

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Levitt, Cyril H. and Shaffir, William. *The Riot at Christie Pits*. Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1987. Pp. xii, 305. 8 black and white plates. \$26.95

Paula J. Draper

Volume 17, Number 3, February 1989

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017641ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017641ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Draper, P. J. (1989). Review of [Levitt, Cyril H. and Shaffir, William. *The Riot at Christie Pits*. Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1987. Pp. xii, 305. 8 black and white plates. \$26.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 17(3), 219–221. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017641ar>

Metcalf, Alan. *Canada Learns to Play: The Emergence of Organized Sport, 1807-1914*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987. Pp. 243. Illustrations. \$15.95 (paper).

In this volume, Alan Metcalfe examines the growth of organized sport in Canada from 1807, when the Montreal Curling Club was founded, to 1914, when the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada had established control of the amateur in sport. Metcalfe's considerable accomplishment lies somewhere between that of Nancy and Max Howell's *Sports and Games in Canadian Life* (1969) and John Hargreaves' study of Britain, *Sport, Power and Culture* (1986). He appears to be aiming for a book like Hargreaves', one in the tradition of E. P. Thompson, and at times he approaches the standard. But he retains, still, much of the minutiae typical of the Howells and sport historians of their genre.

Metcalf sees his book as a history of the emergence of new sport forms that correspond to the 19th-century evolution of urban-industrial Canada. In this process, spontaneous play forms, according to Metcalfe, gave way to a more rationalized structure of spectators, rules, and administrative bureaucracy. Despite the changing nature of the larger society, and of sport itself, the underlying and guiding ethic in sports remained amateurism, a product of an earlier, elite society.

In this way, then, the roots of Canadian sport are seen to lie in a clash between pre-industrial values, as represented in the amateur ethic, and those of the newer urban-industrial patterns, as represented in commercial sport. By 1914 the former was largely victorious, and the amateur ethic (sport seen chiefly as avocation) prevailed in much of the sporting world. Commercial, professional sport was confined to certain areas.

Looked at in a social sense, the culture of the urban, anglophone middle classes

prevailed. The culture of the rural, the francophone, and the working classes were, as Metcalfe says about the last group, "largely confined to the sidelines." It would appear that the culture of a new, pushing business class suffered the same fate to some degree. And since the victory was chiefly that of Montreal and, later, Toronto, it was also a central Canadian one.

The book builds to what is arguably Metcalfe's best chapter, which is also, happily, his central one. It describes, in if over-abundant detail, the growth of the amateur ethic and its challenge at the end of the 19th century by professional, commercial sport. There was to be no compromise. A proposed compromise intended to permit amateurs and professionals to play on the same team was rejected by the purists. They underlined their declaration by the repudiation of the amateur status of Tom Longboat, selected to run for Canada in the 1908 Olympics. By 1909, the conservatives had also achieved organizational control of sport, and, in doing so, confirmed as dominant the notion of the amateur.

Professional sport by no means disappeared, indeed commercialization of sport proceeded apace. The middle classes exploited the market potential of their sports facilities and the working classes were quickly consumerized. A history of professionalism is provided, including horse-racing, bicycle-racing, and the touring professional who made his living travelling from city to city. Ned Hanlan is presented as the prototype for the sport hero who is marketed by the press. But commercialization appears to have been confined to sectors, baseball, for example, because it had American support, and hockey because it was rural and somewhat beyond the reach of the urban amateurs (though this last judgement seems questionable). More to the point is Metcalfe's discovery of hockey's professional roots in the amateur game. British sports, such as cricket, existed in Canada only so long as there was a strong core of British expatriates

to support them. British elite ideas about sport, of course, persisted.

Lacrosse, which enjoys an entire chapter, is used by Metcalfe to illustrate the nature of the amateur/professional clash —embodied, in fact, in the conflict between the elite clubs of Montreal, representing traditional society and its values, and the Shamrocks, an Irish, Roman Catholic, working-class organization, representing modern structures and values. Even though they were the best club on the field, the Shamrocks were unable to control the development of the sport in the face of elite resistance. Without support of traditional institutions and an organizational centre, lacrosse died as a commercial, and proletarian, enterprise. So, too, did the assertion of a commercial and proletarian culture. The middle-class, amateur ethic, which arose in Montreal and spread to Toronto, was assailed by the proletarian values of the city at the turn of the century, but they were at that time not strong enough to change the face of sport.

Metcalf has produced a book that ranks among the best yet produced on Canadian sport, but it is one that still lacks much necessary descriptive clarity and analytical vigour. We still seem to be awaiting a Canadian Hargreaves'.

Bernard F. Booth
University of Ottawa

Levitt, Cyril H. and Shaffir, William. *The Riot at Christie Pits*. Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1987. Pp. xii, 305. 8 black and white plates. \$26.95.

It was the summer of 1933. Young men and women paraded on the city's eastern beaches sporting swastika badges and t-shirts. One morning, residents of a downtown neighbourhood awoke to find a large swastika and "Heil Hitler" painted on a roof of the Willowvale clubhouse. During a junior league softball game in Willowvale Park,

(known locally as Christie Pits), between a predominantly Jewish team and a team sponsored by a church, a swastika flag was unfurled and voices cried: "Heil Hitler" and "Kill the Jews". In the riot that ensued several people were injured badly enough to be hospitalized, yet only one combatant was eventually jailed. Responding to the ethnic strife, the mayor threatened prosecution of anyone displaying the swastika emblem. This was "Toronto the Good." He called on its citizens to keep it that way.

For most of Toronto's inhabitants, the riot at Christie Pits was quickly overshadowed by the mounting tensions in Europe and the enormous human tragedy of the Second World War. But the Jews of Toronto never forgot the events of the summer of 1933, and the riot has become permanently embedded in their ethnic mythology. It is a particular point of honour to have participated in the rioting, or even to have witnessed it. The fighting spirit of Jews against a perceived Nazi threat was significantly enhanced through the "prism of the Holocaust." So too, show the authors, were the ironies. Several of the Jewish and gentile youths who fought one another so viciously in Toronto found common graves in the battlefields of Europe.

For forty-five years the anti-Semitic episodes of the summer of 1933 remained a footnote in the history of Toronto's Jews. Sociologists Cyril Levitt and William Shaffir perceived a wider significance and, in their detailed study of the Beaches and Christie Pits episodes, they paint a colourful picture of a city undergoing the labour pains of multiculturalism. Recreating the atmosphere of depression-era Toronto and its shifting demographic composition through an emphasis on oral interviews and newspaper accounts, Levitt and Shaffir demonstrate how prejudice and xenophobia could escalate into condoned violence.

The story is presented as a series of connected incidents of antisemitic provocation. The residents of Toronto's

exclusively Anglo Beaches neighbourhood were horrified by weekend invasions by immigrant bathers. These newcomers, some of them Jews, monopolized the picnic tables, were noisy, nursed their babies in public, changed in their trucks and littered the beaches. Local youths, adopting Nazi paraphernalia, created "Swastika Clubs" which began a campaign of intimidation and occasional violence to rid the Beaches of these foreigners, conveniently lumped together as Jews. The Jewish community was quick to react. The authors argue in convincing detail that no one in Toronto could be ignorant, even at this early date, of the Nazi identification with the swastika and its symbolic connection to their treatment of Germany's Jews. Every newspaper in the city was replete with front-page reports on the abuse and murder of Jews under Nazi rule. The anti-Semitic incidents at the Beaches were further sensationalized by the press. As soon as the uproar on the waterfront was resolved, through public meetings, the problem popped up again in the city's core. No longer was the issue one of occasional territorial infringement, and the results were much more serious.

As their economic situation improved, the Jewish community began to shift northward from the immigrant areas of Spadina towards Bloor Street. Christie Pits, located on the north side of Bloor, served as a symbolic geographic boundary. In their analysis, Levitt and Shaffir demonstrate the ethnic tensions which led inevitably to conflict at the park. Predominantly Anglo Toronto was undergoing an irreversible transformation. Through their re-creation of the riot between local Anglo gangs and Jewish youths (aided by some of their Italian and Ukrainian fellow immigrants), the authors open a window to our past and to new ways of understanding the ethnic integration of a North American city.

The method of presentation is not particularly chronological, a fault that leads to some repetition and confusion. There is also an overabundance of detail in the chapters

devoted to newspaper accounts of Nazi atrocities. A helpful series of charts summarize the geographic, age, language and occupational distribution of Jews in Toronto. The book is carefully documented. The authors were frustrated in their attempts to interview former members of the Swastika Clubs and the non-Jewish fighters from the Pits. This does not detract, however, from the vibrant picture they present, a picture enhanced by their colourful use of quotations from Jewish old-timers.

Levitt and Shaffir are concerned with a variety of issues raised by the events they describe. Their discussion of the changing ethnic mix of Toronto is enhanced by their look at interconnections between ethnic conceptions of territory and self-defence. They also examine the changing face of anti-Semitism in Canada and make strong arguments to connect it, not only with a generalized xenophobia, but with the growing world-wide influence of fascism. Their study of Toronto's newspapers during the early 30s offers some surprising evidence of the extent of knowledge about Nazi Jewish policies available to Canadians. In light of the baseball riot, the whole issue of sports as a means of keeping youths out of trouble during economic recession is perhaps too briefly touched upon.

Levitt and Shaffir also draw our attention to the relevance of their study today. Drawing parallels to other anti-Semitic incidents in Toronto's past — notably the Allan Gardens riot in 1965 and recent Holocaust Denial trials — they illustrate that such outbursts are no longer tolerated by the general public. Likewise the Jewish community has become more sophisticated in its dealings with other ethnic groups and with government.

The authors have given us a valuable case study of the effects on the urban landscape of economic recession, xenophobia and prejudice. By adding the influence of global insecurities, particularly events in countries of origin of specific ethnic groups, they have

illustrated how easily demographic shifts can cause urban violence. As Levitt and Shaffir conclude, "the swastika battles in Toronto during August 1933 were among the most violent expressions of ethnic animosity in the city's history." Their book is a tribute to the new "Toronto the Good," a city which has taken great strides towards making the scores of different ethnic groups who constitute the multicultural mosaic of the city feel safe, secure, welcome, and at home. In doing so, they have enhanced our understanding of the development of the "city that works."

Paula J. Draper
Research Associate
Multicultural History Society
of Ontario

Holdsworth, Deryck W. *The Parking Authority of Toronto, 1952-1987*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987. Pp xii, 122. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index.

In writing this brief, authorized history of the Parking Authority of Toronto (1952-1987), Holdsworth, a geographer, had both full access to the Authority's files plus (to quote the foreword) "complete freedom in his work." He used that freedom to extol the Parking Authority as "demonstrably economic, self-sufficient, and exemplary — and consequently representative of the established Canadian preference for benign government." In other words, when he is not narrating the Authority's history, garage by garage, Holdsworth is anxious to contrast (superior) Canadian public enterprise with (inferior) American private enterprise. "The American model was," he writes, "largely one where municipalities built and then leased garages to private bidders, using their leverage over parking rates as their window on the industry. Toronto, in contrast, chose a different variant on the authority model, one where the municipality owned and operated the facilities."

But Holdsworth does not explain why the Toronto model works better, just that it does. Yet why should the government construction of a carpark and its subsequent operation as regulated private enterprise lead to a situation where one "has to park one's car, unlocked, in a seedy lot in some larger American city . . .?" Holdsworth seems to suggest that urban pathology can be prevented by government-operated carparks. No doubt the Parking Authority would agree. But should scholars? Is not the difference between government ownership and regulation too minor, and the municipal carpark too insignificant (especially when most of Toronto's have been privately-owned), to account for either American urban decay or the success of Toronto? And, since the "Toronto model" had only one other application in Canada, it surely cannot provide a foundation for differentiating Canadian from American cities.

Basically, Holdsworth expects too much of the carpark. It simply did not have the impact — judging from his own evidence — to make Toronto the "city that works." But as a book on a parking authority, there are penetrating insights here into Toronto's traffic history, and the debate over the automobile around 1970. Urban specialists should read this small book, perhaps the best on the subject when the subject is parking.

Donald Davis
Department of History
University of Ottawa

Litchfield, R. Burr. *Emergence of a Bureaucracy: The Florentine Patricians, 1530-1790*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986. Pp. xiii, 407. Illustrations, tables, bibliography, index. \$47.50 (U.S.).

There are few good books on Florence after the collapse of the republic, with the notable exception of Eric Cochrane's well-known *Florence in the Forgotten Centuries*. This

book is thus welcome on that account alone. Professor Litchfield is the author of three fine essays on Florence in this period: on the demography of the patriciate (*Journal of Economic History*, 1969), on their commercial investments (*Annales*, 1969), and on their access to office (*Renaissance Studies in Honor of Hans Baron*, 1971). It has been almost 20 years since he promised us in those essays a general study of the patriciate during the principate: at last his long labours have reached fruition.

Unfortunately the end product is not a great book. The patriciate as members of the bureaucracy provides Litchfield with his guiding theme but little he has to say on this subject (for all the care and effort he has brought to it) surprises or excites. One cannot help regretting that he did not complete the more general social history of the patriciate that he seems once to have planned.

At the centre of his early work were the economic strategies of the patriciate: marriage customs designed to prevent the dissipation of patrimonies and extensive investments in land and (until the mid 18th century) in Florentine commerce. Office-holding, in his original view, gave them an influence on policy that served to protect their commercial investments: as a source of income it was of limited (though not negligible) importance. With the end of the Medici dynasty that influence collapsed. They saved what they could from the wreckage of their commercial investments, abandoning commerce to the urban middle class. But they were compensated by the end of controls on the grain trade which had kept down prices. What they lost in trade they stood to make up in rents. Paradoxically, then, their loss of power freed them from an outmoded economic strategy based upon guild monopolies.

Litchfield's book provides, in its last two sections, a much more developed account of patrician land-holding. Particularly interesting