

Uniting in Measures of Common Good: The Construction of Liberal Identities in Central Canada, 1830-1900 By Darren Ferry

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Volume 102, Number 1, Spring 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065606ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065606ar>

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Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

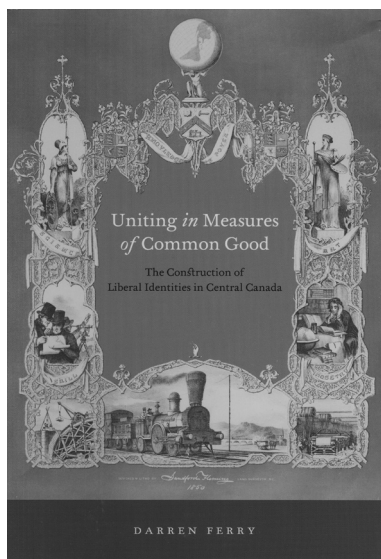
0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

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Cite this review

Heaman, E. (2010). Review of [*Uniting in Measures of Common Good: The Construction of Liberal Identities in Central Canada, 1830-1900* By Darren Ferry]. *Ontario History*, 102(1), 134–135. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065606ar>



*Uniting in Measures of Common Good:
The Construction of Liberal Identities
in Central Canada, 1830-1900*

By Darren Ferry

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008. ix + 433 pages. \$85.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-0-7735-3423-0 (www.mqup.ca)

Since the publication in 2000 of Ian McKay's important article on "the liberal order framework" in Canada, historians have been investigating the

argues, social, political, and religious conflicts always simmered below the surface and thwarted wider adherence. The interest in Ferry's story lies in the way that the different voluntary associations dealt with the gap between their rhetoric of inclusion and their growing recognition that they represented only part of the community. In that recognition lay a realization that the liberal dream of classlessness was illusory.

workings of liberalism during its nineteenth-century heyday. One of the most important social institutions of that liberalism was, without a doubt, the voluntary association, and in *Uniting in Measures of Common Good* Darren Ferry investigates how such was the case. The importance of voluntary associations to the emergence of "democratic sociability" and the overthrow of the old, exclusive Tory Establishment has already been written up by Jeffrey McNairn. Here, Ferry carries the story further, to the end of the nineteenth century, in an attempt to explain the heyday and the eventual decline of liberalism from causes both internal and external to these associations.

Each voluntary association had its own history. Ferry starts with the Mechanics' Institutes: organizations for self-improvement amongst workers. He found that they ultimately served white-collar workers better than workingmen, who dropped away, and rural communities better than urban ones. Like all the institutions studied here, Mechanics' Institutes aimed to bolster community spirit and ennobled labour by holding evening classes and public lectures, and setting up reading rooms. The Guelph Mechanics' Institute summed up its goals in 1860 as follows: to diffuse scientific enquiry and useful knowledge, and to encourage literary taste and morality.

Ferry examines only the truly liberal associations, those with intentions approaching universal appeal and access. Scholars must look elsewhere for accounts of those organized around ethnicity, class, gender or other special qualities. Ferry's selected associations projected themselves as microcosms of liberal society, recapitulating within themselves the strengths and tensions of the larger community. But, Ferry

Regarding temperance societies, Ferry focuses on their efforts to redirect consumer inclinations towards respectability and prosperity and away from vice and poverty. Labour *and* temperance, as well as insurance were, according to Ferry, the core concerns of mutual benefit societies like the Oddfellows and these, he concludes, were the most successful architects of functioning communities, and persisted well into

the twentieth century.

Agricultural societies boasted that they represented not just the farmer but, rather, the whole community, understanding it to be primarily dependent on agriculture for its wealth. But the gap between farmers' interests and those served by economic legislation was too wide to sustain the fiction. Still, agricultural societies persisted, thanks to public sponsorship, but by the late nineteenth century Patrons of Husbandry and Patrons of Industry had emerged. These organizations also claimed universal access, but were aimed primarily at serving the economic interests of producers through co-operative commerce. Liberal critics denounced such organizations as reflecting a "selfish corporatism," comparable to trade unionism.

Lastly, Ferry surveys what he calls a feast of popular scientific and literary societies. These also initially aimed at offering universal membership, but they tended to evolve into specialized professional organizations. The Royal Society of Canada, founded in 1882, was at the head of this group; it was an organization that Goldwin Smith denounced as elitist and illiberal.

There is much rich social history in *Uniting in Measures of Common Good*, and many complex and sometimes poignant confrontations between individuals and theories. Not all are adequately spelled out, however. For example, Ferry writes for a readership already fairly well acquainted with nineteenth-century liberalism. Henry George and his single tax theory are frequently invoked as fodder for discussion within voluntary associations, but the reader will not learn the content of George's theory here. Also, the lack of a basic definition of liberalism itself undermines the rigour of his claims about that liberalism. Nearly all his ideologues insisted that hard work was intrinsic to human dignity. Ferry claims that this association be-

tween work and dignity was a liberal precept but it seems to this reviewer rather more deep-rooted within ordinary identities than that. In other respects, Ferry's neglect of the larger world within which these associations functioned weakens his account. He does not tell us, for example, about the commercialization of leisure late in the nineteenth century, a material change that undermined the soirées, berry picnics and other means of raising money that nearly all these societies relied upon. Political partisanship also requires more attention than Ferry gives it. Political parties were voluntary—and theoretically universal—societies, and he notes that most of these strove, in principle, to rise above political partisanship. But in practice not all succeeded, and proximity to political or economic power could probably account for many subscriptions. Because Ferry studies the stated purposes of voluntary associations but not their membership, their political importance remains unclear. Darren Ferry is a talented historian and I hope that his next work will carry the analysis more squarely into the material, as well as the rhetorical, contradictions within Canadian liberalism.

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