Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

JANICE ACTON, PENNY GOLDSMITH and BONNIE SHEPARD, eds. — *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930,* Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974.

Although some may be offended by its Marxist-Feminist orientation, and others may object to its treatment of particular themes or periods in Canadian women's history, the publication of *Women at Work*: *Ontario*, *1850-1930* is a landmark. It is a first in several important respects. All earlier volumes dealing with the history of Canadian women have been essentially biographical in approach, or have concentrated solely on the politics of the suffrage movement.[1] Many of these works, moreover, were poorly researched and documented, or were based on an inadequate understanding of the social and political background against which the history of Canadian women unfolded. Nor, in most cases, could it even be said that they were best sellers. Often conceived and written in relative isolation from the world of historical scholarship, even the lively and well written volumes seemed to fall between two possibilities. Neither sufficiently popular nor sufficiently scholarly, they soon fell by the wayside and quietly went out of print. *Women at Work*, although it has not entirely avoided all of these pitfalls, is nevertheless the first major history of Ontario women, considered collectively, that goes beyond attempts to document the careers of the socially and politically prominent, to explore the lives of ordinary women in Canada. It treats this history seriously, furthermore, attempting not only to base it on adequate research and documentation, but to understand the patterns of women's lives in Ontario's past in the context of Canadian social history generally. Finally, the authors and editors have clearly made a substantial and largely successful effort to present their material in an interesting and readable format. *Woment at Work* abounds in fascinating tables, quotations, diagrams and pictures, as well as in much good writing. Although the illustrative material sometimes weakens the continuity of the text and occasional lapses in style occur, by and large the book makes very absorbing reading. It is clearly going the used and read for many years to come.

Women at Work is unique, perhaps, for a second general reason. Not content with the ambition to produce a study of women considered Collectively, the editors and authors also attempted to function as a collective themselves. Collective authorship is a welcome trend in historical writing and clearly the writers of *Women at Work* have gone further than most in trying to make what might have been another book of essays into a coherent whole.

[1] The best of the biographical collections is *The Clear Spirit Twenty Canadian Women and Their Times*, edited by Mary Q. INNIS (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967). C.L. CLEVERDON'S *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950; second edition, 1974) examines the history of women's suffrage concentrating on the period from 1900 to 1920. The historical study done for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (Study No. 8), entitled *Cultural Tradition and Political History of Women in Canada* (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1971) contains three brief, but useful, essays dealing with women collectively. For other studies of women in Canadian history, published prior to 1973, see Veronica STRONG-BOAG, "Cousin Cinderella: A Guide to Historical Literature pertaining to Canadian Women," in Marylee STEPHENSON, ed., *Women in Canada* (Toronto: New Press, 1973).

The essays themselves are of three types. There are two introductory pieces, by Linda Kealey and Leo Johnson, which attempt to place the history of women at work in Ontario in the context of current scholarship in women's history and of the social and economic history of the province. These are followed by studies of four occupations: prostitution, domestic service, nursing and teaching. The last four essays deal with particular themes: the "problem" of the working woman from 1896-1914; working women during World War 1; the Toronto dressmakers' strike of 1931; and working women's attempts to organize, chiefly in Toronto, in the 1920's and 1930's. The book concludes with a short section entitled "How to do Research" and a very useful bibliography.

There are several basic themes running through most of the essays which help to give the book coherence. A major one is the way in which working women in the past were urged to seek status and respectability, on the one hand, and to accept "feminine" and subservient roles, on the other, in order to serve what in the end were the purposes of the capitalist state. As Judi Coburn puts it in her study or nursing, the "ideal lady," when translated from the home into the hospital, was expected to show "wifely obedience to the doctor, motherly self-devotion to the patient and a firm mistress-servant discipline to those below the rung of nurse." Similar observations could have been made about the woman teacher, who may not have been asked to play the mistress-servant role very often (except perhaps when as a middle-class professional she dealt with the lower class clientele of some urban downtown schools) but who was certainly expected to exhibit a wifely obedience to her principal as well as a motherly devotion to the children she taught. In both teaching and nursing the supposedly respectable status of these occupations and the related willingness of large numbers of women to work in them for very low wages, when compared to those paid to men in teaching and medicine, are seen as crucial to the emergence of institutions of vast importance to the developing industrial-capitalist state: the public schools, hospitals and health care services that helped to mobilize and maintain a healthy, disciplined and at least minimally literate work force. Prostitution and domestic service are similarly treated in the context of the needs of the economic and social order, as are the factory, office and war work in which women of the period engaged. Prostitution, coupled with the Victorian double standard, for example, helped preserve the patriarchal family, it is argued, by providing a non-threatening outlet for male pre-marital sex. The domestic work of both servants and wives was equally and more obviously essential to the preservation of the family. The family, in its turn, served the needs of the new economic order because women's work, performed in the domestic environment, maintained the labour force that worked outside the home.

To the explicitly Marxist-Feminist interpretation of the function of women's work in late 19th and early 20th century Ontario, *Women at Work* adds a critique of the Victorian social reformer. Too many reformers, male and female alike, failed to see the broader social and economic causes of the evils they were confronting, the authors observe. Too often, as well, interwoven with a genuine concern for their fellow man — or woman — was a far less altruistic concern to further their own social and economic interests, or those of their class, as when middle class women reformers devoted themselves to the cause of keeping impoverished young women out of the gutter and, coincidentally, safely tucked away as domestic servants in their own middle class homes.

A third theme which becomes explicit in many of the essays is the failure of working women to organize effectively prior to 1930. There is clear evidence that not all women adopted the passive or benign role models that were put forward

for them. Nevertheless, with the exception of the Ontario Federation of Women Teachers, perhaps, the efforts of women to unite in order to promote their own interests were sporadic and short-lived. Low status workers like domestic servants or factory workers usually failed to organize altogether, or if they did unite, could not sustain their effort over any length of time. Those organizations that did survive tended to devote their time to questions of status and professionalism and largely avoided more basic issues like wages, or working hours and conditions.

It would be impossible even to outline all of the other themes, trends and questions which are touched on in this book. It is sufficient to say, perhaps, that within the framework described, the authors of *Women at Work* have constructed an account of women's working lives in late 19th and early 20th century Ontario that is both interesting and innovative. A wealth of fascinating detail has been dug up about the activities and opinions of reformers who were concerned about women's working conditions, as well as about those of the working women themselves. A number of early strikes are described, such as that brought on by the stressful conditions of work endured by Bell Telephone operators in 1907. A boycott organized by immigrant Jewish women in Toronto to fight price-fixing in the Kosher meat trade during the depression, is described and analyzed. The best essays are those that treat both working women and middle class reformers with sympathy, yet a degree of detachment, and refrain from moralizing. The worst are those that verge on the shrill and where research and organization and writing are weak. Certainly, *Women at Work* does have its faults, faults that were perhaps inevitable in an ambitious and pioneering work of this kind. One can only admire the collective, for example, for making their Marxist-Feminist perspective explicit and, as an explanatory model, their view that the work of women served the interests of the capitalist-industrial state cannot, in my view, be faulted. But occasionally, the state seems to take on the characteristics of a *persona*; history becomes a conspiracy of the classes against the masses; and the analysis degenerates into preaching. Secondly, in spite of the effort to link the essays through the repetition of certain common themes and to set the social and economic stage at the beginning, one is left with a sense of disconnectedness at the end. A rather less theoretical beginning and a conclusion tying together some of the book's major ideas in a concrete fashion might have helped.

Last, but not least, in an otherwise admirable section inviting Canadian women to explore their history further, the argument is put forward that the "academic" historian is in a position to offer little or no help in this venture. The authors have good reason to attack the Canadian historical profession, for it is true that in the past women's history has been neglected in Canada, as it has been elsewhere. But there are signs of change, and some of these were apparent when *Women at Work* was being written. It was, after all, established male historians who saw to it that C.L. Cleverdon's *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* was reissued in a new paperback edition by the University of Toronto Press.[2] Members of the profession, in their capacity as university teachers, furthermore, have recently encouraged students of both sexes to work in Canadian women's history both at the M.A. and Ph.D. levels and a number of very useful theses and scholarly articles have resulted. Indeed, some of this work was used for the relevant information it contained by the members of the collective, as their own footnotes and bibliography demonstrate. In addition there existed useful published and unpublished scholarly material of which the authors did not make use, no doubt

[2] Cleverdon's study, (*op. cit.*) was reissued in *The Social History of Canada* Series which is edited by Michael Bliss. Ramsay Cook wrote the introduction to the new edition.

because women's history in Canada until very recently has suffered doubly from the usual communication problems which afflict all Canadian scholarship. Thus the authors of *Women at Work* were apparently not aware of Linda Bohnen's "Women Workers in Ontario: A Socio-Legal History," an interesting and very useful article which was obviously relevant to the book.[3]

Much careful research, accurate reporting, thoughtful organization and analysis went into *Women at Work*. The errors that exist in at least one of the essays might have been avoided, however, had the editors and authors considered following the practice of many historians and publishers and circulated the essays to interested and knowledgable readers academic or otherwise, where these could be found, before publication. To dwell on the mistakes in one essay seems unfair, yet because the history of education is my own specialty, Elizabeth Graham's essay on the woman teacher is the one that I am best qualified to comment on. Unfortunately, it does contain several mistakes. Ms. Graham has Egerton Ryerson, (who was Chief Superintendent of the Upper Canadian school system from 1846 to 1876) predicting in 1842 that social disaster might well be the result of the vast immigration that was pouring into the province. Actually Ryerson's statement on the subject was made in 1848, following the difficult years of the Irish famine migration. She quotes him, furthermore, as saying that his ideas and actions were those of anyone concerned with the "happiness and well-being of the *middle class*." (Graham's emphasis.) Ryerson thought of himself, rather, as a representative of the "middle classes," plural, and in fact used the plural form in the quotation in question. He would not have used the singular "middle class," which misleadingly suggests a class solidarity with which he would not have been entirely comfortable, although in many ways he was one of the promoters of the middle class value system in Victorian Canada. Again, Ryerson is cited as having agreed that the increase of women in teaching was a progression in the right direction in 1886. Ryerson died in 1882 and the statement in question was made two decades earlier in 1866. By 1886, women in teaching in Ontario were clearly numerically dominant. Finally, an attempt to check the sources of these errors through the footnotes revealed that several of these, too, were incorrect. Individually, all of the errors are small ones and, in the case of dates, one suspects typographical or printer's mistakes. But collectively, they do add up to evidence of a careless approach to research or a lack of regard for accuracy. A detail can sometimes make a great deal of difference. This is certainly the case when it comes both to dates and to the terminology of class. It was only gradually, for example, that a middle class consciousness was forged in 19th century Ontario; to accurately reflect the attitudes of 19th century ideologues, the historian must use the words they used, not her own. To do otherwise is to distort the past rather than to illuminate it.

Women's history in Canada, like Canadian social history generally, is in its infancy and badly in need of investigation. Hopefully, those concerned about this

[3] Linda S. BOHNEN, "Women Workers in Ontario: A Socio-Legal History," *University of Toronto Faculty of Law Review*, 31 (1973). It may be that Bohnen's study, despite its date, came out after *Women at Work*, or too late to be considered. The following short list of recent articles on the history of Canadian women should give an idea of the growth of scholarly interest in the subject; many more papers, presented at various learned society meetings in recent years, are currently in circulation and hopefully will find publishers. See Sylvia VAN KIRK, "Women in the Fur Trade," *The Beaver (Winter, 1972)*; D. Suzanne CROSS, "The Neglected Majority: The Changing Role of Women in 19th century Montreal," *Social History/histoire sociale* (November, 1973); Alison PRENTICE, "The Feminization of Teaching in British North America and Canada, 1845-1875," *Social History/histoire sociale* (May, 1975); Ian E DAVEY, "Trends in Female School Attendance in Mid-Nineteenth Century Ontario," *Social History/histoire sociale* (forthcoming.)

history — academic and non-academic alike — will work both collectively and cooperatively to make sure that the history of Canadian women not only gets into the record, but stays there. Recently, interested members of the Canadian Historical Association founded a new section on women's history. Agitation continues for the appointment of an archivist for women's history at the National Archives, an appointment which is long overdue. These are good signs and the publication of *Women at Work* is another. Hopefully it is the beginning of many good things to come. As Linda Kealey's interesting introduction to the essays suggests, there are a great many questions to be asked and a fascinating variety of sources in which to seek the answers.

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MARY V. JORDAN. — *Survival: Labour's Trials and Tribulations in Canada.* Toronto: McDonald House, 1975.

It is not an easy task to review hagiography and remain neither a heretic nor a devotee. More than anything else, this volume is testimony to the admiration and affection its author had for Robert Boyd Russell, long time secretary — and heart and soul — of the One Big Union. Mary Jordan was Bob Russell's secretary for thirty-nine years; and in this very personal and idiosyncratic book is quite incapable of any perspective. It is truly a labour of love.

It must also be pointed out immediately that it is not a scholarly book. The research is narrow; there are many (far too many) errors of fact and interpretation and the narrative is often confused and jumbled. The title is completely misleading for the story follows the career of Bob Russell, a prominent Western Canadian labour leader, who was imprisoned for his leading role in the Winnipeg general strike. Yet, for all its problems, the book is not unwelcome.

The volume of literature on the Winnipeg strike and Western Canadian labour radicalism is now substantial. Bob Russell, secretary of the Winnipeg local of the International Association of Machinists played an important, but not a dominant, role. What is now being made clear by young labour historians such as McCormack, Bercuson and Friesen is that the radical labour men of the west were planning a revolution in 1919. They were committed syndicalists who were determined to destroy the capitalist system. Their methods were education through the Socialist Party of Canada and control of the trade union movement. Their weapon was the general strike.

The leadership of this cadre, Pritchard, Kavanaugh, Midgley and Stephenson in Vancouver, Knight in Edmonton and Russell and Johns in Winnipeg won influential positions in their local labour organizations. They then captured control of the Western Labour Conference at Calgary in March of 1919 and launched the One Big Union. The general strike which erupted in Winnipeg in May, 1919 was not part of the scenario. It was, in fact, both premature and damaging. It is probably fair to say that the OBU was the major casualty of the strike, not least because that was the precise object of the intervention of the federal government. But the labour militancy which flourished during the Great War and, at the urging of radical leadership, chose direct action, could not be rekindled.

The mythology of the general strike can now be laid to rest. The strikers did not have a monopoly of virtue. It was not merely a righteous struggle for collec-