Urban History Review
Revue d'histoire urbaine

Owram, Doug. *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. Pp. xv, 392. Black and White photographs. $ 34.95 hard

Dominique Marshall

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

part, ressortir l'histoire des travaux d'infrastructure dans la ville. Ceci est un aspect peu connu de l'histoire montréalaise. D'autre part, au-delà de cette évolution, ce sont les enjeux autour de ces questions qui sont dégages et les rapports de force des différents groupes en présence. Il s'en dégage que les intérêts divergents de ces groupes ont influencé les décisions des élus municipaux concernant les réseaux d'eaux potable et usées.

Allant dans le même sens, mais à un niveau différent, le quatrième texte fait bien voir que la gestion de l'eau potable à Montréal ne l'a pas toujours été en fonction d'un service public offert à l'ensemble de la population. Au contraire, il semble qu'à compter du début du XIXe siècle, l'eau potable devient une res source que finance et s'approprie un élément de la population, des commerçants, en vue de défendre des intérêts particuliers, dont l'essor économique de la ville. De plus, comme le conseil de ville est composé de certains de ces commerçants, la gestion de l'eau devient partagée, selon les circonstances, entre le secteur privé et le secteur public, dans un esprit de collaboration.

Un dernier texte, revenant lui aussi sur les rapports de force des groupes en présence, couvre dependant des aspects plus techniques. Il fait ressortir combien, face à un problème d'infrastructure urbaine donné, la solution technique proposée et retenue sera différente selon que des facteurs nouveaux sont apportés dans le dossier ou non. En fait, une solution proposée n'est pas retenue seulement après l'étude de ses mérites respectifs, mais bien plutôt en fonction de facteurs externes, politiques, économiques, sociaux, professionnels, etc.

D'un point de vue historique, en plus de l'intérêt que présentent ces différents textes, ils soulèvent des questions insoupçonnées jusqu'alors et révèlent certaines moeurs et coutumes encore inconnues pour une bonne partie de la population. Le livre *Bâtir un pays*[1], paru en 1988, couvrait en partie des questions liées aux réseaux d'égout, au traitement des déchets solides et à l'approvisionnement en eau, mais s'étendait sur l'ensemble du Canada et ne remontait pas jusqu'à la période coloniale. Ce nouvel ouvrage le fait et porte uniquement sur le Québec. Les textes sont de plus accompagnés de notes bibliographiques abondantes, permettant de mettre à jour la bibliographie dans ce domaine. L'ouvrage contient cedependant certaines répétitions, bénignes et inévitables dues au découpage de la matière retenue.

1. Norman R. Ball, (sous la direction de), *Bâtir un pays. Histoire des travaux publics au Canada*, Montréal, Boréal, 1988, 351 p.

François Hudon
historien
Montreal

Owram, Doug. *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. Pp. xv, 392. Black and White photographs. $ 34.95 hard.

At the core of Doug Owram's interest for the generation of Canadians born between 1945 and 1955 is the "enthusiasm for experimentation with alternative lifestyles", including student radicalism and the rejuvenation of left politics, when "[d]ozens of confrontations occurred around the country". *Born at the Right Time* closely documents both campus life and political movements, such as the campaign of the summer of 1967 to close Yorkville Avenue in Toronto. Political beliefs and rhetoric are chiefly Studied, in the case of students, through the vocal members of the Canadian Union of Students, the Union générale des étudiants du Québec, the Student Union for Peace Action, the New Left Caucus of 1969–1970, and the inhabitants of the new campus of Simon Fraser. Over a few years, "radicals" took over, and they sought to give to "intergenerational conflicts" an importance superior to class, to psychological "alienation" a meaning as important as material deprivation, and to "involvement" the value of a solution.(227–229, 236) The focus on campuses doesn't derive only from their students' self-proclaimed role as the voice of a generation. The campus itself changed. Universities developed at a fast pace, faster even than the civil service or the body of university teachers, and the proportion of those who reached university was higher than ever before.(179–81)

But the scope of Owrams' endeavor is larger than student radicalism. He seeks to understand a whole generation, the "mood" of what he calls "the sixties revolution"(174, 204, 210), a complex subject, surrounded, because of its temporal and social proximity to writers of today, by many preconceptions and few critical historical studies. *Born at the Right Time* advances the notion that if young people were not all radicals, "the generation had a revolutionary impact." This "was an age in which the rhetoric of political activism and the influence of radical ideas were pronounced".(160, 190) A "counter-culture" emerged, characterized by "authenticity", "individualist", "personalist" and "mystical" beliefs, which "explod[ed] into a mass movement". The "mass of ordinary youth", that is to say "much of the youthful middle class", adopted "concepts of alienation and social resistance demonstrated by their more radical counterparts."(203–204, 207, 215, 217)

To establish the size of the movement, the book follows the upbringing of all Canadian children born after the war. Using qualitative evidence from popular culture to illustrate large statistical indicators, Owram discusses the remarkable demographic importance of the generation and the homogenization of education, residence, and leisure that surrounded their early years. When it comes to "the preoccupations of a great mass of youth", he studies "rock, sex and clothes", mainly using a body of secondary work about the United States, to propose that in less than a decade, from the mid-sixties to the early 1970s, it "had been politicized".(203–

204) He also relies on Canadian polls that showed, for instance, that many suburban children identified with the Hippies.(210) To explain the primacy of this generational divide, Owram often points at the importance of the "peer group" observed by contemporary social scientists.(269)

The "symbiosis" between a "minority of political activists" and a "much broader spectrum of youth" with a "sense of alienation" was in a fragile equilibrium.(232–233) To elucidate "The End of the Sixties", and the "mixture of disillusionment and integration", Owram suggests that when "radicals" adopted extreme means, "totalitarian tendencies"(290) and violence, they "broke the pact" with "liberals". Then, the "many youth [...] still imbued with the liberal-democratic values of their upbringing [...] lost sympathy" for the Left.(288–89) On this point, the historian's understanding converges with the explanations campus authorities had come elaborate by the end of the 1960s. In neither case is it clear whether they think the "politicized culture" had been no deeper than "rhetoric and styles", nor is it explained why most youngsters were now ready to join Liberal "adults". One is left with the image of a minority of students ready to go to the end of their illusions) while a majority of students and nonstudents was watching them and adopting features of the rebellious apparel selectively, when these were proven not to cause too much commotion.

A closer look at the links between the surge in radicalism and the large elements of change presented in the early chapters — affluence, "ceremonialized religion"(40), "lessons of fulfillment", "post-Holocaust notions of democracy", or "a sense of peer affinity"(184) — may point towards better explanations. The contradictions existing within the broadly shared set of beliefs may deserve more attention. How, for instance, could young people explain (or not explain) to themselves the tension between on one hand their wish to conform to one's own generation and, on the other hand, their emphasis on individual inclination? The dynamic of this large "counter-culture" may also need more scrutiny: how did the "masses of university students" influence radicals in the choice of fights? Wasn't SUPA, for instance, "well aware of the potential of Vietnam as a means of radicalization"(221)? And what happened to the "school-leavers" (those who did not go to university, or to those who had just finished) for whom the "experience of the shift from school to work was relatively painless"(172)? Between the lines, can we not see, already in the late sixties, a young generation of journalists, politicians, civil servants, film-makers and professors, providing the "radicals" with much of their legitimacy? Too often, *Born at the Right Time* identifies "the institutions of society at large", "the established order", the "liberal-capitalist system" and the "state" with all that is not "counter-cultural", and all that is "adult".(217, 225, 285,289) Indeed, the world of adults and the world of youth are watertight containers and the relations between them are confined to the narrow possibilities of recuperation or confrontation.

Further incursions by the author out of the students' world may also have helpded readers to see how young workers and other

groups, with whom the revolutionaries identified, came to see the "radicals". Owram's passages about the ill-fated Waffle within the NDP and his chapter devoted to women's history indicate how fruitful such inquiry can be. Owram reserves a distinct treatment to what he terms the "sexual revolutions", because "the changing relationship between the sexes provides another of the great breaks in social structure that mark the pre- and post-baby boom eras"; "the ideology and attitudes of modern feminism owe much to the mood of the 1960s".(273) Here, as well, the values of the whole "populace" (260) are introduced, when only the politics of students are closely studied. However, a more detailed statistical examination allows the changes in the "relative position of females" in high schools and universities to be linked with "higher expectations" from women.(274)

Given the ambiguity of the relationship baby-boomers established later with "liberal adults", it is difficult to consider what remained of a "generational sense of identity" that had been "sufficiently forceful to challenge the credibility of the adult world". One of the book's main contribution is to offer lines of continuity between the baby-boomers' values and the hopes of their parents, but it has little to propose about the relationships between the generation, its own offspring and the established institutions of the quarter of century that has elapsed since the end of the sixties, even when Professor Owram has no doubt that it "defined the political agenda for the next decades". (217–218)

Dominique Marshall
Department of History
Carleton University

Ladd, Brian. *The Ghosts of Berlin. Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. Pp. X, 27, 55 black and white illustrations, bibliography, index. US$29.95 (cloth).

There is no shortage of historical books, scholarly or otherwise, on the city of Berlin, its architecture, monuments, political, social and cultural life of the past and present. And recent German national re-unification has focussed the attention of historians on Berlin once again. But it is not as the former Prussian capital, or the largest metropolitan centre in Germany since the late nineteenth century, or even as the symbol of German industrial and cultural prowess that Berlin elicits so much interest. Rather, it is the city's political role as the capital of the German nation state that seems to matter most. The Ghosts of Berlin, as the book title indicates, are none other than the long shadows of German nationalism and its disastrous course during the twentieth century.

From this perspective, it is one of history's ironies that Berlin made the transformation from the focus of Nazi terror and the brutality of war to become, as a politically divided city during the Cold War, the icon of competing ideologies about political