

Book Note

TRANSFORMING LABOUR: WOMEN AND WORK IN POST-WAR CANADA, by Joan Sangster¹

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IN THE QUARTER CENTURY following the Second World War, the percentage of Canadian women participating in the paid labour force swelled from 25 per cent to nearly 40 per cent by 1971.²

Insufficient scholarly attention has been paid to whether common perceptions of this period of rapid change have been accurate and to how they may need revising. Professor Sangster argues that representations of working women belied the reality of their lived experiences and that a fuller appreciation of the significance of this era for women—and for labour—requires a critical assessment of those representations and a careful consideration of other neglected topics. These include the effect of the influx of female immigrant labour, Aboriginal involvement in paid labour, and the rates and nature of women's participation in labour unions.

Sangster begins with an explicit examination of media portrayals of working women. She argues that labour publications, mainstream journalism (*Chatelaine* magazine, for instance), and government documents (such as reports from the Women's Bureau) presented conflicting visions of women's labour participation that served their own purposes. Union periodicals in particular are a goldmine of inconsistent approaches to the idea of female participation in wage labour.

Next, Sangster employs the case of the Dionne textile workers as a means to examine the experience of immigrant women in the Canadian labour force. Even if they were not virtual indentured servants like the Dionne workers, almost all immigrant women were heavily overrepresented in the types of jobs Canadian-born women (not to mention men) tended to avoid.

1. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009) 308 pages.

2. *Ibid.* at 18.

The next part of the book considers the impact of Cold War era politics on women's work experiences, concluding that a culture of distrust, conservatism, and anti-communism profoundly influenced the operation of Canadian unions and women's involvement in them. Sangster proceeds to take up a study of women's experiences in the retail service sector, focussing on the Dupuis Frères department store in Montréal as a case study. From there she analyzes the nature and extent of women's use of grievance processes and their attempts to ameliorate union and non-union working environments.

A chapter follows that addresses an oft-neglected segment of the labour force: Aboriginal women. Here again, representations at the time—typically from government publications—painted a distorted picture of off-reserve working life for these women that was, and continues to be, more complex than has been offered up in mainstream or government media portrayals. Sangster usefully points out the existence of first-hand accounts by Aboriginal women that challenge our misconceptions.

Finally, Sangster arrives at an analysis of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, beginning with the hearings that took place in 1968. She argues that the Commission represented a “transitional moment”³ when the changes in women's work and lives to that point could be assessed. The Commission provided an opportunity for the airing of women's true experiences and engendered serious debate about how government policy should be shaped. Sangster takes pains to explore the ways in which the composition of the Commission, its mandate, and its methods of amassing and editing relevant material influenced its conclusions in its 1972 report. She specifically calls attention to the lack of official labour movement representation on the Commission.

Sangster's book does not directly consider domestic work, volunteer work, criminalized activity, or public-sector union labour performed by women in the window of time she has chosen for analysis. She acknowledges that her work does not address the full scope of women's labour, but focuses on a narrower subset of women's experiences of paid labour to address certain gaps and inconsistencies in our current understanding.

Transforming Labour is an essential addition to our understanding of how the post-war Canadian labour force was transformed by women's increasing participation and how women's lives have been irrevocably transformed by that involvement.

3. *Ibid.* at 233.