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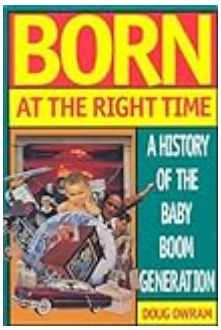

Doug Owram. *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. xiv + 392 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-5957-4.

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With the first wave of the Baby Boom hitting the mid-century mark, and the "Summer of Love" reaching its thirtieth anniversary, Doug Owram's *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* is itself a timely production. In some three hundred pages, Owram has put together a "biography of the first twenty-five years of a generation." And what a generation! At once "extraordinarily powerful" and possessed of a distinctive "sense of self," its force both measurable and mythic, it has had a rare "defining influence" on the larger sociocultural order (p. ix). Identified by the weight of its numbers, its material situation of unprecedented affluence, and its "connection with the fabled decade of the l960s," this generation is also historically delimited by a fourth, "more controversial factor: a "collective mental state" of uniqueness, perhaps more aptly classified as a collective self-image of "specialness."

Owram's case for mounting Boomer-power during the twenty-five years of his coverage entails a gradual layering of contextual detail in five chapters surveying postwar domesticity, childrearing, suburbanization, leisure, schooling, and an adolescence encapsulated in the l950s "cult of the teenager." Much useful and interesting data is collected here, of particular value since the study of post-Second World War Canada from a sociocultural perspective is relatively undeveloped, though showing much promise (eg. J. Parr, ed., *A Diversity of Women*, University of Toronto Press, 1995). The very newness of the field brings its own problems, as Owram also concedes. Much of his interpretation and analysis is necessarily tentative for being inaugural; the primary sources have yet to be surveyed in any depth or breadth to permit authoritative conclusions. And much of the information taken from published material seems familiar because we've already read what little there is. The first five chapters present an effective synthesis, but little that will startle those who have kept up with the literature. In fact, while Owram recognizes that certain trends were not "unique" to the 1950s and 1960s, he tends to forget his own caveat, as well as much of the extant analysis about these very subjects for the first half of the twentieth century. There are notable continuities from the 1920s–that other brave new generation–for an impressive number of these. Thus we get the impression that "babies were the topic of the day" more than ever before, that juvenile delinquency inspired moral panic for the first time, that advertisers were just beginning to capitalize on a growing youth market to promote new consumer goods and modern fads, and that the domesticity, technology, affluence and suburbanization of these years together sparked a newly-distinctive form of leisure. Curiously, he doesn't use the historiography on related topics for the earlier period–much of it published during the past five years–

to best effect to make these continuities clear while supporting his argument for the l950s as the apex of such family-focused concerns.

This study is strongest in its consideration of the 1960s, where Owram shows convincingly that, if only a small minority of Boomers actually participated in such notorious "scenes" as the counterculture and student protest movements, their influence was nonetheless manifest. There was much sympathy and at least tacit (or perhaps passive) support, not only within the massive peer group but, despite the "generation gap," even among the generations sandwiching the Boomers at the centre of all "happening" things. Truly more than ever before, the generation that came of age during the 1960s fundamentally influenced popular tastes, styles, perceptions, attitudes, standards and behaviour in everything from art through language, fashion, music, film, relationships, spirituality, and the status of women, Quebeckers, Aboriginals and visible minorities–not to mention pharmaceuticals. The 1960s chapters will doubtless enliven many lectures in "Contemporary Canada" history courses. Given the "media consciousness" and sheer visual impact of this time, with its obsessive attention to "the look" of things, it really is a shame that there are so few photographs to accompany the text.

Owram is careful to acknowledge that the remarkable generational cohesiveness of the Boomers did not make them an undifferentiated mass. He has delineated a particular segment of Boomer history as his appropriate subject matter by intentionally focusing on its middle-class, white, urban, Euro-Canadian, "mainstream" manifestations. As such, he has supplied the requisite framework for closer looks at other, not-so-mainstream, if not altogether "alternative" facets of growing up in the 1950s and 1960s. What was life like for those coming of age in rural areas and small towns in this historic moment? On parts of the East Coast that perhaps did not share the prosperity of central Canada? In the families of immigrants, many of them recently arrived, often with Boomer children who were first-generation Canadian? In communities demarcated by religion, culture, race, language? Owram touches on Quebec, uncovering tantalizing bits of the distinct and vibrant cultural transformation that fuelled the Quiet Revolution of those years, but, as he points out, it clearly demands a full study of its own. We also need to know more about Aboriginal experiences, both within the Red Power movements and in their day-to-day reality. We need to know more about the effects of Women's Liberation and the new sexual and reproductive freedom–not so much from the viewpoint of the vanguard and its aspirations, as from that of the rank and file of young and non-university-educated women. How did the new openness and freedom translate for those whose participation in the sexual revolution was not defined by heterosexuality? And what about the role of that other critical development of the Boom years, the welfare state, in all that concerned families, sex, public education, and reproduction during this period?

As he notes, Owram's subjects, a necessarily-limited sample of the Boomer generation, still pose challenges about how much we can talk in terms of shared experiences. It is daunting to think how few generalizations historians can make about the vast array outside that sample. Even the notion of the "right time" brings a few questions to mind. Late-Boomers, for example, took part in much of this history only vicariously. They served principally as an audience for older siblings, watching their activities or those of their counterparts on television and movie screens. Their own tender years likely restricted them to emulating a few of the counterculture's less threatening aspects, such as musical tastes and hair and clothing styles, just as many of their parents were doing. By the time they came of age in the late 1970s, conformist pressures were mounting in direct relation to diminishing affluence. Idealism, political radicalism and even "self-knowledge" were looking like drug-induced fantasies–and self-indulgent ones at that. The repressive forces that Boomers believed they had vanquished were regrouping, in short. Could it be that late-Boomers have more in common, then, with their own Generation Y children than with their "born at the right time" (lucky?) older siblings?

All such questions aside, Doug Owram has achieved what he set out to do. He has given scholars, students, and interested readers a colourful "slice" of what life was like for those born in the 1950s and coming of age in the tumultuous l960s, the enviable Baby-Boomers and their unenviable parents. He makes it clear that "timing," that critical "historical moment" that sees the conjuncture in just the "right" ways of ideological, material, and sociocultural strains to foster a particular outcome, a very special generation in this case, is the key to understanding the nature of that "specialness" and its long-term effects. Another point that pierces his analysis is the unrelenting pressure of American influence on just about everything, revealing how difficult it is to untangle what was Canadian, or at least not-American, about these issues and events anywhere outside Quebec. The study of contemporary Canada might well have to be North American in scope and perspective.

For all its unique generational force, there is simply too much to chronicle in a single history of the Baby Boom. There are many histories to be found therein, mainstream and otherwise. In the meantime, Doug Owram has presented an evocative, and provocative, point of departure.

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