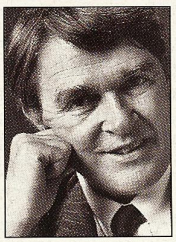
GENDER: HISTORY'S OVERLOOKED SECRET

By looking at which sex did what, Joy Parr adds a new dimension to Canadian business history. By Alexander Ross



WHEN JOY PARR WAS GROWING UP IN PARIS, Ont., in the 1950s, she could still see evidence of the industrial arrangements that had defined the town for almost a century. The mill owner's mansion overlooked the town from the top of a hill. The millworkers lived humbly in the valley below. Karl Marx would have loved the place. Its inequalities would have neatly illustrated his theories about the class struggle. With equal justification, Adam Smith would have seen the prosperity of Paris as evidence that his invisible-hand theory was indeed doing its job.

But neither of them would have seen what Parr saw, after she grew up to become a Queen's University history professor. What she noticed—and has persuasively described in a book called *The Gender of Breadwinners* (University of Toronto Press, $20.95)—is something that most of the town's residents probably took pretty much for granted: that the town's wealth was founded more on the work of women than of men.

Parr's book is more than a history of Canadian companies and the small towns they dominated. More than that, it's a history of how our unspoken assumptions about gender shape the way we work and live. Every age has its own ideas about what is and isn't appropriate for men and women. *The Gender of Breadwinners* demonstrates how subtly pervasive those ideas can be.

John Penman, an American-born entrepreneur, founded his knitting mill in Paris in 1868. By the early years of this century, thanks largely to the protective tariffs of Sir John A's national policy, his firm employed more than 1,000 people. Many of them were young women whom Penman brought to Paris on assisted passages from the English midlands. A teetotaling Presbyterian, he endowed a YWCA to provide his single employees with wholesome accommodation, and did his best to ensure the respectability of factory work for women. He sold control of the company in 1907, but his paternalistic approach to labor relations persisted until the Second World War. Even today, there are old ladies in Paris who emigrated as teenaged girls, spent their entire lives in the mill and still praise the Penman name.

PAUL ORENSTEIN

PARR: NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF GENDER IN BUSINESS

Parr concedes that Penman was, for his time, a model employer. But she points out that his enlightened paternalism was very much in his own interest. "Sure he was a good employer," Parr notes in an interview. "He *had* to be if he wanted to keep his women workers. And he wanted to keep them because he could pay them two-thirds as much as he'd have to pay men."

For contrast, Parr's book also examines another small-town enterprise, the Knechtel Furniture Co., which was a major employer in Hanover, Ont., until the firm went bankrupt in 1983. In Victorian times, Knechtel's all-male workforce was made up of proud craftsmen. But when the founder's son tried to introduce assembly-line techniques in the 1920s, he triggered a crisis in labor relations. "Instead of men building together, they became men apart," says Parr. "Both sides, labor and management, started fighting for their fair manly share."

Once again, gender roles played a decisive, albeit unrecognized, role in business history. As craftsmanship gave way to the stopwatch, male roles changed subtly. Managers emerged as a separate class of men who seemed to do no work at all, except to plan the work of other men. "Both company and unions tried to shift the emphasis," Parr says. "Before, masculine identities were tied to the notion of craftsmanship." But when scientific management became the vogue, men came to be valued as breadwinners rather than as men who knew how to make things. Parr suspects that it's no coincidence that athletic prowess—golf, tennis, rowing and so on—emerged as middle-class male obsessions around this time. Managers in the post-craftsman era needed new ways to prove they were still manly, even though they never got their hands dirty.

There may be a moral in all this for modern managers, especially male managers: "Gender problems have always been part of doing business," says Parr. "The only difference is that these days we're more conscious of it." CB