

Book Review

Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era
by Bryan D. Palmer. Toronto: University of Toronto Press,
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1-605.

Reviewed by Edward Hilchey¹

Curious about 'what it is to be Canadian'? If so, you are not alone. Grounding this question of identity in history, Bryan Palmer theorises that the turbulence of the 1960s played a significant role in the destabilization of established notions of Canadian identity. Re-evaluating the personalities and movements of the 1960s, Palmer argues that the 60s push towards an equitable society acted as a catalyst for questioning Canada's historic British identity. However, these movements did not provide any long lasting certainty over what Canada's national identity should entail.

Palmer's style of writing quietly and gently guides us into his perception of Canada's experience of the 1960s. Layering his work topically, Palmer demonstrates himself to be as much of a cultural as he is a labour historian. Well-supported with 143 pages of notes, he adds a humanistic depth to this work through a series of anecdotes from newspapers, poems, activist manifestos and other lesser known works. Through the effective use of these resources with broader themes and debates, Palmer critically engages the developments of the 1960s. Palmer connects a range of events which emerged in the 1960s through creative and concise language, blending the transformation of this social and political climate.

The choice to examine Canada during the 1960s for Palmer lies precisely in its overt activism. The 60s were marred with patterns of hostility demarcating regional, political, cultural, and linguistic disparities. Through a Marxist definition of irony (drawn from Terry Eagleton), Palmer comments that "capitalism is that of a system

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frozen in its fixed modes of representation, yet mobilizing a desire to overturn all representation; which gives birth to a great carnival of difference... which constantly conjures material inequality out of abstract equality; which is in need of an authority it continually flouts” (p. 9). The post-World War image of Canada was that of a white European colony emerging to become a state. The irony was that Canada was on the verge of confronting its own self image. In a renewed analysis, Palmer counters the notion that Canada’s 1960s was *sui generis*, that is, a spent generation whose objectives were not obtained (p. 5), and argues that this particular period was characterized with widespread changes in Canada.

Palmer sets the stage by contextualizing events within the broader history affecting Canada in the post-war era. Part 1 begins with the fluctuation of the Canadian dollar and its subsequent inflation in the early 60s. Reflecting on the unstable dollar as an indicator of political and economic ineffectiveness, political blunderings became the backdrop to express (and subsequently elect) needed change in Canada. These episodes quashed Canada’s image as one of British dominion, settled by a robust and progressive populace. As well, it severed many historical economic ties with Britain by shifting economic focus to the rise of the imperialist United States.

In Part 2, Palmer tracks the international attention being afforded to Canada through a variety of publicized events and scandals. Emphasizing the role of electronic media in broadcasting and journalism, Canadians became fascinated with sex scandals and political wrangling. From the Munsinger affair wherein a displaced woman from World War II came to media attention due to her personal relationships with prominent conservative figures, to the acceptance of the Ali-Chuvolo fight where an underdog boxer survived fifteen rounds with the ‘Louisville Lip’. The way Canadians perceived sexuality and white-ness was being transformed, paving the way for Trudeau mania. Canadians found themselves elated by the international recognition these events received, though these events flew in the face of Victorian values and conventions.

In Parts 3 & 4, he mentions that the politicization of youth and striking workers lead to the opening of Canada’s political organizations for debate. With airwaves and television screens saturated with nationalistic fervour, the unruly, reactive, and openly rebellious youth had moved from the margins of social transformation (paralleling labour) into “the very core of a decade’s understanding of social-political meaning” (p. 209). Youth were rejecting integration into family and nation, as represented in the Victoria Day disturbances. Street youth hostility shifted towards the development of subsequent banners of new left radicalism, revolutionary strife in Quebec and Indian Red Power. Alternative identities awoke and broadcasted their displeasure with British Canada. They drew their ideals, strength and support from the pantheon of marginal groups which were reinventing and redefining themselves.

The conclusion ends with the vanguard of British Canada gathering with the world in Montreal's Expo 67, celebrating Canada's arrival into the modern era. With the replacement of the Red Ensign for the Maple Leaf and an army of RCMP keeping the protestors and the FLQ at bay, Canadian identity would remain precarious. Yet, Expo 67 and the Maple Leaf flag would be as unsuccessful at charting a unified path for Canada as the Victoria Day celebrations and Bank of Canada issued currency before it. Palmer's remarks in the introduction are epitomized in this final section in which Canadians "finally extricated themselves from a national identity... [that] so many voices had come to proclaim outmoded" (24).

Palmer's understanding and application of historical materialism places increased emphasis on content and examples as compared to theoretical debate (five pages in the introduction are devoted to Eagleson & his theoretical perspective). Choosing to elaborate the historical antagonism bred from exploitation and struggle within Canada, as seen in the dearth of detail, he presents an interpretive history of Canada during the 60s, refocusing the period as a topic worthy of analytical spotlight. Palmer uses this work to 'suggest' (p. 21) the reasons why the past happened as it did, and how the outcome of these events maintained a destabilized Canadian identity. His analytical approach focuses on how the conflicting ideas were critically important to history. Palmer concludes that the dominant relations of class conflict may be seen in the struggle over Canadian identity, an identity which required significant consideration of how gender, race, empire and imperialism, social movements and identity interplay.

The significance of this book lies within its reminder to scholars that the struggles of the 1960s have not completely died, and that this period has made a lasting contribution to Canadian society. The intent is for others to understand the significant impact that 1960s & 70s politics and activism had in the uprooting of Victorian Canada. This book was written for both those who were present during the 60s and those who are interested in the implications of views from this period in Canada. Palmer asserts that what he offers through his work is "not so much a synthesis of the 60s, as suggestion on what destabilized the Canadian identity, rooted in some specifics" (21). The point becomes clear that everything has a history; that before Trudeau, we needed Munsinger; that before Red Power or the FLQ, we needed 'White Niggers of America' and hooliganism; that the transition of the Canadian identity could only occur while being rooted in these events. Reinforcing the point that Canadians have accepted an undetermined identity rather than one passed down from establishment, this book reopens the tumultuous period which was the 1960s for further analysis.

