

Competing Master Narratives on Post-War Canada

Alvin Finkel

Volume 29, numéro 2, spring 2000

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad29_2re05

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Finkel, A. (2000). Competing Master Narratives on Post-War Canada. *Acadiensis*, 29(2), 188–204.

Competing Master Narratives on Post-War Canada

THE COURSE DESCRIPTION FOR “Contemporary Canada: Canada After 1945”, a course I teach at Athabasca University reads in part:

This course focuses on social change and social conflict since 1945. Beginning with a study of the Cold War in the immediate aftermath of World War 2, it demonstrates both official and popular efforts to create a conservative society in which dissent was suppressed, class, sexual and racial hierarchies were maintained, and the United States was the arbiter of political, economic, and cultural correctness. It then examines the social pressures that challenged such an agenda in the decades following the war. Included in the study of social conflicts are the emergence of the women’s movement, movements of Native peoples and visible-minority groups, as well as the Quebec independence movement and movements of regional resistance to the perceived federal agenda. Particular emphasis is placed on the social experiences of the generations born after the war, the “baby boomers,” followed by the “Generation Xers.” Also included is a study of the emergence first of the Keynesian welfare state and later the neo-conservative challenge to its expansion and indeed to its existence.

That this might be my rendition of the Canadian experience in the post-war era will be little surprise to readers of *Our Lives: Canada After 1945*.¹ But it might appear to be a description of a foreign land or a flight of Marxist fantasy to readers of Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond and John English, *Canada Since 1945: Power, Politics, and Provincialism*.² For Bothwell, English and Drummond there was social harmony in Canada for at least the first 25 or 30 years after the war. Only the parochialism of provincial power-seekers marred the intricate pattern woven by wise Ottawa mandarins, and even in more recent years, it was only small, well-organized, loud minorities who troubled Canada’s social peace — though Quebec separatists, the most demagogic minority of all, threatened to unravel the country.

Surveying recent literature on post-war Canada, it is interesting to try to place authors’ views within the framework provided by either *Our Lives* or *Canada Since 1945*. I assumed that much of it would fall comfortably in between these two perspectives, but little does. Canadian historians, even of the recent past, increasingly occupy “two solitudes” and fail to see the relevance of the issues that interest the other side, never mind their methodologies and theories. While the gap between “left” and “right” in Canadian historiography is sometimes presented as a debate between those who focus on social history and those who concentrate on elite history, this does not adequately capture the polarization evident in recent writing. There are historians who are conventional in their orientation yet have done interesting work in social history,

1 Alvin Finkel, *Our Lives: Canada After 1945* (Toronto, 1997).

2 Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond and John English, *Canada Since 1945: Power, Politics, and Provincialism* (Toronto, 1989).

work that nonetheless seems much at odds with the activist writings of the leftist and feminist historians who dominate social history. And the latter by no means ignore elites or political structures in their accounts of the everyday life of ordinary people. Indeed, what seems striking about the left-leaning histories is their refusal to decouple daily life and political structures. Their interest is in exploring the continuing struggles among social groups and the influence these have on the lives, and choices, of elites as well as ordinary people. On the other hand, the more conventional historians seem very good at compartmentalizing social structures. When they write about political policy discussions, the great unwashed rarely figure in the story except in shadowy ways, and when they write social history, political elites tend to disappear.

Doug Owrarn, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996) considers the period from the 1940s through to the early 1970s and suggests *Canada Since 1945* gets it essentially right. This is a well-written, thoughtful study by a self-proclaimed Tory and is one of the few social histories to make Jack Granatstein's list of worthy recent historical works.³ Owrarn presents a seemingly non-political version of the evolution of post-war social values. Emphasizing psychological factors, he attempts to explain the rigid gender norms of the post-war period with reference to individuals' desires to create an ideal of family life that was elusive during the Depression and the Second World War. The ideals of family life were reinforced in popular culture, but their wellsprings were chiefly the psychological needs of a generation that had grown up in periods of insecurity and uncertainty, and which now sought to create a stable, predictable, comfortable world for themselves.⁴

This seductive overarching theory of the post-war behaviour of Canadians of child-bearing age makes it possible for Owrarn to note, but not have to explain, the fact that hundreds of thousands of women who had jobs during the war — some in the high-paying industrial sector traditionally reserved for men — left the work force to bear and raise the baby boomers. His society-centred explanation of individual decisions takes it for granted that women married men who earned reasonable wages and that women gladly became full-time wives and mothers. Owrarn's focus is on the middle class — he parodies “history from the bottom up” by suggesting that he is writing “history from the middle out” (p. xiii) — and he makes it clear that much of what he has to say about post-war society does not apply to working-class and poor people. But he suggests that these people constituted a small and declining section of society as a whole.⁵ There is little doubt that this book hopes to encapsulate the experience of the overwhelming majority of an entire generation of Canadians.

In his consideration of women's choices, Owrarn cites Ruth Roach Pierson's study of the experience of Canadian women during the war and in its immediate aftermath.⁶

3 J.L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto, 1998).

4 Owrarn makes this argument even more explicit in his essay, “Canadian Domesticity in the Postwar Era”, in Peter Neary and J.L. Granatstein, eds., *The Veterans Charter and Post-World War II Canada* (Montreal and Kingston, 1998), pp. 205-23.

5 “The very poor, the very remote, certain ethnic communities had a very different experience”, writes Owrarn (p. xiii). The three “veries” suggest the marginality of those born during the baby boom who could not be said to have been “born at the right time”.

6 Ruth Roach Pierson, *They're Still Women After All: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto, 1986).

But in practice he ignores everything that her work and the work of other feminist historians of the period reveals. Pierson's study discusses women's choices in the context of political and economic power. The patriarchal state, rather than amorphous society, looms large in her account. Pierson demonstrates that from the moment women entered wartime work, the federal government's economic planners ensured that their escape from traditional gender roles would be temporary. Federal bureaucrats were concerned to preserve conventional gender norms — and to make government efforts to establish full employment in the post-war world only half as difficult by excluding most women from the labour force. They left little to chance. Government advertisements in the early post-war period made it clear that it was women's patriotic duty to leave their jobs and focus on domestic life.⁷ The state not only ensured that employers followed through on their obligations to return veterans to their former positions, but also expected employers to favour men in their hiring practices. Government hiring policies led the way, with the federal government refusing to hire married women and some provinces going a step further and firing women employees once they married. Government policies regarding daycare, unemployment insurance and family allowances all had clear gender agendas as well. While a job awaited male veterans returning to civilian life, expectant mothers lost not only their jobs but also their entitlements to unemployment insurance. Only after a lengthy battle by women's organizations and the trade union movement was the regulation that automatically eliminated unemployment insurance entitlements for new mothers rescinded, in 1962, and it would be another nine years before the insurance programme recognized maternity rights.⁸

Owram uses psychological arguments as well to explain why families flocked to new suburbs after the war. Suburban developers, he suggests, responded to deeply-felt psychological needs for privacy and greenery on the part of those who had lived through the privations of the Great Depression. But if the desire to live in suburban, single-family detached homes was truly a universal reaction to the end of depression and war, patterns of housing development should have been similar among Western democracies, at least once prosperity returned to each. The patterns, however, are different. State policies, not psychology, explain these differences. As John Bacher argues in his study of the evolution of Canadian housing policy, the Department of Finance, and particularly W.C. Clark who was deputy minister of finance from 1932 to 1954, resolutely promoted policies that favoured single-family developments over other alternatives.⁹ The government quickly removed wartime rental controls and stolidly opposed calls for social housing from veterans' groups, labour unions and

7 It could be argued that such campaigns were unnecessary because married women in the work force would have left their jobs anyway. In fact, the government was responding to a real threat that women would resist employer efforts to force them out. Wartime surveys showed that many married women wanted to remain in their jobs after the war. See Anne Forrest, "Securing the Male Breadwinner: A Feminist Interpretation of PC 1003", in Cy Gonick, Paul Phillips and Jesse Vorst, eds., *Labour Gains, Labour Pains: 50 Years of PC 1003* (Winnipeg and Halifax, 1995), p. 142.

8 Ann Porter, "Women and Income Security in the Post-War Period: The Case of Unemployment Insurance, 1945-1962", *Labour/Le Travail*, 31 (Spring 1993), pp. 111-44.

9 John C. Bacher, *Keeping to the Marketplace: The Evolution of Canadian Housing Policy* (Montreal and Kingston, 1993).

women's organizations. It was equally hostile to requests for aid from private apartment-builders and from municipalities contemplating public housing developments. Its chief instruments for controlling the actions of developers and accommodation-seekers were loan subsidies, which eventually became loan guarantees for lenders, offered by the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). As labour and other social groups lamented in futility, the government guarantees that allowed finance companies to offer generous mortgages to middle-class purchasers of new homes were of no value to the half of the population who continued to rent. Many were victimized by slum landlords, who ignored laxly enforced municipal building code requirements.¹⁰

Government policies in other countries favoured renters and gave middle-class families less encouragement to flee established areas and seek oases of single-family, detached homes. In Britain, France and Scandinavia, rent controls continued in force for many years after the end of the war, with the result that rent increases lagged behind increases in the cost of living generally, the reverse of what happened in both Canada and the United States.¹¹ Developers moaned that they could not build new rental accommodations in such circumstances. The state response in Britain, particularly while the Labour Party ruled from 1945 to 1951, was to build more social housing. Middle-class and better-off working-class families, in countries with rent controls, proved less enthusiastic about seeking out suburban homes and saddling themselves with huge mortgages than their North American counterparts, who often saw themselves as having little choice in the matter.

Choice is something that the denizens of O'ram's 1940s and 1950s seem to exercise freely, even if this is overly conditioned by their haunting memories of depression and war. A rather different set of Canadians people Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse, *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1945-1957* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994) and other works dealing with relations between the state and citizens in the early post-war era. These authors, while careful not to claim that state repression was as wide-ranging in Canada during the Cold War as in the McCarthyite United States, nonetheless pour cold water on the notion that the Canadian state and Canadian elites responded to dissent in a polarized age in a qualitatively different fashion from their American counterparts. Whitaker and Marcuse challenge earlier work by Jack Granatstein and Robert Bothwell¹² and argue that the Canadians Igor Gouzenko fingered as Russian spies were victims of the Cold War, rather than agents of a foreign power. Fred Rose, the only person ever elected to Parliament as a Communist,¹³ was stripped of his parliamentary seat,

10 "Statement of Canadian Welfare Council Presented to Canadian Legion Housing Conference, Toronto, June 26-27, 1953", Canadian Welfare Council Papers, MG28, I 10, Vol. 54, File 471, National Archives of Canada [NAC]; "Statement on Housing, June 26-7, 1953", Dominion Command, Canadian Legion, B.E.S.C. Housing Committee; "Canadian Congress of Labour Statement on Housing Submitted to Canadian Legion National Conference", June 1953.

11 Canada, Department of Finance Papers, RG 19, ELC, Vol. 363, File 101-102-1-3, NAC.

12 J.L. Granatstein and Robert Bothwell, eds., *The Gouzenko Transcripts: The Evidence Presented to the Kellock-Taschereau Royal Commission of 1946* (Ottawa, 1982).

13 Dorise Nielsen, who served as an MP from 1940 to 1945, had joined the Communist Party at some indeterminate point, but when elected in 1940 was a Unity candidate with support from both the Communists and the CCF.

sentenced to six years in jail and deported to his native Poland, for passing secrets to the Soviets. He had informed the Soviet ambassador in Canada of information on a high-power explosive passed to him by a Canadian scientist. What was conveniently ignored was that he had done this during wartime when Canada and the Soviet Union were allies. There were no scientific secrets that Canadians kept from the British and the Americans, and it was not unreasonable to assume that information that would help the Soviets fight the Nazis was information that they should have.

Such reasoning counted for nothing during the Cold War. As far as the state authorities were concerned, if someone was a Communist, or was associated with Communists in organizations that were Communist fronts or simply “infiltrated” with Communists, he or she was *persona non grata* and ineligible for most government jobs, or for jobs outside government that existed because of government contracts. Ironically, what most seemed to distinguish Canada from the United States on this subject was that in the United States an individual was told of ineligibility for positions resulting from suspicious political behaviour or attitudes, and given a chance to clear his or her name; in Canada, an individual was simply blacklisted and given no opportunity to hear specific charges.

Whitaker and Marcuse are, if anything, naive about the bloody-mindedness of governments confronting the supposed threat of communism. They seem genuinely surprised and outraged that Canada in the 1950s was allowing Nazis into the country without a blush, while excluding all who had the whiff of communism about them. They find it ironic that Canadians who had actively opposed fascism and Nazism in the 1930s were labelled “premature anti-fascists”, and therefore regarded suspiciously as likely having been Communists. The reality is that in the 1930s the Canadian authorities regarded communists as the enemies of the Canadian state, while fascists, though seen as unruly, were tolerated because they supported capitalism and made war on communists. While the federal government proscribed the Communist Party as an illegal organization from 1931 to 1936, Canadian Nazis basked in the glow of legality until Canada declared war on their beloved Hitler in September 1939. The RCMP focused its surveillance and repression on communist activities, treating fascists and Nazis as minor threats to public order.¹⁴ This was very much in keeping with the behaviour of other western “democracies” in the face of Hitler’s rearmament and aggression. As Clement Leibovitz and I have argued, there has been a careful construction of a myth of “appeasement” of Hitler by the Western powers to cover up the close cooperation that existed between the alleged democracies of the West and the fascist dictatorships of Europe from 1933 to early 1939.¹⁵ Nothing casts more doubt in my mind about the affection of capitalists and aristocrats for democracy than their behaviour during the inter-war years, but that is probably because I am Jewish. In practice, American behaviour during the Cold War was probably even more shoddy, as the Americans regularly helped to install military thugs to replace elected

14 Michelle McBride, “From Indifference to Internment: An Examination of RCMP Responses to Nazism and Fascism in Canada from 1934 to 1941”, M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1997.

15 Alvin Finkel and Clement Leibovitz, *The Chamberlain-Hitler Collusion* (Toronto, 1997).

leaders and to forestall unelected but popular — though unfortunately leftist — leaders.¹⁶ Yet Canadians who criticized any of this were labelled as Communists, whether or not they much liked Uncle Joe's Soviet Union or indeed any form of socialism.

Whitaker and Marcuse follow the Communist witch-hunters into the National Film Board, the trade unions and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation. Overall, they paint a picture of a society in which it was not safe to be an independent thinker. Ironically, however, this may not seem such a mismatch with Doug Owram's portrait of a society composed of individuals bent purely on consumption. If thinking could get you in trouble, buying — unless you blew your credit rating — probably would not. Nonetheless, the dissonance between Owram's "middle out" portrait of the early post-war era and Whitaker and Marcuse's study of power politics is striking. Owram, at least, can argue that politics are not his concern. One wonders how conventional Cold War historians can continue to justify ignoring the issues raised in *Cold War Canada*, and in earlier works by Whitaker, regarding the limited notion of civil liberties that government leaders held in the early post-war period. David Bercuson, *True Patriot: The Life of Brooke Claxton, 1898-1960* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993) considers Claxton's performance as defence minister from late 1946 to 1954 and cites an article by Whitaker on the origins of security screening in Canada, but studiously ignores the issue of the impact of the Cold War on the lives of Canadian citizens.

Even in the area of "citizen as consumer", Owram's portrait of the 1950s seems a bit clichéd in the light of recent work on the history of shopping. Joy Parr's richly-textured recent book, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1999) is perhaps the most ambitious of efforts to place consumption in its full social context. Parr demonstrates that far from being mindless consumers, Canada's post-war housewives, as individuals and as members of consumers' organizations, sought to influence the corporate world that controlled production of the household items that were the tools of women's domestic work. They had their own ideas about how household appliances should be manufactured to reduce household drudgery, and they frustrated advertisers who tried to get them to give up their wringer-washers for automatic washers.

Their ideas about how furniture should be designed often placed them at odds with professional designers, mostly males, who believed that women consumers lacked sophistication and required re-education. Nor were housewives outside the politics of the Cold War. Left-wing consumer groups that focused on profit-taking by big companies learned that their adversaries would ignore their arguments and data, focusing on their Communist and socialist connections instead. Middle-class consumer groups, never on the wrong side of the Cold War, nonetheless allowed themselves to be pushed away from an early emphasis on consumers' interest in shaping the products that entered the marketplace towards a narrower focus on the quality and price of consumer goods.

Perhaps as striking as the contrast between Owram's interpretation of the Cold War

16 See, in particular, Gabriel Kolko, *Confronting the Third World: United States Foreign Policy, 1945-1980* (New York, 1988).

period and that of more critical historians is the gap between Owram's portrait of the student revolt of the 1960s and that of others who have examined the new social movements that began in the 1960s. The student revolt in Canada has been the subject of only a few studies,¹⁷ and Doug Owram is to be congratulated for trying to outline its context and its contours. His discussion of the limited achievements of the radicals of the 1960s, unlike his discussion of the events of the 1950s, makes less effort to keep the state and other elites out of the picture. While Owram has little sympathy for the protesters of the period, he makes it clear that one of the obstacles they faced was the limited tolerance the state and other authorities had for their activities.

But, as with his portrait of the 1950s, Owram is too wedded to psychological explanations for the social unrest of the period. Baby boomers, he believes, identified with one another against previous generations, and age identification superseded identifications such as those of class, ethnicity and community:

A vast generation, unprecedented in its affluence, reared on lessons of fulfilment and post-Holocaust notions of democracy, tied by a sense of peer affinity, made the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. A larger percentage of the young than ever before in history made this transition in a world of higher education that both reinforced their sense of identity and encouraged them to challenge received wisdom (p. 184).

While Owram documents the growth of counter-cultural movements in the 1960s and early 1970s, and of New Left and feminist political organizations, his focus on all of these as the product of a spoiled-rotten generation makes their political demands appear secondary, if not trivial. Owram's version of "the personal is political" suggests that the very act of protest was more important than the specific demands of a protest group. So, for example, "the feminism of the 1960s owed more to contemporary reform movements than to earlier efforts at women's reform. Material well-being and political power merged with slippery notions of self-fulfilment, personal authenticity, and action" (p. 279).

This observation, meant to imply in a polite way that women's liberationists deep-down were baby-boom individualists committed to mindless activism, sits poorly with Owram's passing but unexplored comment that "the renewed interest in women's rights was as much a product of the activities of older women as it was an offshoot of the politics of youth" (p. 273). As other analysts of the stirrings of rebellion in the post-war period have noted, members of the generation including the baby boomers' parents, against whom the boomers were supposed to be in rebellion, played an equally significant role in defining both the problems of conventional society and proposing new social values and ways of organizing society to supplant the old. In his encyclopedic study of changing social values in Europe and the United States from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, Arthur Marwick, commenting on the first wave of change from 1958 to 1963, notes that an exclusive focus on youth misses

17 See, for example, Cyril Levitt, *Children of Privilege: Student Revolt in the Sixties: A Study of Student Movements in Canada, the United States, and West Germany* (Toronto, 1984) and Myrna Kostash, *Long Way from Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada* (Toronto, 1980).

the extent to which “the first stirrings of cultural revolution” were also emanating from older members of society: “There was a not dissimilar activism among the young married, and, indeed, the middle-aged, specifically with reference to sexual attitudes and behaviour, the role of women, and the environment”.¹⁸

The activism of the generation born in the pre-war period played a significant role in shaping the character of the “second wave” women’s movement in Canada despite the numerical dominance of baby boomers among second-wave participants. While Owrain appears to see little difference between the Canadian and American women’s movements of the late 1960s and onwards, Jill Vickers, Pauline Rankin and Christine Appelle, as well as Constance Backhouse and David Flaherty, have emphasized the divergence in the focus and the organization of the women’s movements in the two countries.¹⁹ While the American movement seemed to be characterized by ideological battles and a myriad of often mutually hostile organizations, the Canadian movement was relatively united and made winning legislation and court decisions favourable to women’s interests its priority. The essays in Joy Parr’s edited collection, *A Diversity of Women: Ontario 1945-1980*, demonstrate the weakness of an argument that views women’s liberation in the 1970s mainly in the context of counter-cultural individualism. From the trade union women who struck the Lanark Manufacturing Company’s wire harness plant in Dunnville in 1964 to the Native and francophone women who organized to demand better treatment within their communities, it is clear that older women played significant roles in demanding a widening of women’s sphere in Canada.²⁰

Women’s organizations played a significant role in lobbying governments for the various reforms that constitute Canada’s welfare state. So did other popular groups such as trade unions, anti-poverty groups and farm organizations. But, just as recent historical writing disagrees about the relative importance of individual choice and state direction in determining a variety of developments in post-war Canadian society, so too is there a wide gap among historians regarding the relative importance of key political actors and of social groups in setting the state agenda after 1945. While biographies and autobiographies that focus on the key roles played by progressive individuals in government or the civil service continue to be written, some of the new writing on the welfare state follows a social history model.

In the older tradition, David Bercuson, *True Patriot: The Life of Brooke Claxton*, presents the early post-war debate on social reforms as a debate among a limited number of state actors, though the author recognizes that demands for reform were coming from below. He mentions, but fails to explain, that provincial opposition to an ambitious federal programme for social reform killed it off. Casting the blame on the provinces ignores the insincerity of the federal offers and begs the question of what happened to the pressures from below for legislated change that were so prominent in

18 Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958-c. 1974* (Oxford, 1998).

19 Constance Backhouse and David H. Flaherty, eds., *Challenging Times: The Women’s Movement in Canada and the United States* (Montreal, 1992); Jill Vickers, Pauline Rankin and Christine Appelle, *Politics As If Women Mattered: A Political Analysis of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women* (Toronto, 1993).

20 Joy Parr, ed., *A Diversity of Women: Ontario 1945-1980* (Toronto, 1995).

wartime.²¹ Surprisingly for a biographer of the major social reformer in Mackenzie King's last cabinet, Bercuson seems unaware of the extent of the ideological gap between Claxton and King. Instead he chooses to focus on King's personal (or apparently personal) attacks on Claxton to explain Claxton's declining influence in the making of social policy. Bercuson also pays only scant attention to Claxton's increasingly reactionary stances on social issues in the 1950s. He notes only that Claxton became less sympathetic to "welfare spending" once he became minister of national defence and observes that the government's commitment to cutting military costs was a direct consequence of its need to fund expanding social programmes (p. 8).

But if Penny Bryden is to be believed, Claxton in fact became a vigorous opponent of new social programmes in his later years, particularly after leaving government in 1954 to become Canadian general manager of Metropolitan Life. P.E. Bryden, *Planners and Politicians: Liberal Politics and Social Policy, 1957-1968* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997) is a state-centred study of policy formation. But her focus is less on cabinet or the civil service than on the Liberal Party, the natural governing party for most of post-war Canada. When Canadian voters had the temerity to dump the Liberals from office in 1957 and to confirm their verdict in 1958, the Liberals, without the spoils of office to define their *raison d'être*, were forced to try to distinguish themselves from John Diefenbaker's Progressive Conservatives. Right-wing Liberals, among whom Claxton and C.D. Howe figured prominently, believed the party had gone far enough in office with social programmes and that it should now emphasize the rights of individuals. But a more left-leaning set of Liberals, led by Walter Gordon and Tom Kent, managed to take hold of the party organization and to set the agenda for the Liberals' next term of office. It was they who ensured that the party re-committed itself to its abandoned 1940s plans for medicare and an earnings-related pension scheme, along with enriched federal aid to provinces for social assistance recipients and a low-interest loans scheme for post-secondary students.

Once the Liberals were in office, according to Bryden, the two factions in the party fought for control in cabinet. Ultimately those on the left won out, though their position was much weakened when Walter Gordon resigned as finance minister after the 1965 election failed to win the Liberals their much-desired majority. The right-wing influence in the new cabinet was sufficient to occasion delays in the introduction of medicare. Mitchell Sharp, the new finance minister, sought a delay on the grounds that federal expenditures needed to be pruned at the time and not encouraged to luxuriate. According to Bryden, he also "gave the impression of being opposed to many of the features of the national plan" (p. 162). Bryden's detailed study is certainly a credible alternative to Sharp's own anodyne account, *Which Reminds Me . . . : A Memoir* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993). While Sharp admits that he sought a delay, he insists that he was a defender of medicare and that he was not looking to weaken the programme or to kill it on the vine (pp. 149-50).

Bryden's analysis unfortunately leaves little room for non-state social actors,

21 Alvin Finkel, "Paradise Postponed: A Re-examination of the Green Book Proposals of 1945", *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 4 (1993), pp. 120-42.

other than the Liberal Party itself, in its explanation of the evolution of Canadian social programmes. While this book provides a richer explanation of the political manoeuvring that shaped Canada's major social programmes than biographies and autobiographies in which one or two individuals become pivotal, it helps little to explain why Canada created a national medical insurance programme when the United States did not. It also ignores issues about the character of Canada's medicare programme that more critical scholars have raised.²² Why, for example, did the Canadian government choose a doctor-controlled, fee-for-service structure rather than the system of community clinics and salaried physicians that a variety of advocates of medicare called for? Why were only allopathic medical services included, and, for that matter, why were the services of dentists, pharmacists, optometrists and nutritionists, who among others formed part of the traditional medical systems, not covered? Somehow the focus on party and cabinet discussions, along with federal-provincial negotiations, seems to limit the range of questions that Bryden considers.

Several other recent accounts of the evolution of social welfare programmes make more of an effort to link attitudes and activities at the levels of state and society. Two recent volumes, one on Quebec and one on Ontario, have done a particularly good job of providing new perspectives on the development of social policy in the two central provinces. Dominique Marshall, *Aux Origines Sociales de l'Etat-providence: familles québécoises, obligation scolaire et allocations familiales, 1940-1955* (Montréal, Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1998) is a fascinating and richly nuanced account of how Quebec families and Quebec social and political institutions experienced two major social reforms, one provincial (compulsory school attendance), the other federal (family allowances). Marshall places her work within the "new political history" that attempts to contextualize political developments by demonstrating the shifting constellations of relations among all social actors. This includes relations among social classes, the sexes, generations, regions, nations and ethnic groups. The new political historians, she notes, see their work as a response to earlier elitist histories that relied mainly on the accounts of government officials and which fit nicely with 19th-century nationalist projects.

As a result, Marshall demonstrates that mandatory schooling, while long supported by trade unions, only became law when Quebec elites began to see the limited education of the majority of Québécois as a drawback to the province's industrial development. The demands of industry during the Second World War revealed dramatically how ill-prepared Quebec was to capture the economic possibilities that the post-war world was likely to deliver. Big business, small business and the bishops not only dropped their former insistence that parents alone should decide whether or not children should be educated and for how long, but they also began to press the government to make education compulsory for children. Adelard Godbout's Liberals had not campaigned on a promise to make education obligatory, but they responded positively to pressures from traditional elites for this reform. As for family

22 Donald Swartz, "The Politics of Reform: Conflict and Accommodation in Canadian Health Policy", in Leo Panitch, ed., *The Canadian State: Political Economy and Political Power* (Toronto, 1977), pp. 311-43; Stan Rands, "Recollections", in Donald C. Kerr, ed., *Western Canadian Politics: The Radical Tradition* (Edmonton, 1981), pp. 63-4.

allowances, Marshall underlines the conservative thinking of the King government in implementing this programme. Family allowances, in the government's view, were meant as an alternative to the comprehensive social measures advocated in the Marsh Report of 1943 and endorsed by the trade unions and the surging CCF. Family allowances were also an attempt to dampen demands for higher wages, common throughout the war, by providing more income for families with children, particularly for families with a large number of children. As a result, they had the support of business organizations, but were resented by the trade unions.

Marshall demonstrates that these two reforms were linked because Ottawa made attendance of their children at school a prerequisite for parents hoping to collect family allowances. The Duplessis government, which returned to power in 1944, was opposed to such an intrusion into the province's exclusive right to control education and refused to cooperate with the federal government and provide the necessary information regarding school attendance. But Roman Catholic school officials, supported by the bishops, quietly provided Ottawa with the desired information. Marshall's evidence turns notions that the post-war Catholic Church in Quebec remained opposed to mass education on their head. The evidence suggests the church was so interested in helping Quebec's young fit into the modern industrial world that it risked the opprobrium of both families and the provincial authorities to act as a snitch to Ottawa against families that did not appear to be providing adequate support to keep their children in school.

Marshall's study of farm and working-class families' attitudes in the early post-war years demonstrates the ways in which the new universal programmes created a sense of citizen entitlement. After schooling became compulsory, farm districts without schools or with poorly qualified teachers demanded provincial government support for building schools and supplying good teachers. Working-class parents challenged the right of school boards to charge fees for books and supplies when parents had no right to simply keep their children at home. Such attitudes, Marshall observes, paved the way for the Quiet Revolution's wholesale restructuring of the school system. While most histories of the Quiet Revolution focus on the behaviour of elites, Marshall's work suggests the need for more attention to the attitudes of a citizenry who had experienced two universal programmes since the closing days of the war and expected more from governments than the Duplessis regime was prepared to deliver.

The poor became more visible and more demanding as a result of compulsory schooling and the link between schooling and family allowances. Social workers and teachers, attempting to find out why certain children never or rarely attended school, joined the parents in challenging the view that poor parenting or insufficient knowledge of the importance of education caused parents not to send children to school. They argued that poverty was usually the root cause of the problem. Some parents could not afford to clothe their children properly to send them to school in cold weather; many others needed their children to help out with household chores, particularly when families were large or there was only one parent. While the number of children under 14 (the legal school leaving age until the 1960s) in the labour force was dropping, some farm families and small entrepreneurs continued to rely on the work of their fairly young children to get by. Poverty was sufficiently generalized in Quebec in the early 1950s that a majority of 14- and 15-year-olds left school either to join the labour force or, in the case of girls, to help with household chores.

Still, while the poor had to struggle against authorities who condemned them as poor parents when their children failed to attend school, they made use of their family allowances, as modest as these were, to buy their children clothing and school supplies, and to pay whatever levies the school boards imposed on them. For the poorest, who once had been forced to make use of orphanages to ensure their children were fed, family allowances sometimes meant that they could keep their children at home for the years before they were old enough to work. Whatever the nationalist elites in Quebec might think, working people and the poor were happy to receive family allowances from Ottawa, and national opinion polls, though showing 90 per cent of Canadians in the 1950s supportive of the family allowance programme, demonstrated the highest levels of support for the programme in the province of Quebec.

The struggles of the poor in Quebec to compel authorities to recognize their needs have their echo in the struggles of Ontario's poor to become visible in the post-war period. James Struthers, *The Limits of Affluence: Welfare in Ontario, 1920-1970* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994) demonstrates forcefully the persistence of the concept of "less eligibility" in Ontario social assistance policies. His evidence both of widespread poverty in Canada's richest province during the period of post-war prosperity, and also of reactionary provincial Tory policies to deal with the poor, will surprise many. Residents everywhere else in the country tend to think of Ontario as a haven of wealth and to forget the obvious fact that this rich province has been, and remains, class divided. The pre-Mike Harris Tories successfully created an image of themselves as non-ideological centrists, and certainly Penny Bryden's book, with its focus on programmes mainly important to the middle class, confirms this image. But Struthers's lens, aimed at the relationship between the Tories and the poor, depicts politicians and key civil servants every bit as conservative as the Tories who now blight the political landscape of Ontario.

Like Marshall, Struthers points out that political struggles occurred over questions of how to define poverty, and how to combat it. So, for example, the preparation of tables on the cost of living in Toronto proved more than an issue of compiling adequate statistics. In 1944 the Toronto Welfare Council produced a document entitled *The Cost of Living*. Its estimates of how much money families needed to get by became a useful tool for trade unions in collective bargaining, and it provided the data that Leonard Marsh relied upon to establish the minimum social benefits needed to provide a decent standard of living. But the Toronto Welfare Council depended on the good will of the Community Chest, in turn dominated by corporate interests. The latter suppressed *The Cost of Living*. Its successor, entitled *A Guide to Family Spending in Toronto*, assigned the cause of poverty to inadequate homemaker knowledge about managing money rather than to inadequate income (pp. 138-41). As Struthers goes on to indicate, the turn away from efforts to determine the minimum dollars required by various types of households to live decently was evident in provincial government policies that often nullified the gains that were made from federal programmes with a universal character:

The willingness of governments to allow the gains achieved by universal social entitlements such as family allowances and old age security to be eaten up by grossly inadequate or unaltered shelter, heating, and clothing

allowances not only eroded the value of these initiatives for the fight against poverty, but also nullified the marginal gains achieved after 1944 by the provision of nutritionally adequate food allowances. Quite simply, in postwar Ontario the poor went hungry to pay the rent (p. 180).

The bureaucracies that dealt with the poor and middle-class citizens tended to regard the poor as authors of their own problems. The notion that welfare recipients were often cheaters who either refused to work or had unconfessed sources of income, or both, had been a constant theme since the earliest establishment of state programmes to aid the destitute. Such views persisted steadfastly among the people who counted in post-war Ontario. Municipal councils introduced work-fare requirements, while middle-class matrons spied on less fortunate women to ensure that they did not have a man in the house (pp. 183-4, 272). If they did they would be cut off welfare since, by definition, a man who had sex with a woman must, in the eyes of the authorities, be paying for the privilege. Man-in-the-house rules reflected a larger gender agenda within social assistance programmes that penalized women who, for whatever reason, had flouted conventional notions of morality. The growing number of single mothers constituted an ever-increasing proportion of the poor in Ontario, but no policies were devised to lift them or their children out of poverty.

Struthers suggests that in the 1960s, though Ontario claimed to share the federal government's desire for a war on poverty, it did little but drag its heels (pp. 211-30). Ontario officials dealing with poverty programmes rarely had a background in social work; they were simply career civil servants who ended up in this branch of government and shared a broader civil service view that was more concerned with the welfare of the middle class and the wealthy than with the fate of the poor. The generation of post-war federal officials working in the area of social programmes, by contrast, included important figures in the world of social work (p. 270). Their commitment to social change was often greater than that of their political masters. Struthers observes that the Liberals' War on Poverty, launched in 1965, was more of a slogan than a programme. Half-hearted in its implementation, it ignored the specific problems of Natives, women and immigrants.

Perhaps the explanation for this can be found in the Liberals' continued dependence on the financial and moral support of the business community. While the business community was not opposed to all social expenditures, its members were opposed to most of them, and to any programme for which the cost would be shouldered by the nation's wealthy. Some of Mitchell Sharp's comments on tax reform in *Which Reminds Me* illustrate nicely the limits of reform as perceived by the Liberal Party of Canada:

I left the Finance ministry in 1968 . . . before it became necessary for me to take any action on the recommendations of the Carter Commission. That responsibility fell to my successor, Edgar Benson. . . . In the end, the results, while useful, bore little resemblance to the fundamental reforms recommended by Carter and his associates. There was too much inertia in the existing system of taxation, and there were too many uncertainties in shifting from known to unfamiliar and untested systems for the politicians to take the risks inherent in radical reforms, however logical they might be. A

cautionary tale, to be heeded by enthusiasts for tax reform in the future (p. 134).

Struthers also reviews the proliferation of welfare rights and poverty action groups in the late 1960s. He indicates that while some of these groups were the product of community and labour activism with roots in the 1940s, more were the result of “a combination of 1960s New Left activism, the devastating impact of urban redevelopment on poor people’s neighbourhoods, and direct government sponsorship of community organization efforts through agencies such as the Company of Young Canadians or welfare grants channelled through the Department of National Health and Welfare” (pp. 247-8). While Struthers does not delve into the activities of the left-wing activists involved in poverty struggles, the background that he provides for such struggles is dramatically at odds with the atmosphere that Owsram presents. In Owsram’s middle-class world, the activists are simply giving an “up yours” to conventional society. Their goals are purely personal. Struthers, for whom their goals are not an issue, makes it clear that the struggles of the poor were quite desperate and that they needed all the allies they could find, whether among social workers, trade unionists or social activists of middle-class background. Whatever allies they found, the poor of Ontario did not prevail. The attitudes of the bureaucracy and the leading politicians did not change in any essential way, and few victories were won.

As inadequate as Ontario’s social welfare programmes may have been in the post-war period, Gerard William Boychuk, *Patchworks of Purpose: The Development of Provincial Social Assistance Regimes in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998) reminds us that in several provinces the treatment of the poor was worse than in Ontario. “Municipal homes”, better known as poorhouses and workhouses, housed the unfortunate in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia until the late 1950s, with so-called “outdoor relief”, that is non-institutional relief, rare before the federal government began paying part of the costs of maintaining the poor. Only widows and deserted wives could expect to receive social assistance without moving into the workhouse, and they were expected to join the work force to supplement the tiny mothers’ allowance on offer in these provinces. Unmarried mothers were pressured to give up their babies for adoption; they were ineligible for a mother’s allowance if they decided to keep their babies (pp. 30-2).

Boychuk traces the development of social assistance regimes in all the Canadian provinces from about 1930 to 1990. His main goal is to chart continuities and changes in the basic premises underlying social assistance over time. Some regimes, he observes, are residual, providing aid to only the most destitute. They weaken dependence on neither the market nor the family, but they do not stigmatize recipients. Other regimes actively strengthen dependence on the market and the family through policies such as work-fare and the denial of benefits to single mothers. Finally, some regimes are redistributive, weakening both market and family dependence. Boychuk argues that pre-Confederation Newfoundland’s social assistance programme was redistributive, and that during the Quiet Revolution, Quebec’s social programmes also tended towards the redistributive, though by 1990, Prince Edward Island had become the only province with such a regime. Quebec, by then, had developed programmes that tended to enforce market and family norms (pp. 59, 90-1).

While Boychuk largely relies on official descriptions of the various provincial

programmes, social historians are skeptical of a reliance on state sources for evaluations of state programmes, and, in this case, with reason. In an article in *New Maritimes*, written in 1985 and republished in Ian McKay and Scott Milson, eds., *Toward a New Maritimes: A Selection from Ten Years of New Maritimes* (Charlottetown, Ragweed Press, 1992), Irene Burge mentions that, as Boychuk notes, Prince Edward Island described its welfare programmes in terms of entitlements. But, in practice, someone dependent on social assistance benefits in the province would have only 60 per cent of the income needed to live decently, and the programme made it difficult for anyone to earn income beyond such benefits without having the size of the benefits cut accordingly. In general, observes Burge, there was little connection between government statements about social programmes for the poor in the province and people's experiences with these programmes: "People who depend on social assistance for survival are somewhat cynical, to say the least, about such statements. Their experience is that the Department's field workers act and speak as though assistance were a gift, a privilege for which clients must somehow prove themselves worthy, that field workers often treat recipients without respect, and that recipients often have to fight to get these so-called rights, and not always with success" (p. 121).

Burge's essay forms part of an excellent collection of articles that, between them, provide a vivid portrait both of the lives of workers and the poor, and of the struggles for change that they have been involved in. If Boychuk's account of the welfare state, while liberal in its overall tone, is quite bloodless and without a single anecdote, the accounts in *Toward a New Maritimes* are personal and passionate. They are nonetheless, on the whole, closely researched and richly detailed. Here we read about the struggles for social justice of, among others, the region's African-Americans, First Nations peoples, resource industry workers and social assistance recipients. Women's struggles against both the state and male chauvinism receive a great deal of attention. A few articles deserve special mention because of the ways in which they illuminate post-1945 social and political history generally through their discussion of a particular event. George Elliott Clarke's interview with Nova Scotia's long-time Black activist Rocky Jones links the destruction of the venerable Nova Scotian African community of Africville to the "liberal philosophy of urban renewal" which social workers subscribed to every bit as much as the business people who profited directly from such projects. He notes that relocations of residents of Newfoundland fishing communities, as much as people in decrepit neighbourhoods, had at their roots a "misguided humanitarianism" (p. 29).

An essay by Clarke, "The Black Renaissance", deals with the questionable acquittal of the murderer of an African-Canadian in Weymouth Falls, Nova Scotia. It raises larger issues of justice for non-whites in the province, noting that "structural racism" pervades the justice system, typified in the Donald Marshall case, but also evident "in its treatment of first-time Black offenders who, in Halifax, are always convicted, whereas twenty-three percent of white first offenders are given absolute discharges" (p. 23). Clarke also demonstrates that Nova Scotia Blacks have been fighting back, for example, in the murder case mentioned above, by forming the Weymouth Falls Justice Committee. The Committee tried to get a reversal of the acquittal but without success. Nonetheless, it succeeded in publicizing the racist treatment of non-whites in the province by the judicial system. An article by Marilyn Millward, "Clean Behind the Ears? Micmac Parents, Micmac Children, and the

Shubenacadie Residential School”, demonstrates that First Nations people in the Maritimes, like African-Canadians, have fought against oppression, though not always with immediate successes to show. Parents attempted for years to fight the residential schools’ policy of keeping the children from all contact with parents during the school year (pp. 45-59). In the period of virtually enforced domesticity for white women with children, Native women were denied even limited opportunities to nurture their offspring. Eventually, however, protests of the kind described in this article led to the phasing out of the residential schools and to the gradual takeover by First Nations themselves of their children’s education.

The essays in *Toward a New Maritimes* rarely introduce someone whose life experience would fit comfortably with the lives discussed in Doug Owram’s history of post-war Canadian life. This pastiche of essays on the Maritimes is dominated by images of single mothers, prisoners, non-whites, residents of resource communities with precarious working conditions selling their products in precarious markets and angry unemployed and homeless men. Somehow all these people escaped becoming part of the great Canadian middle class. One group that was more likely proportionately to achieve middle-class status were the veterans of the Second World War. They have been the beneficiaries of a recent collection of essays edited by Peter Neary and J.L. Granatstein, *The Veterans Charter and Post-World War II Canada* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997). On the whole, this volume’s accounts of how the Canadian state treated its fighting men — and a few women — are positive. Jeff Keshen recounts the federal government’s ambitious planning in the closing years of the war to ensure that veterans were well cared for. Veterans received pensions, government subsidies for housing, help in finding work, cheap loans to start businesses or become farmers and free university education. Peter Neary argues that the social programmes for the veterans gave a generation of state planners models for social development for the entire population (pp. 3-14). This may be true, but it is equally likely that the veterans’ programmes retarded social programmes for the rest of the population. After all, when Mackenzie King, always a fiscal conservative, looked at the costs of the universal programmes that his government was supposedly proposing to the Dominion-Provincial Conference on Reconstruction in 1945, he got cold feet. He began to think of how much money was already committed to veterans’ programmes and to fret about where extra dollars for new, permanent programmes might be found.²³

Theda Skocpol, studying the impact of veterans’ provisions after the American Civil War, concludes that the relatively generous and widely available veterans’ pensions served as a brake on demands for universal social insurance for several generations after the war. As it became clear that many claimants were frauds and that a bloated bureaucracy had developed to administer the pensions, it became easy to convince the electorate that government social programmes led only to waste and corruption.²⁴ By contrast, in Canada post-war veterans’ pensions and veterans’ programmes appear to have been generally well-administered, and their success may

23 Alvin Finkel, “Paradise Postponed”, p. 128.

24 Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).

have had a positive effect on popular perceptions of the ability of governments to design and administer social programmes. But Canadians would wait for a generation before most of the programmes promised in 1945 were implemented. Despite popular pressures during the war for a post-war world in which state responsibility for guaranteeing jobs to all who sought them as well as coverage of people's health, education and housing needs would be a priority, the government's decision to focus on veterans' welfare in 1945 appears to have been a flight from the welfare state rather than an intentional step towards its achievement.

On the whole then, it is interesting to observe how divergent the histories of Canada's recent past have become. Post-modernists might applaud the patchwork of stories about the post-1945 period as evidence of the willingness of different groups to interpret events in the light of their own experiences rather than submitting to a master narrative. But master narratives are needed to pull these stories together and demonstrate that they are not isolated, unrelated accounts. In the Canadian case, competing master narratives will be with us for many years to come.

ALVIN FINKEL