 2021. 400 pages. \$49.95 cloth ISBN: 9780776636603. \$29.95 Paper ISBN: 9780776636597. ([press.uottawa.ca](http://press.uottawa.ca))

In an international context, the year 1968 looms large, filled with iconic images such as the Prague Spring, the Paris general strike, and political assassinations in the United States. But was this year quite so transformational and potent for Canada? It was a question I grappled with several years ago when I was asked to do a Canadian week for a team-taught graduate course focused on events of that year. My focus on Trudeaumania and the St-Jean-Baptiste Day riot seemed to pale next to what my colleagues covered. As co-editor of the *Canadian Historical Review*, I posited the notion that perhaps the year 1969 was Canada's 1968, given the degree of political and social tumult of that year. After all, the key events listed in Bryan Palmer's article about Canada's 1968 for the *American Historical Review* were mostly from 1969, not 1968. The authors who contributed to the special *Historical Perspectives* section about 1969 in the June 2019 *CHR* issue, though, while noting the importance of

key events from 1969, also emphasized the importance of longer-term changes and continuities, and questioned the utility of thinking of a year as a turning point.

It was with this background that I approached this edited collection about Canada's 1968, the product of a 2018 conference at the Canadian Museum of History. The editors and authors started from the premise that, globally, 1968 was an extraordinary year, unlike any other in its activities and significance; a year filled with momentous decisions and actions with far-reaching consequences. But Canada of 1968, they argue, was also a nation in ferment, in the process of remaking itself, its institutions, and its identities, establishing new ways of communicating and new approaches to dealing with the international world. But to what extent was Canada's 1968 akin to the tumultuous year experienced in so many societies around the world? Did that particular year matter as much to Canada as it did to other coun-