

*Discounted Labour: Women Workers in Canada, 1870–1939.* By Ruth A. Frager and Carmela K. Patrias. ix + 289 pp. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. Index, bibliography. Cloth, \$45.00; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-802-00828-3; paper, 0-802-07818-4.

Reviewed by Carmen Nielson

*Discounted Labour* is a succinct synthesis of women's experiences of waged and salaried work during Canada's first and second industrial revolutions. Since labor and women's historians have paid more attention to this than to any other era in Canadian history, the authors had a rich body of literature to survey. Ruth A. Frager and Carmela K. Patrias have done so admirably and have produced a small, readable volume that nicely balances breadth and depth. The text, which includes a comprehensive bibliography but no footnotes, would be an excellent support to undergraduate teaching in Canadian labor history and women's history. It will also be welcomed by scholars who work outside these fields and need a quick, expert introduction.

The central question posed by the authors is, How have class and ethnic or racial difference interacted with gender in the realm of paid labor? To answer this question, they examine women's participation in both blue- and white-collar work, including factory, service, prostitution, teaching, social work, sales, nursing, and clerical. The authors seamlessly integrate ethnic and racialized women's experiences, including indigenous, African, Asian, Slavic, Scandinavian, Jewish, and southern European. They also provide even-handed coverage of regional differences among women in French and English Canada, the Prairie West, British Columbia, and the Maritime Provinces, thereby diverging from the emphasis on Ontario in the existing literature.

The first of the book's two sections deals with women's work lives and the conditions they encountered on the job. Here Frager and Patrias propose that industrial deskilling and the cult of female domesticity were the factors that most affected women's relation to paid labor during this period. Deskilling meant that craft workers and artisans lost control of the labor process, and capitalists could cheapen the cost of labor. By

breaking down production into simple, repetitive tasks, employers opened up new sources of cheap labor, namely, women, children, rural migrants, and immigrants (p. 23). These “unskilled” laborers could be replaced easily and therefore had little power to demand higher wages or better working conditions.

The cult of domesticity demanded that married women and women with children retreat into the home and rely upon their male breadwinner for economic support. Frager and Patrias note that this was a middle-class notion to which many working-class families no doubt aspired (p. 11). It was, however, a difficult or impossible goal for many. Insufficient male wages or the absence of a male breadwinner drove working-class women into the paid labor force. Middle-class women could also find themselves without a male protector or might undergo a reversal of fortune that threatened their livelihoods and obligated them to work for pay. The cult of domesticity empowered employers to pay women less, on the grounds that they were “temporary” workers earning “pin money.” The cult also placed the burden of housework and child care securely on the shoulders of women, an extremely difficult assignment to carry out in conjunction with waged or salaried labor.

The book’s second section examines social reform and regulation of women’s paid work, as well as laboring women’s relation to union organizing and worker resistance. Of the former, Frager and Patrias conclude that responses to female workers were in general paternalistic and concerned primarily with protecting (white) women’s procreative abilities and moral purity. Although reform mitigated some of the worst abuses of women in the workforce, it tended to perpetuate gender and racial and ethnic inequalities.

In their analysis of the union movement, the authors refute the notion that female laborers were docile, submissive, or uninterested in improving their working conditions. In addition to describing specific episodes of resistance, Frager and Patrias point to “the major structural barriers that impeded women workers’ militancy” (p. 118). One such barrier was employers’ ability to “divide and conquer” along both gender and racial and ethnic lines (p. 119). Protection for women workers was often in direct conflict with male workers’ interests, and vice versa. Union demands for equal pay for equal work, for example, could “remove the low-wage incentive for hiring women” (p. 124). Similarly,

pressure on employers to grant a “family wage” was premised on male union members’ belief that women did not belong in the labor force. In instances where labor militancy coalesced around racial or ethnic identities, “women’s issues” were often seen as a threat to worker solidarity.

Fragar and Patrias are to be commended for engaging with a thorny issue that a less ambitious book would have tried to avoid: Is women’s work accorded lesser value because women are understood to be inferior? Or are women understood to be inferior because their work is less valued? The authors provide good evidence that the answer is “yes” to both questions. Any work that resembled the domestic or caring work that women traditionally did in the home was defined as “unskilled” and garnered low wages in the paid labor force. Women accepted low wages and low-status jobs because their options for wage-earning were limited to “women’s work.” Gender segregation in the workforce was, in turn, compounded by racial or ethnic divisions. Some types of waged and salaried work were simply deemed low status *because* women were engaged in them. Fragar and Patrias liken this to “the opposite of . . . King Midas. . . . Because women themselves have been devalued, a woman’s touch has had a negative effect” (p. 38).

The authors nicely illustrate how subjective the category “women’s work” has been and demonstrate that definitions have varied according to time, place, class, and race. They also leave the reader with little doubt that the categorizing of paid work according to gender has, by and large, oppressed women and reconciled labor to the needs of capital. They conclude that “the story of Canada’s women workers in the years from 1870 to 1939 is, in many ways, a grim tale” (p. 147).

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