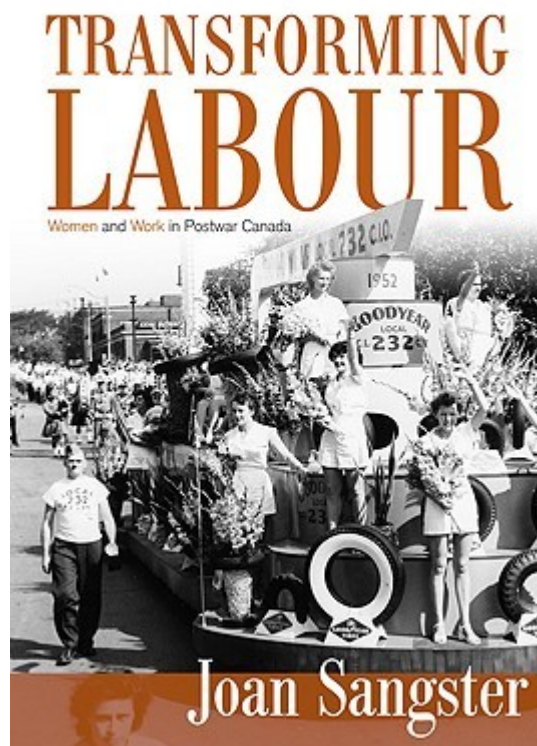


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The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

Transforming Labour: Women and Work in Postwar Canada



Volume 44 (2011)

Reviewed Work(s)

Transforming Labour: Women and Work in Postwar Canada. By Joan Sangster (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010). Pp. 416. Cloth, \$75.00. Paper, \$35.00.

Joan Sangster's *Transforming Labour* is the first monograph to examine Canadian women's labor in the twenty-five years after the end of the Second World War. She builds on the existing Canadian and American historiography of the post-war period by endeavoring to gender the Fordist accord, defined by Sangster as "the tacit agreement between capital, the state, and the established labour movements that gave labour some important legal protections, and capital the stability it needed to Taylorize production, augment productivity, and sustain profits" (4). Sangster locates herself within revisionist scholarship that challenges the narrative of decline used to characterize the post-Fordist period, arguing that there was no "decisive break" between the post-war period and the demise of accommodation in the 1970s. She emphasizes, instead, continuity and development. Primarily concerned with working-class women's self-organization, the study explores a number of key questions surrounding the social and economic conditions of women's paid work, women's negotiation and resistance to labor developments, and the "interpenetration" of class, gender, and race in post-war Canada. Sangster challenges the argument that the post-war years witnessed the entrenchment of confining gender roles and emphasizes instead women's changing outlook; yet, she also acknowledges the "repressive and constricting aspects to Canadian political and social life" conveyed in women's working experiences (272). For Sangster, the post-war years are ultimately contradictory and this is the overarching argument of the book.

Sangster draws on documentary, media, and archival sources, ranging from union- to government-collected materials that include legal records and personal papers. Her methodological approach is inclusive, calling for an integration of the feminist historical practice of interpreting the material evidence of women's daily lives and the "macro social structures of gender, race, and class relations" accentuated by feminist political economists (12). In other words, empirical research and theoretical questions need to be combined and in conversation with each other. Sangster's work is thus, in part, a response to criticism of the use of

women's experiences in historical inquiry. She defends their usage, reminding her reader that a historian cannot dismiss women workers' complaints and actions.

Partly due to her interdisciplinary approach, Sangster points to developments in a variety of fields, including women's and feminist scholarship and labor and working-class history. Of note for Canadian scholars are the implications of Sangster's study for an analysis of the impact of war on women. Many of Sangster's findings challenge Ruth Roach Pierson's pioneering 1986 study which disputed claims that the Second World War was a watershed in the history of women.^[1] There is likewise much of note for American scholars. Sangster points to continuities and divergences in the American and Canadian contexts, pointing out, for example, that while international unions crossed the border, labor feminists in Canada were less organized due to the smaller size of the labor movement and the lack of a long-standing federal Women's Bureau. Moreover, Canadian political traditions included a more pronounced democratic socialist tradition, and Canadian Second Wave Feminism displayed a stronger socialist influence than its counterpart in the United States.

In addition to an introduction and conclusion, the book contains seven chapters. Each chapter outlines a specific theme and draws on regional case studies for illustration. The first chapter explores representations of working women in the media, focusing primarily on print publications. Sangster points to a variety of gendered images, arguing that prescriptive literature and messages were often inconsistent with reality. The complicated and changing relationship between the realities of women's workforce participation and the representations of female workers in the media resulted in women defending their need for paid work while simultaneously apologizing for work outside of the home. Contributing to our understanding of how state policies racialize and gender labor, chapters two and six analyze European immigrant women and Aboriginal women. Sangster argues that the post-war accord assumed that new immigrants and less desirable citizens would have fewer opportunities and social mobility. Interestingly, chapter six is the only chapter to significantly emphasize women's unpaid familial work. Chapter three examines the efforts of fur, electrical, and textile unions in an effort to assess both the impact of the Cold War on women workers

and the fight for gender equality within the labor movement, with Sangster lamenting the effect of anti-communist rhetoric on women laborers. She argues that communist unions were often more vocal in their demands for gender equality and that a fear of being labeled “too communist” silenced women’s criticisms.

Using as a case study the Dupuis Frères, a Montreal department store, chapter four examines the regulation and protests of women in the retail sector. These women, according to Sangster, found little relief under the Fordist accord. This development is in direct contradiction to the unionized women discussed in chapter five whom Sangster argues made significant use of the grievance system. Unionized women are thus identified as a privileged minority whose workplace was “just a little more bearable” (197). The final chapter examines the labor feminists whose testimonies were presented before the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in the late 1960s. Sangster emphasizes the escalating demands for change that characterized the 1960s and examines the relationship between feminism and the labor movement.

As Sangster notes in her introduction, there is much missing from her analysis of women’s labor in the post-war period, including an analysis of women’s domestic labor, women’s professional education and careers, and public-sector unionism (11). Sangster endeavors to fill the gaps missing in the Canadian historiography and to respond to current American scholarship, but there is still much work to be done on women in the post-Second World War era. Regardless, Sangster’s case studies illustrate the changes in women’s consciousness and “interpretation” of paid work that would culminate in the organizational growth of feminism in the 1970s. *Transforming Labour* makes a significant contribution that is relevant to scholars in a variety of fields.

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[1] Ruth Roach Pierson, “*They’re still women after all: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986).



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