

## *Radical Ambition: The New Left in Toronto* by Peter Graham and Ian McKay

David Tough

---

Volume 113, Number 2, Fall 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081126ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081126ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

**Publisher(s)**

The Ontario Historical Society

**ISSN**

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

**Cite this review**

Tough, D. (2021). Review of [*Radical Ambition: The New Left in Toronto* by Peter Graham and Ian McKay]. *Ontario History*, 113(2), 269–270.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1081126ar>

## *Radical Ambition*

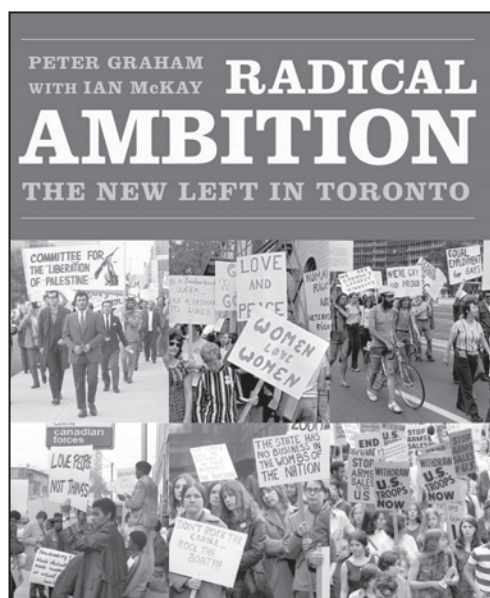
### *The New Left in Toronto*

by Peter Graham and Ian McKay

Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019. 400pp. paperback  
\$35.95 ISBN 9781771134231. (btlbooks.com)

As a teenager growing up in Toronto in the mid-1980s, I worked at my local branch of the Toronto Public Library, marched in demonstrations against cruise missile testing, and even played folk songs on a 12-string acoustic guitar at my school peace assembly. An avid student of the Beatles, the Grateful Dead, and the Flying Burrito Brothers, I understood myself, somewhat uncomfortably, as living otherwise, out-of-joint, in a spectral 1960s amid the synth and neon of the 1980s. My sense of disconnection was premised on a deep cultural and historical chasm between the two neighbouring decades, one authentic and activist, the other phony and greedy. Reading Peter Graham and Ian McKay's *Radical Ambition: The New Left in Toronto*, I begin to think that what I lived was not as separate from the 1960s as it felt. The book, epic in scope and thematic in structure, portrays a Toronto new left, driven by concerns about dehumanization, exploitation, and authenticity, that lasted longer than the 1960s, and touched elements of the city's life we don't readily associate with radical change.

The definition of new left with which the book operates revolves around McKay's concept of living otherwise, expanding activism from a narrow focus on making egalitarian changes in the political and economic sphere to the crafting of lives filled with authentic connection and meaning. But Graham and McKay find this approach to politics in some unexpected places. There is, to be sure, lots of detail concerning the



transformation of the Combined Universities Committee for Nuclear Disarmament (CUCND) into the Student Union for Peace Action (SUPA), a shift often seen as the genesis of the new left in Canada, but here as elsewhere throughout the book the point is made that there were people with radical politics and commitments to personal authenticity in both organizations, and beyond, including in the Communist Party of Canada and the various new Leninist organizations that emerged after 1968, in the youth sections of the Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party, as well as in the Black Power and women's liberation movements. It is a very big tent, and no one is excluded *prima facie*.

This approach is sure to bother a lot of people, but it can't be denied that an openness to following ideas into unexpected places yields Graham and McKay exciting results. The discussion of left nationalism, for example, is impressively non-perfunctory, focusing primarily on the Waffle faction of the NDP but touching on Walter Gor-

don and on various Liberals, hearing out the idea's critics without conceding their points. A favourite section of mine weighs the influence of George Grant's *Lament for a Nation*, concluding ultimately that solidarity with national liberation movements (particularly Cuba's) contributed more to new leftists' nationalism than Grant's tragic Toryism, which was mainly useful for attracting allies from outside the left. I don't find myself completely convinced, but it's an interesting question and it's approached thoughtfully, with ample evidence. I expect other readers will have a similar reaction to other sections of the book, and be impressed by the depth of engagement the authors give these arguably passing points.

Partly because the narrative extends well beyond the 1960s, *Radical Ambition's* understanding of the new left isn't tethered completely to youth. It engages with the promise and threat offered by educated middle-class professionals, especially academics, but also librarians and social workers, in challenging the status quo. A particularly vivid example is the 1970 burglary and arson of the offices of Praxis, a kind of new left think tank focusing on questions of poverty and participatory democracy, that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police had investigated, and right-wing journalist Peter Worthington had pilloried, as a source of

potential trouble. Battles over the Spadina Expressway and the city's neighbourhood public libraries, as well as schools and colleges, theatre and the visual arts, are examined in terms of their new left resonance, alongside detailed accounts of the vagaries of various far left organizations through the 1970s and early 1980s.

*Radical Ambition* is undoubtedly exhaustively researched, and highly ambitious in its breadth. Nearly every page is filled with untold stories and remarkable insights. The range of sites it takes seriously as places of politics is awesome, and its insistence on examining their interconnections is undeniably fruitful. But the book is too long. It's often unclear, especially in the first chapter, when readers are deciding whether to stick with it, what it's going to be about. It is not quite encyclopedic in its scope, but it's also not entirely a coherent narrative. Being broad is important to its thesis; the capaciousness of its idea of its subject is central to its laudable politics. But the length of the book and the looseness of its argument makes it less useful to scholars and teachers and less accessible to non-scholars hoping to understand the new left, than a volume half its size would have been.

David Tough  
Trent University

### *Not for King or Country*

*Edward Cecil-Smith, the Communist Party of Canada, and the Spanish Civil War*

by Tyler Wentzell

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 368 pages. \$29.96  
Paper. ISBN 9781487522889 (utorontopress.com)

Tyler Wentzell's *Not for King or Country* is a fascinating biography of overlooked historical figure Edward Cecil-Smith. So-

cialist turned soldier, Cecil-Smith served in the Spanish Civil War, helped found the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, and