

D.C.M. Platt, ed. — *Social Welfare, 1850-1950: Australia, Argentina and Canada Compared*. London: Macmillan, 1989. Pp. xii, 208.

This collection of essays on the comparative social history of Argentina, Australia and Canada is a sequel to an earlier comparison by the editor of comparative development in the three countries, from 1870 to 1965, published in 1985. It is an interesting if uneven attempt at comparative social history as the ten essays — five on charity health and housing, two on labour and three entitled “comparisons” — are disproportionately spread across Canada (five), Argentina (four), and Australia (one) — can be read as a series of largely stand-alone essays in the history of social welfare. Emanating as innovative collections often do from small topical conferences, these essays illuminate more by individual candlelight the gloom of scholarly ignorance than by their collective brilliance or incandescence. Only two of the essays are truly comparative, those by Harry Ferns, of Birmingham, on Argentina and Canada as immigrant communities from 1880-1930, and by John Fogarty, of Melbourne, on social experiments in all three countries under examination. These two essays in themselves make the book worth reading since their observations derive from recent comparative histories — Ferns on *Britain and Argentina* (1983), and Fogarty on *Australia and Argentina* (1985).

The rest of the essays are more in the conventional mold of national social history, and make their own special contributions to the evolution of social welfare during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — in particular those essays on Canada by Judith Fingard, Terry Copp, John Weaver, and Gregory Kealey. Fingard, as usual, turns a new page in social history, this time on the subject of Sailors' Institutes and the Salvation Army as international evangelical agencies for social amelioration at the turn of the century. Copp delineates the two solitudes of the Catholic versus Protestant communities in Montreal and their approaches to child welfare at *fin de siècle*. John Weaver explores the reasons for a conservative Canadian attitude to social experiments on housing prior to World War II, offering some illumination of the sanctity of private property in a North American frontier-setting, concluding that “the private dwelling became the universal aspiration in Canada, even without advertising” (79). Lastly, in the Canadian cadre of essays, Gregory Kealey examines Canadian industrial relations in the first half of the twentieth century with a view to illuminating relations between capital and labour. Despite a slow start, Canada implemented three pieces of legislation, the *Conciliation Act* of 1900, the *Railway Disputes Act* of 1903, and the *Industrial Disputes Investigation Act* of 1907, the last of which “laid the foundation for the particular industrial relations system which still exists in Canada” (125). Much of the rapid improvement in labour legislation was, of course, attributable to MacKenzie King, the young Harvard and Chicago-educated Deputy Minister of Labour in the pre-war period, then as Prime Minister of Canada for much of the period from 1921-1948, when he fashioned a collective-bargaining system of industrial relations “which lay halfway between British and Australasian experience” (145). From a comparative aspect, this essay is an interesting read beside that of Diane Kirby who explores the earlier introduction of state compulsory arbitration in Australia in 1904 — a common product of the ideas of socialists such as the Webbs, and such Australasian progressives as Henry Browne Higgins and William Pember Reeves.

The essays on Argentinian social history are those by Carlos Escudé on health in Buenos Aires, Frances Korn and Lidia de la Torre on housing prior to World War I, and Peter Alhadeff on social welfare in the 1930s. Of these, Escudé's is the most

explicitly comparative, demonstrating the very favourable record of Buenos Aires as a city in terms of health and public sanitation in 1900 by comparison to Montreal and Melbourne. By implication, the urban landscape and ambiance of Buenos Aires are also favourably judged by Korn and Torre, who conclude that by 1914, "It is Paris with good weather, expensive cars, well-dressed women, restaurants, parks and gardens which cannot be seen in any other part of the world" (103). As D.C.M. Platt also notes in his editorial introduction, the "Argentine *conventillos* were scarcely different than the slums of Winnipeg [ten families or more in an older room] although the climate of Buenos Aires was kinder to slum-living than the Canadian prairie" (11). Lastly, the Argentine essays are capped off by Alhadeff's elaboration of the social welfare policies of the government during the Depression, noting its modest and piecemeal record of economic redistribution which set the stage for the onset of the welfare state in Argentina, with the extraordinary wage settlements of 1946-1948 and the advent of Peronism.

The last two comparative essays by Ferns and Fogarty, as noted above, are the only truly comparative essays in the book. Ferns' essay has interesting resonances since, as a former Canadian of leftist persuasion (*cf.* his autobiography, *Reading from Left to Right: One Man's Political History*, 1983), Ferns was an early critic of Mackenzie King's rise to power in his co-authored work with Bernard Ostry on *The Age of Mackenzie King* (1955). Here, he eschews ideology for synthesis in a wide-ranging essay on the economic character of the two countries — Argentina as a classic *laissez-faire* economy and Canada as a state-supported national economy via its railway, tariff and settlement policies. Other comparative features of both societies in war and peace are deftly delineated in a piece which explains, among other trends, the sources of militarism in Argentina and the lack thereof in Canada, despite participation in two World Wars.

The final essay by John Fogarty on social experiments in regions of recent settlement is perhaps the most suggestive treatment of the role of the state in economic development in the three countries, where elites successfully merged *laissez-faire* and liberal positivist beliefs "into a pragmatic political philosophy which combined liberal economic notions with government activism and interventionism in the community interest" (180). This penchant for what William Pember Reeves of New Zealand called "state-experimentation" (179), or utopian schemes of social and economic planning and progressive social legislation, was visible in both Irigoyen's Argentina and in Mackenzie King's Canada in the 1920s. Fogarty's thought-provoking essay suggests fruitful lines of comparison in the social ethos and political culture of the three countries, and begins to fill in some of the spaces of that seminal collective work edited by Louis Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies*, in 1964. But we are a long way yet from a full understanding of recent "settler societies" if this modest volume is any indication of reptilian scholarly progress of nearly a generation in the vineyard of comparative history.

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