

Angela Davis — *Art and Work: A Social History of Labour in the Canadian Graphic Arts Industry to the 1940s*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995. Pp. xx, 187.

One of the most interesting items in the 1993 William Morris exhibit mounted by the Art Gallery of Ontario was a letter from Morris to James Mavor:

I beg you to dismiss from your mind the idea that the workman can afford any art of any sort whatever in the teeth of the "Iron Law".... So here's 3 cheers for the Social Revolution! For till it comes art must be in the hands of the Monopolists and their parasites — whereof I am one.

In this statement of frustration, Morris was commenting on the strange divide that separated the world of everyday life from the world of artistic creation.

In her social history of work in the Canadian graphic arts industry, art historian Angela Davis also comments, more optimistically, on this central dilemma of modern culture. Her study documents the impact of new technologies on the production of visual culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and thus contributes to an understanding of the social history of one sector of cultural production. At the same time she advances the argument that the achievements of Canadian graphic artists deserve greater recognition — first of all by the technical and aesthetic standards of their own modes of expression, but additionally because the world of commercial art played a significant part in the formation of what we have come to regard as the mainstream traditions of Canadian art. While art history in Canada has usually focused on the appreciation of "fine art", Davis draws our attention to the neglected world of "commercial art". Such divisions, she suggests, are artificial and unhistorical, not least because both kinds of art were often produced by the same individuals — as was typically the case among members of the Group of Seven. Indeed, Davis reaches the conclusion that "the separation of fine art and commercial art started when industrialization of the means of reproduction placed engravers and illustrators in a new work environment and when official art institutions formulated criteria that were not always directly related to skill" (p. 131).

The rise of the graphic arts industry in late nineteenth-century Canada drew on older traditions, including the often picturesque work of illustrators who accompanied exploration and survey parties and subsequently published lithographs and engravings depicting the landscape of British North America. The most direct influences came from contemporary developments in the world of British publishing at the middle of the nineteenth century, which provided much of the technical knowledge and practical experience for the establishment of a substantial domestic industry. In 1869 the *Canadian Illustrated News* became the first periodical in the world to use the difficult new photo-engraving methods, although wood engraving and lithography continued to predominate until the end of the century. One British artisan who became influential in the development of the Canadian industry was Frederick Brigden, who had served an apprenticeship in London with the eminent

engraver William Linton. Influenced in his early days by John Ruskin, Brigden regarded himself as an “art-workman” dedicated to the craft of creating and reproducing visual images. In Canada the expansion of the domestic economy coincided with the advent of new forms of mass communication based on the printing trades, and this in turn had a visible impact on popular culture. Brigden prospered in the course of this boom and rose to control a Toronto firm that prepared much of the illustrative material for books, magazines, and newspapers and for major commercial customers such as the Eaton’s mail-order catalogues. While Brigden became a leading entrepreneur in the new graphic arts industry, other artisans found themselves transformed into lower-status employees in an industry that relied on new engraving technologies and an increasing specialization in the division of labour. Although the graphic arts had always involved collaborative work, at one extreme the artists who drew the fashion catalogue pages were now subdivided into those responsible for faces, hands, garments, ornaments, and other details. Not surprisingly, labour conflicts arose in this environment over issues of hours, wages, and regulation of the workplace. By 1904 Brigden, somewhat reluctantly it appears, accepted the presence of unions to represent the interests of his workers. Yet he and his son Fred Brigden continued to see themselves as defenders of taste and standards in the production of a modern representational art that took its rightful place in the world of everyday life.

Meanwhile, the industrialization of art had reinforced the divisions between those who practised “fine art” (and were regularly invited to join such national institutions as the Royal Canadian Academy of Art) and those who were engaged in “commercial art”. Although fine art had been supported for centuries by the patronage of church, state, and wealth, the patronage of business was applied to practical purposes in the world of commercial art. This was clear enough to the thousands of men and women who gained employment in the expanding graphic arts industry during this period. Even within these constraints, there were opportunities for creative work. This was the case as early as the 1860s, when the Notman Studios gained their reputation for technical excellence in hand-coloured photography. It was apparent in the ambitious engravings published in volumes such as *Picturesque Canada* (1882) and the influential work of J. W. Bengough, C. W. Jefferys, and others who drew for Canadian magazines and newspapers. Jefferys himself was, like the Brigdens, an articulate defender of the value of what Davis calls “the art of everyday life”. Pointing to the advertising posters of his time, Jefferys anticipated Marshall McLuhan in arguing that “a hundred or two hundred years hence such work ... may be deemed more typical of the art of our time than some of the more pretentious paintings which hang in our public galleries and museums” (pp. 95–96). As Davis makes clear, however, the case for the significance of commercial art does not rest solely on its own qualities. J. E. H. MacDonald, the senior member of the Group of Seven, had a long career as an engraver and designer for Toronto firms well before he enjoyed success as a painter; most other members of the Group of Seven, as well as Tom Thomson, also worked as commercial artists at various times in their careers and continued to undertake book designs and other commissions once they were known for their painting. Certainly,

the case study of Winnipeg suggests that the decision by the Brigden firm to open a local branch in 1914 had a galvanizing effect on the local art scene, eventually producing artists of stature such as Charles Comfort. While it is the conventional wisdom that the Group of Seven represented the first appearance of a distinctive national art in Canada (itself a problematic notion for an Ontario-centric landscape group in a highly regionalized but also urbanizing and industrializing country), it must certainly be accepted that the foundations of much widely recognized achievement are to be found in the world of commercial art.

In all, this is a stimulating work that should help reinvigorate the study of Canadian art history. This book shows how a thoughtful use of social history can generate new insights into a traditional subject. Because the book originated in the author's dissertation on the Brigdens, there is an understandable emphasis on Toronto, Winnipeg, and the art of engraving; studies of other local and regional experiences are still needed, as are additional studies of individual firms and other branches of public art, especially in the period since the 1920s. Moreover, as Davis indicates, by the 1930s graphic artists seem to have been more concerned about the limitations both of business patronage and of elitist standards; by 1936 the Trades and Labour Congress had even chartered a new Artists' Union that was seeking new forms of sponsorship and support for the production of art. As new technologies of communication proliferate at the end of the twentieth century, the debate about production of art in the age of mass culture remains timely. Sadly, we will not hear more on the subject from this promising scholar, who died before her book was published. There are rich opportunities for the expansion of art history in this country, and it will be up to others to pursue the work.

David Frank
University of New Brunswick

Doug Owrām — *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation*.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. Pp. xxv, 392.

The generation born after the Second World War continues to have a major impact on social institutions and popular culture in Canada. Preoccupation with youth culture and its needs has long given way to concern over middle age, no doubt soon to be supplanted by a focus on seniors. The demographic significance of the largest birth cohort in Canadian history will continue to be felt well into the next century, literally until death. Although this demographic bulge will remain influential throughout its existence, Doug Owrām argues that its real social legacy is found in its youth, in the turbulent 1960s. *Born at the Right Time* sets out to explain the emergence of this rebellious youth culture.

Owrām identifies his study as a "biography of the first twenty-five years of a generation" (p. ix). This social biography cuts a large swath through the middle, leaving questions of class, ethnicity, race, gender (though there is some attention to