Ontario History

Be Wise! Be Healthy! Morality and Citizenship in Canadian Public Health Campaigns by Catherine Carstairs, Bethany Philpott, and Sara Wilmshurst

Sarah Glassford

Volume 111, Number 2, Fall 2019

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065090ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1065090ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)
The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN
0030-2953 (print)
2371-4654 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this review
Alexander makes a powerful argument about the need to consider Canadian history in a larger imperial and global context. Overall, *Guiding Modern Girls* makes an important contribution to the field of Canadian history and is an example of how ethnographic, transnational, and childhood studies allow scholars to consider the intersections of norms and lived experiences, read into archival silences, and critically consider power structures that continue to hold so much power in our lives.

Andrea Eidinger  
University of British Columbia/Unwritten Histories

**Be Wise! Be Healthy!**  
*Morality and Citizenship in Canadian Public Health Campaigns*  
By Catherine Carstairs, Bethany Philpott, and Sara Wilmshurst

*Be Wise! Be Healthy!* is an exemplary work of collaborative scholarship that traces the history of a single voluntary public health organization from the 1920s to the 1970s. Under the direction of Dr. Gordon Bates, the Health League of Canada aspired to national prominence, although the authors show it to have instead been Toronto-centric with its most significant impact limited to Ontario. The League was smaller and less prominent than other contemporary public health organizations, but authors Catherine Carstairs, Bethany Philpott, and Sara Wilmshurst argue that it punched above its weight, becoming “one of Canada’s leading organizations promoting public health” (4), and therefore worthy of historical study.

The organization was created in 1919 as the Canadian National Council for Combatting Venereal Disease, its mandate limited to sexually-transmitted infections (STIs). In 1922 it was renamed the Canadian Social Hygiene Council and began to engage in broader health education efforts. The early twentieth-century concept of “social hygiene” most often referred to the mobilization of morality and technical expertise around issues of STIs, prostitution, and sex education, but it could also include interventions in the areas of nutrition, maternal education, alcoholism, and intellectual disabilities (5). By 1935 the
name “Health League of Canada” seemed a better fit for the group’s ever-broadening mandate, but Carstairs, Philpott, and Wilmshurst argue that the morality associated with its early STI and social hygiene work persisted throughout the organization’s history.

Eight thematic chapters explore the nuances of specific health issues or campaigns undertaken by the League, including STIs and sex education, childhood immunization (especially diphtheria), pasteurization and tuberculosis, workplace health including exercise, leisure, mental health, and absenteeism, water fluoridation and dental health. These are bookended by an introduction and conclusion that address the larger context for the League and the influence of founder Gordon Bates. Because there is significant chronological overlap (and some similarity of campaigns) between the chapters, this is a book best enjoyed in small doses, dipped into as needed for research or teaching purposes. The chapters are especially well-suited for adoption on course reading lists, since they can be read in isolation from the larger history of the Health League as case studies in the perceptions of certain diseases or approaches to public health intervention, and include descriptions and close readings of health promotion materials such as films, posters, and pamphlets. The text occasionally gets bogged down in description where a more sophisticated analysis would be preferable, but overall the authors provide sufficient context and thought-provoking insights into each individual public health issue they address.

The resulting portrait of an organization and its work cries out for comparison with other Canadian public health agencies active in the same period. For instance, I was repeatedly struck by the many similarities between the Health League and the Canadian Red Cross, which has been one focus of my own research. Both began as Toronto-based voluntary organizations with national aspirations; both were founded by white male physicians whose medical expertise, personal networks, and drive to advance a pet cause spurred early growth and success; and both expanded beyond their initial single-issue preoccupation, taking up a wide variety of public health causes. Highly active from the 1920s to the 1970s, both organizations emphasized prevention, education, and individual behavioural modification as the keys to better health, and framed good health as a core duty of Canadian citizenship, an approach Carstairs, Philpott, and Wilmshurst call “health citizenship” (9-10). Both had difficult relationships with federated fundraising organizations. The two agencies even shared similar approaches to certain issues: in the 1930s health promotion articles that originally appeared in Health (the Health League’s magazine) were sometimes reprinted in the Canadian Red Cross Junior children’s magazine—a testament to the wide influence the authors claim for the Health League.

Despite these many similarities, the trajectories of the two organizations were wildly different. The Canadian Red Cross became a truly national body, and one of Canada’s leading voluntary organizations, quickly outgrowing its founder. The Health League did not manage to do any of those things. Some reasons for the difference rest with the Red Cross: after 1919 its mandate was even broader than the Health League’s, its public health work subsidized in part by the interest (manifest in volunteers and donations) generated by its wartime and disaster relief efforts. But equally important are factors specific to the Health League itself, easily summarized in one name: Gordon Bates. As
In *Levelling the Lake: Transboundary Resource Management in the Lake of the Woods Watershed*, Jamie Benidickson explores the last one hundred and fifty years of resource exploitation in the watershed, the environmental consequences of that exploitation, as well as institutional responses to environmental change. The book begins in the late nineteenth century with the newly formed settler state of Canada obtaining lands from the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) and negotiating Treaty #3 with the Anishinabeg to secure territorial access (5, 11). The resulting intergovernmental struggle between Canada and Ontario for control over resources on treaty lands helps to frame the watershed as a heavily contested and “complex transboundary setting” (xxx-iii). From this “complex” starting point, Benidickson traces struggles over the highly valuable sturgeon fisheries, forests, minerals, and water resources between Canada and the United States; Ontario, Manitoba, and Minnesota; and, between government