

# Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure and Identity in Late-Nineteenth Century Small-Town Ontario by Lynne Marks.

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## ***Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure and Identity in Late-Nineteenth Century Small-Town Ontario* by Lynne Marks (review)**

Peter Bailey

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REVIEW

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### **In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Book Reviews 653 *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure and Identity in Late-Nineteenth Century Small-Town Ontario*. LYNNE MARKS. *Studies in Gender and History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1996. Pp. xxiv, 330, illus. \$55.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper A fat lady on roller skates about to slam into a weedy cleric was a cartoon from Britain's 'rinkomania' that nicely encapsulates the themes of this book. Leisure and religion - the secular and the sacred variously collude and collide. So too do the sexes (for this initiates a new series, *Studies in Gender and History*), though the comic image inverts the real disposition of cultural weight in

southern Ontario's small-town patriarchy. The roller rink signifies the 'fast life,' beckoning seekers of worldly pleasure and horrifying preachers as an accelerated path to damnation while offering a graphic reminder of the 'moving equilibrium' that is Gramsci's hegemony, the book's interpretive motif. Not that Lynne Marks allows herself such symbolic levities as she sets out to test the extent of cultural authority wielded by the churches in a society generally regarded as a stronghold of Protestant conformity. On its own earnestly empirical terms, however, this book proves an instructive exercise, admirably executed. For Marks, the measure of the churches' hegemony lies less in expressions of faith or the hard data of membership (albeit meticulously assessed) than in the satisfactions of social identity conferred by churchgoing. Identity is conceived as a repertoire of competing roles, individual and collective, part prescribed and part elected, and performed in a shifting social landscape, from church precincts to hotel bars, from the street to the family home. The author adroitly reconstructs this landscape for the three communities of Thorold, Campbellford, and Ingersoll, whose mainstream churches were both winning and losing in the last two decades of the century. Respectability superseded piety as the defining attribute of Protestant identity. In the 1880s respectability was most conspicuously registered in donations to the building of bigger churches, a material condition as much as a reward of church membership that deterred working-class attendance. Fundraising and beautifying the new interiors provided an extended role for women, but their strawberry socials drew reproach as 'questionable entertainments,' and the feminization of religion discomfited men. Class and gender remained primary differentials of identity, if uneven in operation. Men enjoyed an extensive associational life in lodges, fire companies, and militia bands, well fuelled by drink. Young single males were the most obtrusive of Men Behaving Badly and the rarest of churchgoers, but with marriage they might assume the role of *The Canadian Historical Review* manly breadwinner, a passport to respectable masculinity. Yet the categories of rough and respectable were neither exclusive nor coterminous with class, and heads of families could reconcile fraternal pleasures with churchgoing. Unexceptioned respectability was required of women. Churches were almost the only institutions to afford them active roles, though these remained limited, particularly for working-class women who enjoyed scant sisterhood with their betters. In the 1880s young working women achieved sensational prominence as preachers and officers with the Salvation Army, while the Knights of Labour enabled working people to align the political claims of their class with a more egalitarian religion; equally remarkable, if similarly shortlived, was the success of Thorold's 'Great Revival' of the 1890s in winning converts among young male workers. Marks concludes that mainstream Protestant hegemony was incomplete, which is hardly surprising, for in the nature of its operation, hegemony never achieves closure. More promising for debate are claims for the number and diversity of identities available to small-town subjects, which may go too far or not far enough. Although older stereotypes may need some modifying, literary and autobiographical evidence of small-town life suggests a still formidably limited conformity. Yet increased geographical and psychic mobility may have generated a much more complex consciousness. Thorold was close to big city pleasures and their greater sexual opportunities in St Catharines and Buffalo, but small-towners everywhere could indulge vicariously through extensive coverage in press and pulpit, whose condemnations might invite as much as deter. The big city also came to the small town in travelling shows whose female entertainers may have inspired not only...

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