

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Radforth, Ian. *Royal Spectacle: The 1860 Visit of the Prince of Wales to Canada and the United States*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. Pp. xi, 469. Illustrations, \$39.95 paper

Del Mui

Volume 34, numéro 2, spring 2006

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016018ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016018ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Muise, D. (2006). Compte rendu de [Radforth, Ian. *Royal Spectacle: The 1860 Visit of the Prince of Wales to Canada and the United States*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. Pp. xi, 469. Illustrations, \$39.95 paper]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 34(2), 62–63. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016018ar>

imply that the events that culminated in the tragic loss of life of thirteen female students and a secretary were part of a growing trend of anti-feminist sentiment and an extreme example of widespread misogyny in Canada rather than the deranged actions of a mentally ill individual. This characterization is itself extreme and should have been more carefully considered.

Overall *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History* is an excellent choice for students who are seeking a primer on Canadian history and for scholars who are in need of such an anticipated reference work. Canadians will find this to be an insightful, educational, and at times lively and entertaining look at our history.

Jeffrey P. Plante
York University

Radforth, Ian. *Royal Spectacle: The 1860 Visit of the Prince of Wales to Canada and the United States*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. Pp. xi, 469. Illustrations, \$39.95 paper.

Royal visits to Canada have been of considerable interest to Canadian scholars in recent years. They have come from a variety of directions and have produced some fascinating scholarship. Following on Viv Nelles's enormous success with *The Art of Nation Building*, which explored the politics behind the 1908 commemorative events surrounding the 300th anniversary of the founding of Quebec, this volume takes on the well-known visit of the very youthful Edward Albert, Prince of Wales, to British North America and the United States in 1860. As with Nelles's approach, the objective here is to use the visit, along with all its resulting paraphernalia and reportage, as a prism through which to view colonial societies, seen by Radforth to be groping toward a transformation of identity on the eve of Confederation, though, as a way of examining colonial politics and society, it seldom gets far beyond a rather voyeuristic appreciation of the various communities that were visited, as reflected in the large amounts of reportage.

At one level, *Royal Spectacle* is a straightforward recounting of the princely entourage's passage through the colonies, starting with the decision to travel and following along as he makes his way through the various communities. What the colonists chose to put on view for the prince (and how their various spectacles were received by the royal visitor and his handlers) provides most of the grist for Radforth's mill. And the mill grinds pretty slowly in some parts, as it moves through the languid and repetitious ceremonies marking the prince's passage from Saint John's through all the colonial towns and cities along his route, til his final exit from Canada via Windsor and Detroit after a tortuous two months of travelling and feting.

The presumption in such extended examinations of specific moments or events such as these is that deep analysis of the material produced by the occasion will offer an opportunity for a comparably deeper understanding of the society from which the material emanates. This study is based largely on a close

reading of newspaper accounts of the prince's every move, several contemporary accounts produced by the nineteenth-century equivalent of royal watchers, the private recollections of several members of the royal entourage, as well as the papers of various politicians and imperial officials associated with the trip. It is a rich brew of sometimes contradictory evidence.

Urban historians might be directly interested in the book because most of the events described take place within the boundaries of British North America's exploding urban spaces. After all, the occasion for the visit was at least in part to inaugurate the Victoria Bridge in Montreal, considered by many to be one of the marvels of the day and a wonderful example of the intersection of interests by colonial governments, railway magnates, and municipalities in linking cities together. But at every stop along the route of the visit processions of mayors and councillors anxiously boosted their particular communities with displays of pomp and circumstance designed to bring some attention to their community's possibilities for investment and development. The focal point provided by the vast array of newspaper commentators and the need to shed the best possible light on their communities resulted in a fair amount of sprucing up and lots of involvement with precedence being set in the various public occasions. Radforth enhances this discussion with a wealth of illustrative material from the contemporary illustrated press, which offers something of the flavour of the communities discussed.

There is much else in the discussion to tempt urbanists, including an interesting discussion of the role and place of native people, so often at the edge of the urban environment but foregrounded in many celebrations to demonstrate the exotic nature of North America. Tensions between the Orange Order and the Duke of Newcastle, who refused to allow Irish politics any play in the occasion, are prominently discussed. And an informed discussion of the tourist experience that characterized the prince's passage through the colonies offers some fresh insight into the emergence of the tourist craze that was about to swamp North America. All these subjects are dealt with in a spirit of enquiry that will command the attention of cultural historians of the nineteenth-century North American city.

The interplay of social and cultural groups that struggled for place and precedence in front of the royal entourage and its powerful press corps was perhaps the most revealing aspect of the whole trip. This is picked up in a very interesting pair of chapters dealing with the second half of the trip, through the eastern United States, which culminated in a spectacular reception in New York that was the quintessence of antebellum American society. It also put in the shadows all the attempts at such spectacle in the much smaller British North American cities. It was in America that the diplomatic purpose of the trip was most apparent, as the British used the fascination with royalty to shore up their shaky relationship with the United States on the eve of the Civil War. But it was there as well that the full flower of urban transformation was most apparent to the followers of the royals. Toronto and Montreal were overshadowed by

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.

Del Muiise
Carleton University

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.

Steve Penfold
University of Toronto