REVIEWS

The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880–1950. JOY PARR. Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1990. Pp. xiv, 314, illus. $45 cloth, $19.95 paper

Joy Parr has produced the most exhilarating, challenging book to appear in modern Canadian social history in many years. Part women's history, part labour history, part technological history, part economic history, it integrates and surpasses these discrete subfields. Its theoretical underpinnings are particularly innovative. Parr gives the boot to neo-classical analysis, simplistic Marxism, and radical feminism, and compels us to confront the manifold ways in which the social experience of both men and women is structured simultaneously and often unpredictably by class and gender. We are reminded that both femininity and masculinity are socially, not biologically, constructed and constantly in flux. Methodologically, the book reveals the rewards of blending oral history and newspaper research with statistical work in company and town records, meticulous use of technical data, and sensitivity to language, all of which is put into a comparative perspective. It is a demanding, subtly nuanced, and sometimes difficult book, but one whose message cannot be ignored.

Parr compares two small factory towns in southern Ontario dominated by quite different industries during the transition to monopoly capitalism in Canadian economic development. Commanding the local economy in Paris was the Penman's textile plant, which, along with a handful of other corporate giants, dominated the reliable national market for knitted goods, especially underwear. In Hanover several smaller companies competed in the country's more unstable furniture market. Parr concentrates on one of these, Knetchel's. The contrast, however, goes far beyond product markets and corporate size. The occupational mix and labour markets in each town are so strikingly different that she can generally describe them as a 'women's town' and a 'men's town.' In Paris the knitting mill required a large number of semi-skilled female workers, often recruited in the East Midlands of England, and, in contrast to most employers of women, Penman's held onto many of them after marriage. Outside Penman's, there was no major employer of male labour in the town. Parr argues that the continuing importance of these female breadwinners' wages (and the reduction of men to the status of 'secondary' wage-earners, often in other towns) gave the women somewhat more power and autonomy in their own households and in their larger social lives – to remain single, own their own houses, socialize together, and so on.

Hanover offered no such opportunities for women. There the predominantly German-Canadian male furniture workers were always the breadwinners, while their wives, sisters, and daughters seldom broke out of domestic labour at home.

It was in such starkly different contexts that gender – both female and male – was shaped. Parr marshals fascinating empirical detail and theoretical sophistication to reveal how contingent the particular form of gender identity was in labour processes and working-class households. Her brilliant discussion of knitting technology on both sides of the Atlantic, for example, emphasises how different corporate structure, product and labour markets, and worker organization could produce completely different job assignments and occupational identities for women. Similarly, she explores the diverse routes by which boys learned to be men in separate departments of the Hanover furniture plant and thus how masculinity could be constructed in divergent ways. Yet she also wants us to understand how gender, in turn, shaped processes and events. She enables us to see the great bogey of Canadian political history, *the tariff, in a new light*, by examining the rhetorical defences that manufacturers threw up to protect their investments in factories – textile manufacturers like Penman wrapping themselves in the mantle of patriarchal paternalism and those like Knetchel arguing for the defense of male working-class breadwinners. She also contrasts the strikingly different unionizing experiences of the two working-class communities – on the one hand, the painful struggle of the women textile workers to find acceptance in a town where they had long been treated as outsiders; on the other, family men struggling repeatedly and ultimately successfully for 'breadwinner unionism.' Clearly, the different outcomes of the overall class experience have a lot to do with how gender relations have developed.

To admit the persuasiveness of her argument is not to deny some difficulties that cloud the analysis. The fascinating, richly textured Paris story in particular gets a bit ragged in spots. A large part of the problem is the presentation of her statistical evidence, which becomes slippery and elusive. Parr has done some meticulous counting in company and town records, especially for 1936 and 1948, but she seldom presents her statistical conclusions in a clear, straightforward tabular form. The reader has to roam back and forth through text and footnotes in search of crucial data. The actual significance of the all-important single immigrant women, and of the distinct women's culture they create in female-headed households, remains in question when it is so difficult to find a simple statement of the percentage of men and women in the Penman's work force or of the immigrant proportion of the women workers. A close reading of the figures provided suggests the portrait of the 'women's town' may be slightly misleading. From a note on page 267 we learn that 59 per cent of the knitters in 1939 and 64 per cent

in 1948 were male, and, in the last chapter on Paris (100), that 44 per cent of the whole Penman's work force in 1948 were men – hardly an insignificant proportion. These men seldom come clearly into focus, especially when Parr turns to analysing the bitter 1949 strike, where 'womanly militance' takes centre stage. A more sustained emphasis on mill families, including both men and women, might have been more convincing. So too would a discussion of the other townsfolk who allegedly scorned the life-long work patterns of the Penman's women and treated them as 'outsiders.' In a town where Penman's was virtually the only employer and extended its influence so far into community life, who were these people?

Parr's treatment of the 1949 strike and the unionizing experience that lay behind it raises many questions as well. Was it principally gender ideology – the respectability that women could only be assured of in their non-breadwinning domestic roles – that undermined the women's ability to sustain a strike, as Parr argues? In her introduction she insists that 'the parts and proportions of the social landscape covered by class and gender alter' (10) and that class can take precedence over gender. Yet in this instance she has suppressed the impact of class where it was undeniably a crucial force. In contrast to the Hanover furniture workers, whose considerable skills and leverage in the labour market gave them unusual clout with their employers, semi-skilled workers in single-enterprise towns across Canada had enormous difficulty organizing against corporate bosses like Penman. Without jettisoning a sensitivity to gender dynamics, Parr might have given greater prominence to the power of the company to resist and eventually break the strike – especially in the collective memory of the experience in the town. Strikes by either men or women are always divisive in working-class communities and always treated as disreputable affairs, especially if the workers lose in the end. Typically, defeats such as that which took place in Paris in 1949 have led to deep bitterness, disillusionment, and demoralization and to efforts to bury the hard memories.

We might better understand the working-class experience in both towns if we also looked beyond the merely local factors that preoccupy Parr. She has quite rightly emphasised the importance of small-town identity and neighbourliness and the awkwardness that unfamiliar union traditions and concerns might engender. Yet by focusing on the townspeople's discomfort with strangers, she diminishes the links workers built outward to give them more clout in the confrontations with their employers. Unions did not consist simply of unfamiliar outside organizers; they were also maintained on the commitment of local union executives who had decided to make a stand against unilateral employment relations in their workplaces. They reached outward to find strength in solidarity with similar workers elsewhere. She also downplays the impact of broader social trends and processes that affected

workers in many communities at the same time. The two world wars, which, historians of both women and workers have told us, brought major ruptures in established class and gender relations, are particularly lightly dealt with. In Hanover we learn that the First World War created a crisis of masculinity for many German-Canadian workers, but never hear about the profound disruptions in labour markets that gave most Canadian workers unprecedented leverage to make demands on employers or the new grassroots fervour for working-class organization and for new ideologies. The furniture workers' union organized in 1919 and its involvement in helping put Agnes Macphail in the House of Commons (mentioned, but never discussed in the book) were part of a workers' revolt percolating through towns and cities across the country, in which wider identities than local neighbourliness were emerging. Similarly, the story of the 1949 Paris strike leaps across the Second World War with scarcely a mention of its impact on class relations in the town or the country more generally. How did the women, who we were told earlier were so grateful to Penman's for its corporate largesse in the 1930s, end up so resentful of company officials' favouritism a decade later? And what effect did the disruption of normal gender relations during the war, documented by Ruth Roach Pierson and others, have on the consciousness of the women who signed union cards and walked picket lines a few years later? In general, in both case studies, why so little discussion of the state (beyond tariff debates), which is certainly the major force drawing people out of parochial identities?

A major frustration for Canadian readers is that Parr situates her book solidly in the flood of international literature on many of the theoretical and historiographical issues raised, but seldom makes any reference to the considerable Canadian literature on work, class, gender, or small-town life that has emerged in the last decade. It will consequently be harder for many Canadian social historians to meet the challenge of Parr's important insights.

But respond we must. In this book we have a methodological and analytical model for a more sensitive, rigorous social history of twentieth-century Canada. Joy Parr has pushed us onto new terrain where gender is neither ignored nor is it given a monocausal explanatory force, and where its specific context is crucial. We are all in her debt for making this case so eloquently.

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Shadow of Heaven: The Life of Lester Pearson, vol. I: 1897–1948. JOHN ENGLISH. Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys 1989. Pp. xii, 414, illus. $28.95

'Lester Pearson,' John English notes at the beginning of his book,' has not been easy to know' (ix). He is undoubtedly correct. In spite of three volumes