

Buying Happiness: The Emergence of Consumer Consciousness in English Canada by Bettina Liverant

Michael Dawson

Volume 111, Number 2, Fall 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065086ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065086ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Dawson, M. (2019). Review of [*Buying Happiness: The Emergence of Consumer Consciousness in English Canada* by Bettina Liverant]. *Ontario History*, 111(2), 217–219. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065086ar>

went from being told they were doing the best thing for their child when they made the choice to institutionalize to being told they could always have had their children with them and in the community. Burghardt again makes clear that blaming parents individualizes the broad factors she's outlined throughout (203); however, she makes clear that too much of the story of institutionalization has focused on parents and workers—the voices of the intellectually disabled needs to be prioritized so we do not repeat the oppression of the intellectually disabled through a different guise, such as community care facilities that limit the physical and emotional freedoms of their residents.

The main weakness of the book is one that the author refers to throughout: the lack of representation of racialized people in the histories she is uncovering. This issue in disability studies was raised by Chris Bell in 2010 and continues to be an issue in disability-related histories in Canada. Burghardt tries to address this by discussing how Indigenous children labelled as intellectually disabled were likely instead living in residential schools; however, no one

who might have fallen into this category was interviewed (as the author continually addresses issues of Indigeneity throughout the book, this is likely due to lack of available subjects rather than deliberate or accidental oversight). The lack of African-Canadians in disability history is a problem that the field is attempting to address, but limited sources outside of institutions that primarily served European-Canadians makes this difficult (54).

This book makes a strong contribution to Canada's growing disability history field. By choosing to prioritize the experiences of those institutionalized, Burghardt is able to highlight histories that are rarely able to be told. While it is obvious that this book also contributes to the histories of childhood, family, and medicine, I would also recommend it to those who study the creation of "normal" during the Cold War era. This is a strong first book, and I look forward to seeing what Burghardt does with her next project.

Joanna L. Pearce
PhD student, Department of History,
York University.

Buying Happiness

The Emergence of Consumer Consciousness in English Canada

By Bettina Liverant

Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2018. 304 pages. \$89.95 hardcover; ISBN 9780774835138. \$34.95 paperback; ISBN 9780774835145. \$34.95 EPUB; ISBN 9780774835169. \$34.95 PDF; ISBN 9780774835152. (ubcpress.ca).

Reflecting on Canada's economic situation in the years following the Second World War, Donald Gordon, then Deputy Governor of the Bank of Canada, offered the following upbeat assessment: We "drank one third more

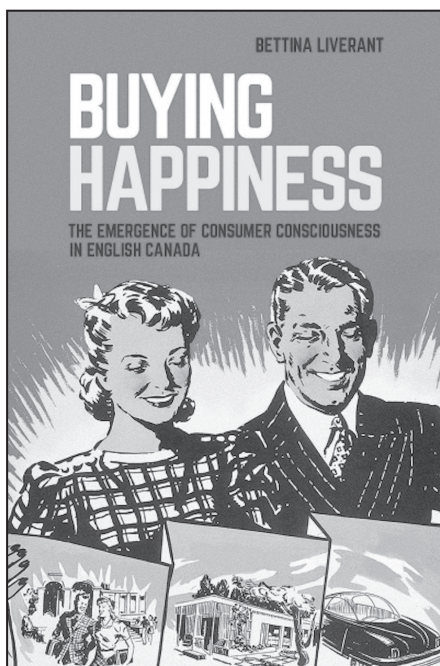
milk, ate two thirds more pork, rang up two thirds more movie admissions and bought 75 percent more new houses in 1948 than in... 1938... We used twice as much gasoline, chewed twice as much gum, bought twice as many refrigerators

and ate three times as much ice cream” (163). From our present vantage point, where concerns about overconsumption, planned obsolescence, and climate change pervade daily discourse, Gordon’s assessment appears both crass and lamentable. Bettina Liverant’s new book delves deep into the historical record to contextualize Gordon’s thoughts and, more importantly, to document when, how, and why consumption (and consumers) came to occupy such a central place in our understanding of Canada’s economic development—and Canadian society more generally.

Liverant employs a series of case studies that examine Canadian attitudes towards consumption from the 1890s to the 1960s. Central to her analysis is an awareness of the tensions at play as Canada developed a modern consumer economy. For a number of Canadians, this development offered promise and possibilities. Some social gossellers, for example, balanced their concerns about “the growing ethos of materialism and increasing extremes of wealth” (26) with an optimistic sense of what rising living standards might offer to Canada’s working-class population. For other concerned observers, however, consumerism seemed to suggest that Armageddon was at hand: the decline of self-reliance, the destruction of the family unit, and mountains of debt. Roadmaps for resistance came in a variety of forms. Conservative

critic Andrew Macphail pointedly refused to wear commercially produced clothing—opting instead to sport only “suits that had been cut from cloth woven by his mother” (22). Luckily for today’s fashion-conscious Canadians, Macphail’s one-man campaign failed to gather momentum. Instead, consumer demand for ready-made goods expanded dramatically and Liverant provides a thoughtful and quite comprehensive examination of this phenomenon.

The book is both an intellectual history endeavour (think Doug Owsram’s *Government Generation* meets Len Kuffert’s *A Great Duty*) and a detailed survey of Canada’s economic development that focuses on how government authorities and other self-proclaimed experts attempted to come to terms with the emergence of a consumer society. Central to the author’s argument is an awareness that the Great Depression marked a key turning point in



the development of Canada’s consumer society. In their scramble to secure votes during the 1935 election, Liverant notes, “politicians made consumption a legitimate public concern and a political rather than a personal, private matter” (109). Canadian history lecturers keen to update their notes on H.H. Stevens and the Royal Commission on Price Spreads and Mass Buying during the 1930s or government intervention in the economy during the Second World War would do well to dive

into Liverant's excellent account of these developments. Similarly, the lively chapter on advice and expectations for postwar consumers, which features excellent material from *Chatelaine* magazine, will be welcomed by a broad range of Canadian historians.

Liverant's gaze remains focused on intellectuals and experts whether they be politicians, government bureaucrats, social scientists, or magazine columnists. Indeed, the "consumer consciousness" examined here is probably better understood as a consciousness of consumers—a growing awareness of their influence—rather than a detailed examination of consumers' thoughts and identities. Moreover, the case studies on offer focus primarily on shifting intellectual attitudes towards the consumption of goods rather than services. Incorporating the Canadian (and international) literature on tourism and con-

sumption, for example, might well have reinforced some of the author's conclusions while challenging others.

Overall, *Buying Happiness* offers readers a welcome opportunity to reflect on the development of a consumer society in English Canada. It will appeal not just to historians of consumerism but to a wide range of scholars including those interested in intellectual history, political history, gender history, and, of course, the study of the Depression and the Second World War. More broadly, amidst ongoing debates about carbon taxes, the Ontario Basic Income Pilot, and school commercialism, Liverant's study offers a timely historical perspective that traces the development of a concept that pervades our daily lives—the idea that we are all, at our core, consumers.

Michael Dawson
St. Thomas University

Working Lives

Essays in Canadian Working-Class History

By Craig Heron

Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2018. 640 pages. \$49.95 softcover and ebook. ISBN 978-1-4875-2251-3 (utorontopress.com).

As more and more Canadian practitioners of the 'new' labour history reach retirement age, it is fitting that Craig Heron's *Working Lives* should appear. Heron, after all, is one of Canada's most accomplished labour historians and *Working Lives* is a hefty collection of his essays going back to the 1970s—charting his career-long explorations into the different aspects of working-class experience. But the collection functions as much as a guide to the development of labour his-

tory in Canada as a discipline as it does for Heron's personal trajectory. *Working Lives* is an exemplary book which captures both the new labour history's adaptations to more recent scholarly developments but also its core continuities. Ultimately, it is a testament to why working-class people and their struggles ought to remain central to the study of Canadian history.

As Heron recounts in the introduction, the new labour history first came to Canada during the 1970s. Young labour