

Women at Work

Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930. Edited by Janice Acton, Penny Goldsmith and Bonnie Shepard. Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974. Pp. 415.

Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930 represents a landmark in Canadian publishing history. It is a tribute to its authors and to the Canadian Women's Educational Press which supervised its publication. But it is more than that. It is a monument to that half of our population whose history hitherto has been relegated to an occasional footnote or to vague and unsatisfactory social histories. After the appearance of Women at Work, no Canadian history worthy of the name should be able to dismiss the role of women's work and oppression in our national development.

Women at Work is a collection of essays each of which focuses on a certain theme in the history of women's work outside the home. One essay provides a broad interpretive framework for Ontario in the nineteenth century; four deal with specific female professions — prostitution, domestic service, nursing and teaching; four more with the problems and struggles of working women in the early decades of the twentieth century. Although the authors in no way dismiss the importance of women's work within the home (in fact, as they point out, industrialization depended upon unpaid labour in the home which produced and maintained the labour force), their emphasis on the role of women during Ontario's transition to industrialism prompted them to concentrate on the proletarianization of the woman worker, her attempts at organization to overcome her exploitation and the problems she encountered given the prevailing

ideology that women's place was in the home.

Unlike most collections of essays which are usually characterized by how unsuccessfully the various contributions relate to each other, Women at Work carries a powerful impact because of the strict adherence of each of the authors to the theme of exploitation of women due to sexism and the capitalist's concern for profits. The book also benefits from the methodology of the collective effort. As is pointed out in the Preface, the authors were "committed to the idea of a collectively produced book," because they "felt that it was very important to break down the individualized and competitive work habits that had been drilled in by years of schooling." (pp. iv-v) Over a period of two years the authors exchanged ideas, criticized each other's manuscripts, made suggestions and in the process subordinated individual efforts to the benefits of constructive criticism, mutual support and the hammering out of broader interpretations. The result is a testimony to collective scholarship. What may have been lost in this "homogenizing" process is magnificently compensated for by the unity of approach and depth of analysis. Their example should be taken seriously by all writers who feel their subject matter to be more important than their individual professional images (the lure of the latter, the authors inform us, having been a trap for many women over the years).

Of course, this approach is a clear political statement by the authors as are the articles they write. Convinced that "even Marxist models for examining societies, however useful, are inadequate," they admit that their work is "not part of a completed political analysis," but an exploratory step in the experience of women writing their own histories which is of "crucial importance to women carrying their struggle forward together." (pp. iv-v)

Given such a serious mission, it is perhaps surprising that Women at Work escapes, for the most part, the pompous and pedantic. The expertise with which the authors handle the techniques of the new social history set a high standard for those whom they invite to follow their example. An essay on "How to do Research" and an extensive bibliography including archival and tape resources as well as books, articles and newspapers is a call to action to women across Canada to liberate history from "male middle class academics." They encourage women to write personal and socially relevant family, town and institutional histories which include women in their analysis as political, military and constitutional histories do not. They even tactfully warn would-be women historians against librarians who might be uncooperative and not take women seriously. Such candour is refreshing and certainly speaks to the problem of modern-day sexism for the potential researcher.

Women at Work represents an incalculable number of woman-hours devoted to primary research in newspapers and journals, government and institutional documents, demographic and personal records. The forty tables conveying statistical information are on the whole useful and clearly presented. Illustrations depicting working women's culture draw upon magazines and catalogues, old photographs and paintings, and in themselves indicate a valiant research effort. A particularly fine touch to this attractive and carefully produced volume are Gail Geltner's drawings which are as strong in their impact as are the essays.

The book itself is "heavy" both in terms of its length (over 400 pages including bibliography) and of its contents. Many readers in the broad audience, which the authors hope to attract, will put the book down before finishing it. Others will feel the need to re-read it in order to pick up points missed in one reading of the concentrated prose. Ultimately, Women at Work will serve for many years as a reference work and a necessary point of departure for anyone interested in the topic.

On a superficial level the book contains much fascinating information about the nature of women's work during Ontario's transition to industrialism. The reader discovers that a prominent member of the Massey family was shot dead in 1915 by his 18-year-old domestic servant whom a jury found, for good

reasons, "not guilty" of murder; that Bell Telephone operators wore roller skates in order to increase their efficiency; that in 1867 girl students counted as half persons for purposes of government education grants; that middle and upper class women ran Day Nurseries for working class women; that there was a greater percentage of women in graduate schools in the 1920s than is the case today; that in 1932 women in Toronto's Jewish community staged a meat boycott that was partially successful; that in 1931 only 10% of women working outside the home were married (as compared to 56.7% in 1971). Happily, such details are incorporated into a coherent analysis explaining how these facts relate to women's history.

Readers are "eased" into Women at Work by Linda Kealey's Introduction and Leo Johnson's essay "The Political Economy of Ontario Women in the Nineteenth Century," the latter being the only contribution in the book written solely by a male author. Kealey's fine historiographical analysis and suggestions for further research in women's culture indicates the comprehensive grasp that the authors have of their material and of the new social history which they have used to "demonstrate the interrelations between economic and social factors in the secondary position of the women worker." (p. 3) Johnson describes the evolution of Ontario society through various stages from toiler production in early pioneer days,

to individual commodity production and finally to industrial capitalism, "the arenas" where women's battles were waged. This is a useful article in many ways: it delineates the important role played by the woman as "wife-mother-producer" in the pre-industrial family; it explains why sexual purity was important for women in bourgeois and aristocratic families; why it was that upper class women were assigned the task of administering charity in the days before the welfare state; how education became the focus of early class conflict in Ontario; and how the role of the women in the family unit gradually diminished with the emergence of industrial society. Sexism under capitalism was expressed by what Johnson calls an ingenious "apartheid system" in which certain tasks were designated as women's work and paid for with low wages. (p. 29) Male labourers were thus spared competition from cheap female labour in job categories defined as exclusively male while industrialists could still draw on women for cheap labour in jobs men did not do. For the capitalist, it was important to keep the family alive, if not well, for "when an employer hired a man in effect he hired two people, the man to work on the job and the man's wife to keep the workman, physically and mentally, in working order" and to raise the next generation of labourers. (p. 24) In turn, the family represented the only security working people had against sickness, old age and loneliness since governments took no responsibility for the individual needs of the poor.

The essays on prostitution and domestic workers, in some ways the best articles in the book, do much to bring the history of such women out of the dark ages. The authors argue that both performed necessary services to preserve the patriarchal family during the transition to industrial society. And both groups of workers suffered decreasing demands for their services as modern conveniences gave wives more time to provide such services themselves.

The line between these two professions at the bottom of the status scale was often crossed as unemployed domestics turned to prostitution to keep body and soul together, while such institutions as the Toronto Industrial Refuge "reformed" prostitutes by training them for domestic service. Nurses and schoolmarmes, on the other hand, avoided the fate of their "lowly" sisters by accepting what can only be described as a grizzly training (usually on the job) in a variety of skills assigned respectively to nurses and teachers. They were socialized to accept inferior status and pay compared to that of doctors and male teachers; inculcated with the habits of self-sacrifice, deference and service; and expected to be jack-of-all-trades. (This is especially the case for female teachers in rural school "situations;" nurses were simply expected to do the dirty work as part of a medical "team.") The emphasis on social mothering coupled with the false

"lure of professionalism," which prevented women from perceiving their oppression and discouraged them from unionizing to protect their interests, insured the continuance of their exploitation.

"Besieged Innocence" and "Women during the Great War" provide an overall picture of the problems faced by working women during the early decades of the twentieth century. As part of a reserve, and largely unskilled, labour pool women were drawn in and out of the labour force as they were needed with little concern for the needs of the women themselves for dignity and a living wage. (The opposite sides of this tendency are forcefully demonstrated by the First World War and the Depression of the 1930s.) Although evidence from working women indicated that wages and working conditions were their primary concerns (as they were for their male counterparts), reform-minded citizens saw the working woman at worst as a social deviant and at best as one of the unfortunate facts in evidence of a grave social crisis, since women's place was really in the home. Reformers, therefore, pre-occupied themselves with such secondary considerations as separate wash-rooms for women, seats for shopgirls (to prevent harm to female organs from extended periods of standing up) and conducted a moral crusade to save the working girl from such wicked vices of factory life as excessive attention to fashionable dress and a passion for

movies during their all-too-few leisure hours. In retrospect there is tragic irony to a situation in which reform zeal for feminine purity and the domestic ideal prevented men and women in the work force from combining to improve factory conditions that were inhuman for both sexes. Even the labour unions accepted the ruling class view of the role of women and included equal pay for equal work in their manifestos not because they felt women should have incomes equal to those of men but as a means of preventing competition from the large reserve of female labour. Governments simply failed to recognize the fact that women worked outside the home. As late as 1916, an Ontario Royal Commission on Unemployment admitted that the existence of 175,000 working women in the province had been "imperfectly appreciated"; this despite the Bell Telephone Strike of 1907, the increasing number of Day Nurseries set up to care for the children of working mothers, and the periodic "crises" in the supply of domestic help which governments sought to alleviate through the Department of Immigration!

The last two essays concentrate on women's attempts to organize against their exploitation. The Toronto Dressmakers' Strike of 1931, the meat boycott in the Jewish community of Toronto in 1932 and the strike of textile workers in a Hamilton cotton factory are presented as case studies around which generalizations are made

concerning the vulnerability and powerlessness of women in the labour force. These essays are less satisfying historically than the others because the background of women's role in the trade union movement (originally planned for inclusion in the book) was abandoned in the interests of "elucidating particular lessons for women," who are now debating the basis of women's political power and the future of an "autonomous" women's movement. (p. 331) Each reader will have to decide for herself the value of this editorial decision. It is not exactly clear why these "lessons" could not be as easily conveyed in an analysis of women in trade unions. The fact remains that the history of women's relation to the trade union movement still requires careful consideration. We do not know the extent to which sexism in trade unions weakened their power; we know little of the nature and effectiveness of separate women's organizations such as the National Women's Trade Union League and the Federation of Women's Labour Leagues; and we do not have a clear understanding of how fully working people "bought" the prevailing attitude that women's place was in the home.

It is impossible to do justice to the material contained in Women at Work in a review essay. Certainly there is much in the book that will be disputed and modified in the years ahead as women continue to explore their history and their roles in society. Much is

left out, for example, the work of women in volunteer groups, and in office staffs. And it certainly is in order to encourage the authors to do another collective study, this time of the role and work of women in the home.

Before setting out on their next venture, however, the authors should keep a few points in mind. Despite their efforts to transcend reformist assumptions and traditions, they have occasionally slept at the watch. One problem is the title of the book itself. Granted, it is high time that historians stop drawing conclusions from the Ontario experience and calling it Canadian history. This activity has raised the hackles of men and women from the hinterland for many years. Yet, to draw information from working conditions in Montreal, as well as statistics from the Maritimes (once to find an all-time low salary) to prove a point and include this under the title 'Ontario' smacks of the old liberal imperialism. Moreover, when Leo Johnson takes a swipe at PEI and Nova Scotia for being carved into large estates unlike Ontario which had "vast amounts of cheap or free lands available," (p. 15) he demonstrates an unfortunate "Upper Canadian" carelessness in matters Maritime. Admittedly PEI suffered such a fate, but how can he attribute such characteristics to Nova Scotia? Except for the abortive baronetcies of William Alexander, Nova Scotia was quite literally given away to New England farmers and fisher-

men, Loyalists and British immigrants, whose ancestors in many cases still own the land and some would contend are still busily giving it away.

Should this trend be continued, whether by Marxist or liberal historians, it will surely raise the standard of revolt not only in the much maligned Maritime provinces but also in "New Ontario," the Ontario hinterland par excellence, which except for a picture of Public Health nurses on a northern railroad car (p. 151) is excluded from Women at Work. Surely this is a serious omission. The rapid resource development of northern Ontario during the period under discussion should provide a fertile source for study and add much to our knowledge of the role of women--especially immigrant and Indian women--in the history of Ontario society.

It would seem also that while reformers of yesterday and today's feminists have different goals, they share a similar tendency to paint black and white pictures in order to score their points as well as a tendency to select only information that fits neatly into their ideologies. For example: the book's success at rescuing the prostitute from the clutches of "sin" and "deviance" is indeed commendable as is the analysis of the reasons why women entered the profession. Yet, why does the author dismiss the claim made by many prostitutes themselves that they plied their trade because of 'inclination'

or a 'desire for sexual gratification?' Given societal attitudes toward extra-marital sex for women in the period under discussion, could it not be the case that a substantial number of women did not want to lock themselves into marriage simply to achieve sexual gratification? Had they, as it were, seen the light?

Nit-picking aside, Women at Work is a much-needed and long-over-due serious study of working people. The authors wanted the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts. In this they have wonderfully succeeded.

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