

Revisiting Toronto the Good: Violence, Religion, and Culture in Late Victorian Toronto by William Reimer

Dan Horner

Volume 109, Number 1, Spring 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1039206ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1039206ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Horner, D. (2017). Review of [*Revisiting Toronto the Good: Violence, Religion, and Culture in Late Victorian Toronto* by William Reimer]. *Ontario History*, 109(1), 145–147. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1039206ar>

***Revisiting Toronto the Good:
Violence, Religion, and Culture in Late Victorian Toronto***

by William Reimer

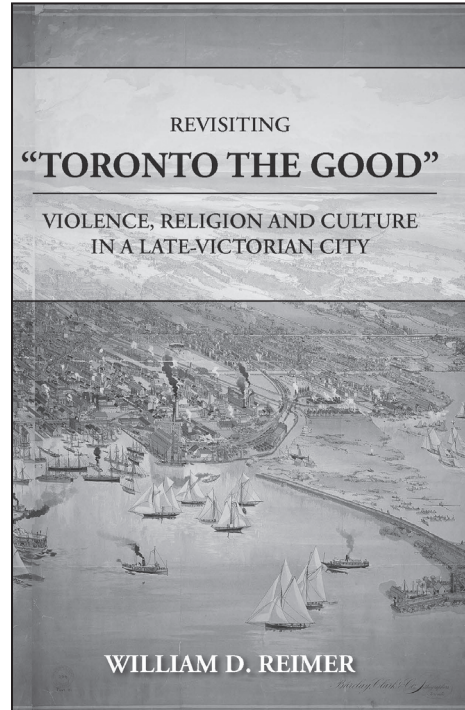
Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2016. 360 pages. \$19.95 paperback.
ISBN-13: 978-1573835244. (www.regentpublishing.com)

In the closing decades of the nineteenth-century, rates of interpersonal violence appear to have declined significantly in Toronto. In some ways, this trend appears counterintuitive. After all, the city continued to grow as migrants from near and far arrived in search of opportunities unavailable to them on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean or in Toronto's own rural hinterland. What factors could possibly explain it? In *Revisiting Toronto the Good*, William Reimer argues that it was the expanding reach of what he refers to as British Evangelical Protestantism that caused Torontonians to eschew the sorts of rough popular violence that marked social relations in the city throughout the first three quarters of the nineteenth-century.

Historians and social scientists have long been documenting a general decline in interpersonal violence across Western Europe and North America that began at the end of the nineteenth century and continued into the middle of the twentieth century, before spiking again in the 1960s and 1970s. Reimer engages with pivotal works like Norbert Elias' *The Civilizing Process*, a study first published in German in 1936, that traced the growing importance placed on personal restraint, and psychologist Steven Pinker's 2011 treatise, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, which inquires into the precipitous decline in violence since the Enlightenment. Some have argued that this can be credited primarily to the emergence of a more effective state apparatus during this period, which provided people with options for resolving

personal disputes other than engaging in acts of violence. Others, meanwhile, point to a broader context of a growing emphasis on personal restraint that was a crucial component of liberal individualism.

Reimer, however, argues forcefully that it was the popular dissemination of Evangelical Protestantism—espoused primarily by those affiliated with the Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian churches—that explains why a Torontonian in 1890 would be less likely to engage in acts of violence than his predecessor a half century earlier. In what is some of the most



illuminating material in the book, Reimer traces the impact that these ideas had on public life in Toronto during this period. Zeroing in on examples such as the diary kept by a young Mackenzie King during his days as a student at University College and as a reporter for *The Globe*, and the successful 1886 mayoral campaign of William Howland, Reimer demonstrates how this Evangelical community was able to disseminate and popularize its ideas and exert a powerful political influence, despite concerted opposition from the city's Tory establishment. Evangelical Protestants, he argues, were critical players in two of the key political movements of the nineteenth century—those calling for the abolition of slavery and temperance. Reimer sees a common theme in the rhetoric used to advance these two movements: a disdain for violent and unruly impulses. He also notes the vital role that women played as Evangelical Protestant activists. With women playing an active role in these political movements and men and women marrying at an earlier age than they had in previous generations, the opportunities for men in this sphere of Evangelical Protestant influence to engage in unruly popular leisure activities began diminished significantly.

Revisiting Toronto the Good is an engagingly written book, and those interested in turn-of-the-century Toronto will find Reimer's research and arguments stimulating. With that being said, it is not without its faults. The book would have benefitted from some more rigorous editing. It continues to read like the doctoral dissertation that it began as. This is evident in passages where it gets bogged down in discussions of historiography.

Reimer uses chapter seven to present a detailed quantitative account of changing patterns of violent crime in Toronto. He argues that there is a very clear pattern

evident in the judicial records. Amidst a general decline in violence, it is clear that those who came under the influence of Evangelical Protestantism were disproportionately under-represented in the ranks of violent offenders. It was a trend, Reimer argues, that supersedes class affiliation. Even those Evangelical Protestants who were labourers were less likely to be brought up on charges related to violent activity. This confirms a key pillar of Reimer's argument: that a broad indictment of violent activity that occupied a central place in Evangelical Protestant rhetoric during this period had made a discernable impact on personal deportment.

Reimer admits that there are inherent challenges in crafting an argument such as this. After all, even the most rigorous historian cannot ultimately prove why one generation of Torontonians was less likely than their predecessors to engage in a rough popular culture where conflicts were resolved through interpersonal violence. Reimer insists that, because even less affluent Evangelical Protestants were rarely brought up on charges relating to violence, this proves that an antipathy towards violence was being successfully disseminated during this period. Reimer's treatment of class, however, is not as fully conceptualized as his grasp on Christian rhetoric. He does not address the diversity of the working-class. A skilled craftsman with steady work and a young family at home would have been less likely to engage in violence than a bachelor migrant labourer no matter their exposure to British Evangelical Protestant rhetoric—a reality that Reimer's quantitative data confirms. Mid-nineteenth-century Toronto likely owed much of its violence to the transiency of its population, and less to the fact that Torontonians of that period were less exposed to evangelical rhetoric condemning interper-

sonal violence.

Reimer's decision to remove the dropping rates of interpersonal violence in Toronto from larger contexts of demographic, economic, cultural and political change by constructing it as a product of Evangelical Protestant rhetoric gives *Revisiting Toronto the Good* a sharp focus. It will contribute to our understanding of how some late-nineteenth-century Canadians leaned on their exposure to religious teaching to shape

their worldview. This focus, however, risks causing readers to lose sight of the richly complex knot of factors—economic, social, cultural, political and demographic—that might have caused nineteenth-century Torontonians to turn their backs on the rough popular violence of their predecessors.

Dan Horner
Ryerson University

*Another World:
William Ord Mackenzie's Sojourn in
the Canadas, 1839-1843*

Sandra Alston and C.M. Blackstock, eds.

Toronto: The Champlain Society, 2015. 645 pages. ISBN 978-1-4875-2025-0 (bound). (champlainsociety.utpjournals.press)

Between February 1839 and October 1843 William Ord Mackenzie, an Indian-born British army surgeon in his mid-twenties recorded—in five volumes—his impressions of the peoples, places, and politics of northern North America. As Sandra Alston and C.M. Blackstone explain in their introduction to the 2015 edition published by the Champlain Society, Mackenzie's journals appear to have been based on notes and diary entries he made at the time and then revised in the days and weeks that followed. While Mackenzie's journals span the duration of his tenure in the Canadian colonies, there are occasional months-long gaps between entries and volumes. When Mackenzie began his fourth volume from Riviere du Loup on 1 September 1841, for example, the tediousness of his

routine appears to have got the better of him: "My last Volume was concluded early May last. Since that date I have not had much inclination to begin a new one... as I conceive a Journal is meant for the amusement of both writer and reader" (314).

In their introduction Alston and Blackstone hone in on the broader medical and military histories of the colonial period. Given Mackenzie's background, such a focus on his medical training at the University of Edinburgh and his award-winning scholarship as well as the presence of the British military in the Canadian colonies appear to make sense. Unfortunately, this history provides little context for the content of Mackenzie's journals which are as scant on matters of militarism in the Canadas

