

*The Dominion of Youth: Adolescence and the making of modern Canada, 1920 to 1950* By Cynthia R. Comacchio

Kristina Alexander

Volume 99, numéro 2, fall 2007

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065751ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065751ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Alexander, K. (2007). Compte rendu de [*The Dominion of Youth: Adolescence and the making of modern Canada, 1920 to 1950* By Cynthia R. Comacchio]. *Ontario History*, 99(2), 269–271. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065751ar>

The overwhelming impression, however, is that Barker has failed to meet an ineluctable standard by which textual composition is measured, and that by implication Barker's uncomplaining original readers perhaps have too. Gerber pithily observes that "[correspondents] wanted different content, not better grammar," but in asking for content to their liking, were they not also requesting the unorthodox grammar in which it was best conveyed? Gerber adopts a similarly stern tone in his discussion of Niblock, whose activities amount to "transnational and international failure, involving activities on three continents and a transoceanic network of family connections and subsidies and strained relationships" and whose correspondence is characterized by an inability to perform a "sustained reflection on the role in authoring the crises that punctuated his adult life." This judgment sits uneasily with Gerber's declaration, delivered in an eruption of jargon rare in a book remarkable for its lucid writing, that "[immigrants] were buffeted by the instabilities and discontinuities, such as emigrations and resettlement themselves, that necessitated adopting plural subject positionings appropriate to the shifting contexts of daily life common to modern individuals."

While in these instances a clearer expli-

cation of the author's own ambivalent position would have been helpful, other matters are discussed at unnecessary length – for example the several pages devoted to illustrating that correspondence was often rushed, when that point could have been made just as effectively in a single paragraph. Also rushed appears to have been the copy-editing. This book deserved better than letting confusion between "flaunt" and "flout" stand unchallenged, or failing to root out various stylistic infelicities (dangling modifiers, or noun-verb disagreements) that look all the more annoying in a study where the meaning of stylistics is front and centre.

None of these criticisms, however, makes this a less stimulating and important book. It is moving to read about correspondents like Mary Ann Archibald who assured her correspondent that "your letters are now so necessary to me that I cannot live comfortably without them and would wish to die with one of them in my hand" and who was comforted by their "friendly rustling" near her heart. Indeed, it is reassuring to know that in Gerber such letters have found the scrupulous and compassionate commentator they require.

Eva-Marie Kröller

University of British Columbia

## *The Dominion of Youth*

*Adolescence and the making of modern Canada, 1920 to 1950*

By Cynthia R. Comacchio. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006. ix + 298 pp. \$65.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-88920-488-8.

In *The Dominion of Youth*, historian Cynthia Comacchio traces the emergence of the figure of the modern teenager in Canada during the first half of the twentieth century. Using a variety of sources including newspapers, high school

yearbooks, memoirs, and advice literature, she links the circulation of new ideas about adolescence with Canada's coming of age as a modern industrial nation. The book begins by discussing the many theories and anxieties about modern youth

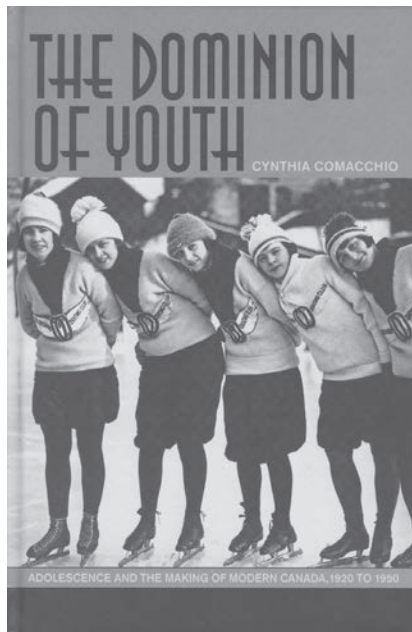
that were voiced by social commentators, educators, and medical and psychological experts between 1920 and 1950. These experts, who understood young people variously as frivolous flappers, endangered employees, and future citizens, discussed the place of adolescents in Canadian society with an unprecedented mix of confidence and concern. From there, Comacchio moves beyond theoretical discussions of adolescence to provide a wealth of information about what it was like to be a teenager in Canada during the 1920s, '30s and '40s.

Her discussion of family life in Chapter 2, for instance, shows the different ways in which new ideas about intergenerational relations affected relationships between parents and teenagers during these years. In Chapter 3 Comacchio argues that, despite adult concerns about adolescent sexuality and the new practice of dating at movie theatres and dance halls, early twentieth-century adolescent romances generally conformed to parental expectations. Chapter 4 highlights the increasing influence of secondary education in Canadian adolescent lives between 1920 and 1950, as provincial governments raised the age of school-leaving and used new technical and vocational high schools to replace older models of apprenticeship. High school classes and extracurricular activities were intended to mold young Canadians into efficient citizens and workers, and Comacchio writes that they did so in ways that largely perpetuated existing

class, gender, and racial hierarchies. But while modern Canadian teenagers stayed in school longer than any generation before them, Comacchio's discussion of employment in Chapter 5 shows that many young people continued to work for pay. Whether in farm labour, domestic service, factory work, or other occupations, full- and part-time employment defined the lives of many Canadian adolescents. Chapter 6 focuses on leisure activities and popular culture, and includes discussions of fashion, music, films, and advertising. Adults, Comacchio argues, saw teenagers' attraction to dance halls, the cinema, and consumer culture

as "grounded in larger issues of citizenship, national welfare, and the very nature of modernity, with its... 'new' highly questionable morality." (p. 161). The book's final substantive chapter looks at how adults sought to confront these worries about modern youth through organized leisure activities. Groups like the Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, and 1940s teen clubs, Comacchio writes, were formed in the hopes of shaping Canadian adolescents into moral and service-oriented citizens.

*The Dominion of Youth*, the first book-length study of the history of Canadian adolescence, is a significant piece of scholarship. Comacchio's work makes it a substantial contribution to Canadian social and cultural history, and her findings complement other studies of youth in the same period. Her discussion of adult concerns about the early twentieth-century 'youth problem' is



also a timely reminder that worries about gangs, teenage sexuality, and popular music have a longer history than many of us might imagine. Importantly, Comacchio also recognizes that her subjects actually belonged to several *different* generations. The different effects of the Depression and the Second World War on Canadian adolescent life, for example, are made clear in every chapter.

While recognizing that the book deals mainly with white, urban, and middle-class ideas and experiences, Comacchio acknowledges the fact that early twentieth-century Canadian adolescents were a far from uniform group. Popular perceptions and experiences of young men and women in rural settings, aboriginal residential schools, European and Asian immigrant households, and French Catholic communities, while far from dominant in her analysis, are present throughout the book. *The Dominion of Youth* also features a number of lively anecdotes about Ontario, the province that Comacchio claims was especially significant in Canadian youth culture and nation-building. Her chapter on high schools, for instance, discusses technical and vocational education in Toronto and Hamilton, high school dances in Kitchener, and basketball games between student teams from Guelph and Galt. The book's discussion of leisure and modern youth culture features an especially memorable account of a Guelph pastor's ultimately unsuccessful crusade against the "reeking atmosphere," "inevitable stirring of sexual passion" and "debauchery and degrading circumstances" of 1920s dance halls. (p. 161)

The discovery of modern adolescence was an international development. The fact that most western industrialized nations developed distinct youth cultures during the first half of the twentieth century is somewhat obscured by Comacchio's

efforts to place modern adolescence in the context of Canadian nation-building. The enormous influence of the United States on the ideas, policies, practices, and culture that affected young people in Canada during these years deserves more attention. *The Dominion of Youth* of course does not ignore the issue of American influence – notice a reference to Canadian cultural critics' reliance on experts from the United States (p. 173) – but a slightly broader view would greatly have enriched its arguments. Comacchio's discussion of the racial and ethnic overtones of the 'zoot-suit riots' that shook Montreal in 1943 and 1944, for example, would only have benefited from a discussion (however brief) of the similar violent clashes that took place between Hispanic 'zoot-suiters' and white soldiers and sailors in Los Angeles in 1942 and 1943. This is a relatively minor criticism, however, of a well-researched and informative book – one that contributes in important ways to Canadian history and the history of children and youth.

Kristina Alexander  
York University

### Bibliography:

- Fowler, David. *The First Teenagers: The Lifestyles of Young Wage-Earners in Interwar Britain*. London: Woburn Press, 1995.
- Savage, Jon. *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2007.
- Strange, Carolyn. *Toronto's Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880-1930*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995.
- Strong-Boag, Veronica. *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939*. Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988.