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Harris, Richard. *Creeping Conformity: How Canada Became Suburban, 1900-1960*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. Pp. x, 204. Illustrations. \$19.95. Paper

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Washington and New York, as well as a number of other towns in between, but Radforth gives pretty short shrift to the activities there, as his main purpose was to examine the BNA experience.

Royal Spectacle can also be read against the work of a number of other cultural studies of public demonstrations and street drama, and actually stands up quite well in their company. It is a thoroughly researched and well-written account of a phenomenon that would assume a regularity that has been instrumental in the past century and a half in prompting all manner of urban redevelopment as communities gather together their best faces to greet a constant stream of royals.

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Harris, Richard. *Creeping Conformity: How Canada Became Suburban, 1900–1960*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. Pp. x, 204. Illustrations. \$19.95. Paper.

In his many studies of building and developing the urban fringe, Richard Harris has helped define our understanding of twentieth-century suburbs. *Creeping Conformity*, part of the University of Toronto Press's "Themes in Canadian History" series, crystallizes his own considerable research efforts and those of other scholars. The result is impressive: clear and concise enough to be useful for undergraduates, comprehensive and comparative enough to appeal to specialists, and apt to save the life of any young professor churning out lectures for undergraduate surveys. *Creeping Conformity* is, in sum, an excellent example of why this series (mainly aimed at undergraduate readers) is so useful.

Harris tackles three main themes with varying levels of depth and detail. The most developed traces the shift from diversity to uniformity on the urban fringe. Early in the century, the suburbs were not one place but four (affluent enclaves, unplanned suburbs of self-built working-class homes, industrial suburbs, and middle-class subdivisions), each relatively homogenous in itself but forming a diverse urban fringe in the aggregate. In some form, then, suburban life was open to a wide range of Canadians. By 1960, a more uniform and generic suburbia replaced this early diversity. Large corporate developers now designed whole neighbourhoods and sold the suburban dream to heavily indebted middle-income families.

State policy, Harris argues, encouraged this trend. With some instructive international comparisons, Harris shows how, from the 1930s, the federal state largely ignored cooperative, public, and aided self-help (government support of owner-builders) efforts in favour of the *Dominion Housing Act* regime, which aimed to revive the building industry (rather than to create cheap and decent housing) through large institutional lenders and government-guaranteed mortgages. Combined with new municipal zoning regulations, new requirements for servicing neighbourhoods, and other policy innovations, governments encouraged corporations to create largely uniform suburbs on

the fringes of most Canadian cities. By 1960, this form of development was so powerful that it influenced language: Canadians began to speak of "the suburban experience," a generic meaning unthinkable in the early decades of the century.

Harris is interested in more than building and developing. His second main theme is the relationship between "house and home, place and people," blending an urbanist's focus on form with a social historian's concern for lived experience. To this end, he draws on the work of other scholars to touch on themes like ethnicity and class, neighbourhood organizing and female networks, consumerism, and family privacy. Harris gives such suburban experiences prominent place, although he covers them in less detail than political economy and the building process. His look at suburbanites (a term Harris points out was largely used derisively in popular literature) is best when put in the context of consumerism in chapter seven. Harris argues that a generic suburban lifestyle emerged from the 1920s to the 1950s with the convergence of working-class and middle-class aspirations and with the increasing triumph of consumerism over thrift.

Harris also takes account of the dialogue between critic and advocate of the suburban way of life, sifting through the multiple layers of celebration and lament. He discusses the consequences of suburban development with a refreshingly non-conspiratorial tone, balancing a sense of both intended and unintended consequence. He handles the relationship between marketing and experience deftly, pointing out that developers hardly created the "mortgaged" suburban dream but certainly "profitably nurtured" it through advertising (32). He also punctures simplistic left-wing notions of home-owner conservatism: at least until the 1940s, many suburbs nurtured radical politics. On this score, he has less to say about the postwar period, although even there we should be careful not to read the suburban politics of the 1980s and 1990s back into the 1960s (a topic that needs much more serious research in Canada).

Creeping Conformity is a hard book to criticize. It is only occasionally frustrating, and even then, the reasons are largely out of Harris's hands. This is the case for minor problems (the maps are poorly served by the too-small format of the series) and for larger gaps. When he says "suburban" he largely—though not exclusively—means housing rather than, say, retailing (a popular undergraduate topic). Undergraduates may also want to read more about the nitty-gritty of social experience and about developments after 1960, although Harris makes a convincing case for stopping at that point, when the political economy of more recent suburban development was established. These gaps, however, largely reflect the state of the existing Canadian literature rather than Harris's analytic lens. Overall, *Creeping Conformity* is a concise, accessible, and comprehensive crystallization of what we know about the history of residential suburbs over the twentieth century, written by a scholar who taught us so much of that history in the first place.

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