

Review

Joan Sangster, Trent University

Katrina Srigley. *Breadwinning Daughters: Young Working Women in a Depression-era City, 1929-1939*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. 206 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4426-1003-3.

In this study of Toronto's young working women during the 1930s, Katrina Srigley uses oral histories, both collected by herself and from archival holdings, to reconstruct the daily lives, on and off the job, of women salaried and wage earners. Srigley's title indicates her thesis: she argues that women became breadwinners in families which faced unemployment and hardship during this era, either contributing to, or often solely supporting the family. This is an intriguing alteration of the way the term breadwinner was understood at the time: it was associated with the male breadwinner ideal, the notion that male heads of household should make a decent enough wage to support their dependents, preventing wives and young children from being forced to work for pay. Propagated by unions and employers alike, this ideal was recognized to be more ideal than reality, but its ideological impact was nonetheless important. Srigley's thesis thus raises interesting questions: if the ideal was severely undermined by the reality of young women's wages, how and why did it maintain its ideological sway? Should we use the term (differently) to signify all wage earners in the family, rather than the one with the supposedly most 'significant' pay packet? Srigley's argument about women becoming the sole support of their families would have been more effectively argued with additional census and other sources, but her suggestion that we re-invent the term breadwinner is nonetheless an interesting idea.

Srigley's aim is to understand "identity, privilege, disadvantage" (5) in women's lives, suggesting that she positions herself historiographically within debates about gender and race identity, more than class relations and working class history. Some of her historiographical assertions might have been supported with more evidence. If she is to situate her writing as an antidote to authors who used "static models of patriarchy" (59) to explain women's work, then some reference to who these authors are is needed (I am not really sure this characterizes Canadian writing on this subject). Similarly, arguing that Canadians have not taken seriously the "invention of race" (8) underestimates the work of geographers like Cole Harris and Kay Anderson, as well as historical writing on Aboriginality.

While not all the chapters are based on oral sources, they are an important underpinning for the book, and the use of women's words gives the book life and

vitality. Like other Canadian historians – Carolyn Strange, Franca Iacovetta, and Ruth Frager – she uses Toronto as a case study, pointing out that a local study is often a useful means of highlighting broader patterns of social experience and gender relations. In the five chapters that follow, Srigley first lays out the context for young women’s work during the Depression, highlighting the economic hardships facing families, the sacrifices daughters made, and the way in which young women maintained a sense of “respectability” and femininity in the face of paid employment which did not always fulfill their dreams. Srigley then turns to women’s position in the household; oral histories allow her to delve into issues not easily uncovered in textual sources, such as who performed domestic labour and how economic hardship created familial tensions and shaped existing hierarchical relations.

Material in the third chapter on women’s paid work, underscoring how a gendered and racialized division of labour shaped women’s choices, is perhaps better known to historians, though Srigley also positions her research as part of a newer, scholarly challenge to “the privileged story of the white, British majority”(7) that she claims has dominated to date. Yet, uncovering and describing the minority story, as she acknowledges, is not always easy, and she makes particular reference to oral history in this regard: “I had great difficulty, for instance, securing interviews with people in Toronto’s Italian communities” (11) and, as a result, she makes use of other interviewers’ material. Srigley does draw on one detailed interview with an African-Canadian woman, Claire Clark, to good effect, showing how race and gender constructed her employment choices and dreams in ways distinctly different from the options available to other women. Srigley also tries to use the concept of “Britishness” to explain why some women enjoyed privileges others did not. One does wonder, however, if even Britishness was a homogenous concept: were working-class Irish and Scottish women, some with a historic antipathy to England, included in this group? How much did class matter in terms of the ‘British’ advantage’?

In the last two chapters Srigley looks at women’s leisure on the one hand, and violent danger in public spaces on the other hand. The chapter on women’s leisure provides very valuable material both on women’s off-the-job activities – from the dance hall to the movies – and also discusses how women interpreted those activities in retrospect. This discussion of leisure is nicely counter-posed to a chapter on women’s safety and moral regulation, which draws more heavily on textual sources, particularly public discussion of the unsolved murder of a ‘respectable’ working woman, Ruth Taylor. Because of her status as a ‘good’ girl, Srigley argues that Taylor’s murder stood as a “cautionary tale” (92) to other women. Yet, this dramatic case of violence stands in contrast to women’s discussion of ‘private’ violence: ‘Women,’ Srigley observes, “rarely discussed family violence explicitly” (92). Did women, then, over-idealise the family in

retrospect? Does this pattern of remembering reflect the persisting misconception that danger lurks outside the family circle, or were women protecting their own family's respectability?

Srigley provides valuable insights into the lives of women workers in this period, showing how the "rupture" (96) of the Depression was a central part of their memoirs. In terms of oral history, her approach sits in between a project of recovery/recuperation and one focusing more on memory and subjectivity, the latter more dominant in oral history writing since the 1990s. In the introduction, for example, she notes the way in which later affluence moderated women's memories of the Depression, as well as how the age gap between herself and her interviewees shape the interview. Nonetheless, she also lays claim to a long-standing goal of oral histories of women: "memories can be used with a political purpose to tell the stories of those whose pasts have been ignored and to challenge dominant narratives that silence those histories" (96). Whether describing the gendered division of labour or women's love of dance, women's words are granted significant authenticity. This suggests not only that recovery remains central to women's oral history, but also that subjectivity and recuperation may be inseparable, different sides of the same coin.