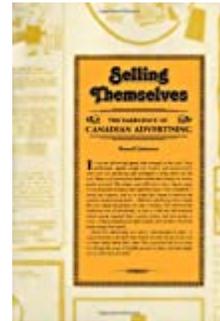




**Russell Johnston.** *Selling Themselves: The Emergence of Canadian Advertising.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. viii + 355 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-4495-2.



**Reviewed by** Sandra Gabriele (Concordia University, Montreal)

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Russell Johnston's *Selling Themselves* is a fascinating addition to the history of advertising and publishing. His work is thoroughly researched, clearly written, and convincingly argued. Although there are gaps in the development of parts of this book, it contributes considerably to the literature concerning the emergence of systems of communication in Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. American scholars interested in some of the connections shared between the industries as they developed in each country may be interested in this book as well. Indeed, as one of the three themes that emerge from this history, the relationship to the American trade is carefully traced, particularly how Canadian adworkers built on American innovations in ways that were uniquely suited to their Canadian clients and culture. Another theme that emerges is the transformations of the early publishing industry (chapter 1) and later developments of the consumer and farming magazines in the 1920s and 1930s (chapter 7). In this latter chapter, Johnston argues that it was the farm papers that were uniquely suited to compete with their American counterparts by re-creating the successful marketing formulas of the American consumer magazine, while retaining the uniquely Canadian editorial content that was intimately connected to the lives of their readers. Sadly, the consumer magazines' fate was less successful, the ramifications of which continue today.

The third theme that occupies at least two chapters in the book (chapters 3 and 4) details the quest to professionalize the industry. It is in these chapters that Johnston's argument about the cooperation and interdependence of the agents, publishers, and advertisers is most fully developed and forcefully argued. Johnston succeeds in outlining how the emergence of advertising rested on the development and fostering of the relationships between these three historical actors. Although I kept wondering what happened to that other actor—the consumer—as a history of the institutional relations and structures that facilitated the development of an industry, this book clearly establishes the terrain under examination. Finally, the book is organized around a possible fourth theme: the emergence and subsequent refinement of the techniques used to sell. Perhaps the most fascinating chapters in the book were the later ones (chapters 5 through 7), which outline the influence of academic psychology on the copywriter, and the emergent scientific rationalization that overtook the industry as it sought to legitimate itself through market research and the management of risk. As Johnston argues, these developments ushered in a new logic of advertising that continue to be refined in today's era of increasingly sophisticated market research.

While overall, I greatly enjoyed this book, I was dis-

appointed in some under-explored, or unexplored, areas. Firstly, this book is not an emergence of Canadian advertising, since there is little by way of the historical developments of cities other than Toronto, and to a lesser extent Montreal and some prairie provinces. Although I do not disagree with Johnston's claim that Toronto represented the center of development and activities for the emerging industry, surely its development varied with regional differences. As anyone acquainted with Canadian history quickly discovers, regional developments in communication systems did not occur evenly and were highly influenced by local cultures and actors. Although Johnston claims that, with fewer papers and fewer manufacturers, other urban centers were not the center for the kinds of innovations that pushed the industry to develop, this does not implicitly mean that there may not be differences that are worth exploring. Nor does it necessarily mean that Toronto's adworkers or agencies may have been the norm. Like much media history that charts undeveloped terrain, the biggest and "best" has been highlighted to the neglect of other—though, perhaps, less "sexy"—experiences that lay elsewhere. This is not to criticize Johnston for his concentration on Toronto per se. Since much of this history is new, it makes sense to begin at the center of it all. One must also be content with limitations in the archival materials (p. 15). It is, however, to say that perhaps making a claim to the "emergence of advertising in Canada" is a bit misleading and preemptive.

Second, central to Johnston's argument about the development of the industry in the crucial early years of the twentieth century is the emergence of a relationship between publishers, ad agencies, and manufacturers. The backdrop to all of this is the profound cultural and social changes that occurred as industrialization re-ordered the economic foundations in the late nineteenth century. Barring a few pages describing urban growth, demographic changes, and some scant cultural and political changes, the effects of industrialization are not fully explored. For instance, what's the relationship between the changing routines of work to the emergence of advertising, the trademarked commodity, and leisure? What about the changes to the private sphere that were the corollary to the shifting public sphere as newspapers began to change their roles? Finally, to move beyond the nineteenth century, what happens to advertising as media other than print, such as radio, begin to appear? One could argue that these changes were more than simply "context" to the advertising industry's development, but were part of the very landscape within which the agency

workers and owners—the heroes of Johnston's history—were forced to navigate. Surely these warrant a somewhat more balanced treatment, given the relative importance these developments occupy within the larger historical picture. Given that Toronto was indeed at the center of industrialization for this nation at the end of the nineteenth century, there exists a vast amount of literature detailing its urban, economic, manufacturing, demographic, and newspaper history in this city. It seems curious then that this literature wasn't more fully exploited.

Similarly, Johnston's characterization of publishers and manufacturers, the other key actors, could have been more fully fleshed out. Very little information or characterization is offered about the nature of this sudden "rise in the volume of advertising" as Johnston repeats over and over again. Who were these advertisers, for instance? Canadian journalism historians just might cringe a little at the overly generalized description of the *fin-de-siècle* newspaper. It is worth mentioning, however, that for the student of journalism history, there are interesting parallels one might make. For instance, as advertising strategies shifted towards the end of the nineteenth century, they, in fact, mirrored newspaper style in their "personalized" and direct style of addressing the reader. Unfortunately, Johnston does not explore such connections precisely because his newspaper history is not as strong as it should be. One last point seems worth mentioning: Johnston should have gotten right the name of one of the most famous nineteenth-century women journalists—especially since she's one of the few women mentioned (see also "Women Adworkers," pp. 73-76). Johnston refers to Kathleen Blake Coleman as Katherine Coleman (p. 196). Though she was born Catherine Ferguson, she changed her name to Kathleen long before she arrived in Canada and wrote under the pseudonym "Kit" (see Barbara M. Freeman's *Kit's Kingdom: The Journalism of Kathleen Blake Coleman*, Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1989, p. 2). It is particularly a shame he didn't spend more time researching her, since she, along with the editors of the *Daily Mail* and a local merchant, ran an 1890 contest to discover the best way to advertise to women. "Women's tastes are the advertiser's puzzle," the ad promoting the contest read (Oct. 25, 1890). It would seem women were more than merely peripheral to some of these developments.

Ultimately, the critiques offered here concentrate on the finer details of Johnston's work. To take this book on its own terms, however, is to appreciate the richness of historical detail to be found here. For historians interested in newspaper history, there is much here that may

not necessarily surprise, but will certainly render more complex and full what we know about how newspapers changed at the end of the nineteenth century. Given the increasing reliance newspapers came to have on advertising, the usefulness of this book within journalism history, as well as within advertising and consumer history, is sure to be felt.

Sandra Gabriele is currently completing her dissertation, "Gendering Journalism History: The Emergence of the Woman Journalist in Toronto, 1880-1905." She plans to complete her Ph.D. in Communication Studies (Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec) this fall.

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