



Keith Walden. *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. xx + 430 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8020-0885-5.



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Keith Walden's *Becoming Modern in Toronto* is not consciously urban history, but a cultural history of the Toronto Industrial Exhibition in the late nineteenth century. More precisely, this book is about how an annual fair helped shape understanding in a society going through unsettling change. Walden of Trent University uses late Victorian Toronto and the Exhibition to explore his chief interest--the process of modernization and how the "new cultural history" can help us to comprehend this change. The result is a superb blend of conventional and postmodern methodology that promises some significant insights for urban historians.

The "new cultural history" represents a step beyond an older cultural history in which culture was understood to include everything that people did and thought, as exemplified by Lewis Mumford's *The Culture of Cities* (1931), and *The City in History* (1961). Perhaps the most successful urban history of this traditional type is Carl Schorske, *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (1980), still one of the best examples of those studies which sought to show how a society's culture is related to the character of its cities.

The new cultural history does not have a neat and tidy approach, of course, but appears to have emerged out of the myriad of theories which include the insights of anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner and the linguistic theories of Jacques Derrida and the Deconstructionists. But this new phase seems to have gone considerably beyond some of the excesses of post-modernist theories in which culture often seemed to be little more than a set of words. As Jay Smith puts it, historians must now recognize that "language expresses meanings that are determined not only by semiotic context but also by the collective and value-laden assumptions of the people who constitute society." [1] Some urban historians have made good use of this new approach--which often does not look all that new. Good examples include Allan Pred's study of the process of modernization in late nineteenth century Stockholm; Alan Mayne's analysis of newspaper representations of slums in Birmingham, Sydney and San Francisco; Carl Smith's discussion of three violent events in Chicago and the way Americans came to link the big city and disorder; and Esther Paszto-

ry's reconstruction of the character of ancient Teotihuacan.[2]

In this vein, Keith Walden's complex book is an exploration into how "meaning is constructed" in a society undergoing rapid change. He argues that the Toronto Exhibition "helped shape understandings in a society being altered profoundly by industrial capitalist production, technological developments, and new ideas and values, including consumerism" (p. xi). On the one hand, this is a study of straightforward cultural domination, of imposed meaning by a powerful elite. Victorian Toronto was primarily a "British" city of Anglo-Celtic stock, whose elite was confident in the virtues of their own values. They were able to use the fair as a lever to turn their biases and values into "common sense" perceptions of daily living. The fair was used, for example, to effectively legitimize Toronto's centralization of power at the expense of smaller places in its hinterland.

On the other hand, this study also investigates how meaning was debated and contested, although this aspect is more complex and less clearly developed. Walden's intellectual scaffolding includes the anthropological concepts of ritual and especially of "liminality" and "transgression." Fairs were like carnivals, large-scale ceremonies of a particularly unstable sort, where normal structures were dissolved and allowed to interact in new ways that were normally prohibited. Sources for this kind of approach are a problem and Walden recognizes the limitations of his sources. Of necessity they were primarily the five to seven Toronto daily newspapers, all of which were city boosters and uniformly positive about the fair's objectives. Walden believes that the papers do reveal the attitudes of an urban middle class, whose understanding of the world would spread to other segments of society. I should point out that Walden has used newspapers as effectively as any author I have read in a long time.

The complex and contradictory manner of establishing "meaning" is spelled out in thematic

chapters with powerful one-word titles: order, confidence, display, identity, space, entertainment, and carnival. All of these provide valuable insights into the process of modernization but some are more directly relevant to urban history. The key theme is that of order, for a fundamental aim of the Exhibition was to demonstrate that city life had stability and pattern. By carving up the world into manageable categories, the fair reinforced the established order, as did other Victorian institutions such as museums, libraries, and department stores. But the fair's efforts to impose rigid hierarchies was usually matched by a countervailing tendency to challenge those hierarchies, for the fair provided the venue for transgression of those social norms through some of the less savoury activities that were allowed. The fair attracted rowdyism, drunkenness, theft, and prostitution to the city and Walden paints a detailed picture of the underside of Toronto that was a far cry from the official versions of "Toronto the Good."

Closely related to order is a chapter on confidence, which really amounted to confidence-building. This involved the way the fair addressed society's concerns about how big city life and industrialization seemed to be eroding traditional values. Walden outlines three matters of confidence--about the sociability of crowds, about manufactured goods, and about the city of Toronto itself. The city's economic progress and population growth (more than 375,000 by 1911), and its commercial and cultural attractions were on display as much as the exhibits at the fairgrounds. But the fair also highlighted another universal urban characteristic--confidence men and women, who represented the extreme form of the age old urbanite tendency to fleece the unwary country visitor.

The urban and rural relationship is further dealt with in a chapter on identity. The fair brought city and country residents together in greater numbers than any other annual event. Ironically, this conjunction only tended to accen-

tuates differences and harden stereotypes. Urbanites reacted to farmers with a mixture of respect and ridicule. While the fair officially portrayed agriculture as a cornerstone of the economy and idealized a life close to nature, when in the city, the farmer became a hick, a continual source of mirth and mockery. It would appear that an important element of an urbanite's self-definition was a perceived difference from country people.

Walden seems less confident in a chapter on "space," but like many other scholars, he shows how the fairground can be related to other social constructs such as the park and the city. The fairgrounds were often regarded as a miniature model city where architecture and landscaping were used to elevate the moral tone of the community. Like the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, the Toronto Exhibition encouraged a tendency toward spatial principles of ordering in the city itself, which included notions of a clear differentiation between groups of people and between various types of activities. But fairgrounds, like cities, were not pristine vehicles of high culture alone, for fairgrounds also gave space to a lower form of culture, the frivolous commercial entertainments which attracted the pleasure-seeking crowds.

In conclusion, *Becoming Modern in Toronto* is a major work, with real significance for how we study urban society and the city. It is conceptually sophisticated and beautifully written. It recognizes the complexity of social change and the difficulties of making sense of it from our perspective, even as contemporaries found it difficult to do so. In some respects Walden's work reminds me of that of Thomas Bender, which I regard as high praise. Bender defines himself as a cultural historian interested in cities, who argues for a notion of the city "as a collectivity based on difference."^[3] Perhaps Walden's chief contribution to an understanding of social change in an urban setting is his effort to explore how certain cultural meanings are formed, and how contradictory and different those meanings can be.

Notes

[1]. Jay M. Smith, "No More Language Games: Words, Beliefs, and the Culture of Early Modern France," *American Historical Review*, 102 (December, 1997), p. 1439.

[2]. Allan Pred, *Lost Words and Lost Worlds: Modernity and the Language of Everyday Life in Late Nineteenth-Century Stockholm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Alan Mayne, *The Imagined Slum: Newspaper Representation in Three Cities, 1870-1914* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993); Carl Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, The Haymarket Bomb and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Esther Pasztor, *Teotihuacan: An Experiment in Living* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

[3]. Bruce Stave, "A Conversation with Thomas Bender: Urban History as Intellectual and Cultural History," *Journal of Urban History*, 14 (August, 1988), p. 470.

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