Comptes rendus / Book Reviews


In the first decades of the twentieth century, amusement parks and seaside resorts such as Coney Island in New York and Blackpool in northern England became ideal destinations for a respite from the demands of modern industrial life. The cool air and “carnivalesque” nature of these seascapes drew a variety of pleasure-seekers hoping to refresh their minds and bodies. Though the elite practice of “taking the waters” had been popular for centuries, by the 1900s, similar excursions were being commoditized and commercialized for a genteel middle-class. Sites such as Coney Island, Blackpool, and even Winnipeg Beach, as Dale Barbour’s study illustrates, became ideal attractions because they combined nature and leisure into an attractive package located a short (and affordable) train ride away.

There have been relatively few histories published in Canada that examine leisure outside of an urban framework. In Winnipeg Beach: Leisure and Courtship in a Resort Town, 1900-1967, Dale Barbour turns his attention specifically to one such place: Winnipeg Beach. Barbour depicts Winnipeg Beach, located on the west shore of Lake Winnipeg, as Canada’s own “Coney Island of the West” (p. 146). He argues that although the site was consciously constructed to be a playground for the elite, it increasingly became a “boundary zone” (p. 7) where social mores entered a state of temporary flux. He finds that many of the legacies of early twentieth century Canada, such as the blossoming of a distinct youth culture, mass consumption and consumerism, and a nervous awareness of the “other” converged at Winnipeg Beach.

Winnipeg Beach is comprised of four chapters that are structured chronologically and thematically. Barbour begins by exploring the central role that the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) played in transforming Winnipeg Beach into a tourist destination and facilitating travel to and from the resort town. In the early 1900s, as Winnipeg was in the midst of an economic boom, social up-and-comers yearned for a restful counterpart to the hustle and bustle of urban life. Located approximately an hour north of the city, Winnipeg Beach proved to be an ideal location for such retreat because it was easily accessible and virtually untouched by “modern” life. In 1901, the CPR, recognizing the economic potential of Lake Winnipeg, began promoting an image of Winnipeg Beach that catered to the desires of the “respectable” classes. A trip to the Beach, the CPR advertised, would provide visitors with a multitude of amusements both natural and human-made.

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This newly created tourist infrastructure welcomed visitors to the town. But it also reminded them that societal norms pertaining to age, gender, class, race, and ethnicity were being simultaneously reinforced and reconfigured at Winnipeg Beach. In its early years, the site operated as an extension of Winnipeg itself. It was a place where vacationing wives and children eagerly anticipated the weekend arrival of their white-collar husbands and fathers. These people often maintained exclusive social circles within the privacy of their rented cottages. Teenagers and young adults used the town for courting purposes and hoped to forge romantic attachments with one of the many people who frequented the beach. Outside the confines of their parents’ cottages, these prospective lovers found sexual freedom at the midway and on the pier. Though white heterosexual experiences dominate the study, Barbour balances these histories by including the perspectives of marginalized tourists such as homosexuals who also found a degree of sexual freedom at the beach. Although a more nuanced discussion of homosexual behaviour would have been welcome, it is certainly understandable that such intimate details are few and far between for this period. Jewish tourists, in contrast to the discrimination they often faced in Winnipeg, found that their tourist dollars often were more important than religion, ethnicity, or race. Meanwhile less affluent men and women found ample employment opportunities in the local businesses that served the tourist industry.

Throughout Winnipeg Beach, Barbour endeavours to show how this “leisure zone” (pp. 11-12) on Lake Winnipeg helped facilitate a revolution in dating practices after the Great War. As the emphasis on gentility and respectability waned throughout the 1920s and 1930s, options for fun and entertainment at Winnipeg Beach paralleled these behavioural shifts. A notable manifestation of this was the myriad ways in which men and women were increasingly able to push the boundaries of sexual appropriateness by openly dating in public. Although holding hands on the boardwalk or cuddling at the pier became the norm, many of the societal expectations of modesty, particularly for women, remained.

Barbour concludes by examining how, in the 1950s and 1960s, a variety of factors ranging from natural disasters to the new suburban dream of postwar Canada were responsible for Winnipeg Beach’s decline. By the 1960s, the CPR’s goal of establishing the Beach as “respectable” getaway was undermined by its growing reputation as an immoral, anti-modern, and “honky-tonk” town. The result, Barbour notes, was that middle-class tourists with disposable incomes began to favour more child-centred amusements such as Disneyland.

By effectively integrating newspaper articles alongside oral histories of Winnipeg Beach’s former excursionists, Barbour provides a richly detailed narrative wherein the sights, sounds, and smells of the Beach transcend the page. Arguably, Barbour’s most noteworthy contribution is his awareness of, and ability to demonstrate how, the constructions, conceptions, and uses of Winnipeg Beach shifted between 1900 and 1967. Here the most notable transformation occurred in the ways that gender was lived at the beach. As the gender order at the beach was being remade, business owners attempted to meet the demands of the male and female tourists seeking fun and excitement. The men and women of this “boundary zone” entered into an alternate world where “traditional” ideas of gender no longer applied. This aspect of Winnipeg Beach is undeniably integral to the study’s broader framework, but it is often overstated to the point of repetitiveness.
Though Barbour does pay brief attention to incidents of violence, on the whole, Winnipeg Beach is surrounded by a rather romantic wistfulness for the “good old days.” Indeed for many whose histories are told in Winnipeg Beach, it will forever remain the place where summer romances blossomed into marriages, lifelong friendships were forged, and familial ties were solidified. This study will find readers from across historical fields. Historians of travel, tourism, and leisure, as well as those who study gender, sexuality, and the environment will discover much about the social and cultural histories of Winnipeg Beach.

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Alison Conway’s study shows the figure of the royal courtesan to be a primary cultural signifier in England’s efforts to resolve the political and religious instabilities that manifested in the late seventeenth century. The “Protestant Whore,” in addition to being Nell Gwyn’s self-appointed moniker, is a conceptual social category through which writers imagined an ethical system separate from the interests that corrupted most other subject positions. The legacy of the Protest Whore maintains this self-sufficient integrity, Conway argues, throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, where we see literary texts and cultural debates invoke the English royal courtesan as an entity with a special capacity to opt out of the passionate discourses of throne and Church, the corruptions of aristocratic masculinity, and the normativity of domestic ideology. The great many strengths of this study include Conway’s innovative approach to period distinctions between “Restoration” and “eighteenth-century;” her emphasis on the role of gender in shoring up political legitimacy and narrative authority; and her coining of the formal category “courtesan narrative,” a thread of the novel’s origins that looks not forward to a domestic modernity but backward to a ribald cultural past in order to formulate concepts such as sovereignty, authority, and religion.

Conway richly reconstitutes the period’s textual debates over religion and politics, and begins each chapter by documenting the recurring figure of the courtesan before turning to literary texts that internalize the figure’s privileged perspective on individual, community, church, King, and God, relationships that were most explicitly questioned during the late seventeenth century but remained of the utmost importance: “Characterizations of the Restoration as a form of political and sexual pathology speak . . . to the issues immediately at hand for eighteenth-century authors, who continued to struggle with dissent, doubt, and aggression” (p. 7). Courtesan narratives persist through mid-century, which sees the last of the Jacobite rebellions and, for Conway, the waning urgency of the questions of cultural legitimacy associated with state politics.

The Protestant Whore moves chronologically from Restoration to mid-century, attending equally to political and literary events that shaped authors’ perspectives. Vividly documenting the textual wars over succession, religious tolerance, Charles II’s sexual