

Workers union and the women's wear ILGWU were castigated not only as Jewish unions, but as American imports as well.

Frager's well-conceived and well-executed book thus adds the interesting Toronto case to the impressive list of Jewish labour movement studies. My favourite line is a Yiddish folk saying that needs to be updated but still rings with hope (p. 35): "If all men pulled in one direction, the world would topple over."

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Suzanne Morton — *Ideal Surroundings: Domestic Life in a Working-Class Suburb in the 1920s*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995. Pp. vii, 201.

Suzanne Morton's *Ideal Surroundings* is another attempt to incorporate gender into the historical writing of the Canadian working-class experience. Morton focuses on Richmond Heights, a working-class suburb in the north end of Halifax, which was constructed in the aftermath of the 1917 explosion. The records generated by the Halifax Relief Commission, together with a variety of other sources including newspapers and church, charity, and municipal records, provide important glimpses into the domestic life of the neighbourhood's residents and render visible the culture of working-class women. *Ideal Surroundings*, with its emphasis on how domesticity transformed working-class culture, is an important complement to previous community studies which considered transformations in the culture of male workers primarily in the workplace and trade union.

The 1920s have been viewed by historians as a period of significant transformation in working-class culture with the rise of monopoly capitalism, the emergence of mass culture, and ethnic and racial fragmentation within the working class. Morton argues that gender ideals were never universal and varied by class, region, and community. The organization of the book reflects another key aspect of Morton's argument about the diversity of gender, specifically that gender was experienced variously according to age and marital status. Separate chapters are devoted to the elderly, young single women, female-headed households, and men. Curiously, the book is organized along a "reversed life cycle", beginning with the elderly and ending with young single women. While this organization, Morton suggests, is intended to emphasize the element of change, it is inconsistent with her overall objective of illuminating the experiences of men and women (p. 13). Life is never experienced according to a "reversed life cycle".

Given the central argument about the relationship between gender and age, Morton's decision not to incorporate children into the study seems inconsistent. She writes: "Children were not active participants in the creation of gender ideology, but were often the intended subjects of socialization" (p. 14). Is it not possible that ideals of masculinity and femininity were shaped, at least in part, by boys and girls themselves, in the neighbourhood, classroom, and playground?

Thus, while Morton delves into important topics long neglected by Canadian

social historians, including for example elderly men and women and the culture of single working women, the conceptual framework of the book is weak and often confusing. In the introduction she writes that “gender ideals of Richmond Heights were shaped by the widespread heterosexual capitalist assumptions about a ‘family wage’ with a male breadwinner and a dependent wife” (p. 6). Interwoven with breadwinning for men and domesticity and motherhood for their wives, as Morton subsequently argues in chapter 2, was the idea of “respectability”. While the gramophone replaced the piano as a symbol of working-class respectability in the 1920s with the spread of consumerism, it remains unclear how working-class gender ideals were transformed by “mass culture”. Indeed in Morton’s discussion one is struck by the continuity of earlier nineteenth-century working-class gender ideals.

The overarching materialist framework of the analysis further inhibits any attempt to explicate the meaning of gender for the working-class men and women of Richmond Heights. While much valuable information is presented about living standards, the multiple meanings of gender for the men and women of Richmond Heights themselves is never fully developed.

The meaning of “the family” and its relationship to the formation of gender ideals is another important question left untouched. In the introduction Morton indicates that she prefers the term “household” over “family”, stating that the latter term is “loaded with emotional overtones”. She further posits that “Looking at the household also allows us to see people in relation to the economic unit in which they lived” (p. 13). Yet, as Morton reveals in a later chapter, “the houses of the subdivision were purposely designed as single-family dwellings and had little flexibility for space reallocation without the complete loss of family privacy” (p. 47). The theme of working-class respectability, central to Morton’s analysis in chapters 2 and 4, is integrally linked to the ideal of the private family constructed during the 1920s around the heterosexual married couple and their children. Any potential class differences between the values of the members of the Halifax Relief Commission and the working-class tenants also remains buried in Morton’s materialist framework.

Chapter 3 focuses on elderly men and women in the community. Morton argues convincingly that men and women who came of age in the 1870s and 1880s experienced and interpreted class and gender differently from their grandsons and granddaughters who entered the work force in the 1920s (p. 52). Men and women, furthermore, experienced old age in different ways. Old age for men began with an inability to support their families, whereas for women menopause was the signal of old age. While Morton’s argument that old age was experienced in gender-specific ways is convincing, her emphasis on women’s bodies as the determinant of old age undermines important social and cultural influences.

The chapter contains considerable detailed demographic information about the elderly in Halifax during the 1920s. The view of the elderly presented by Morton, however, is overwhelmingly one of destitution and ill health. No doubt many working-class men and women experienced old age in poverty or in declining health. Yet there is considerable evidence in the chapter to suggest that many elderly men and women had very different experiences and were active and vital

members of the community. An analysis of 1921 aggregate census statistics for Halifax reveals that nearly 40 per cent of men over 65 were listed as owners, managers, and superintendents. This would suggest that many were among the most prosperous members of the city's working class. As the author herself points out, although adult sons and daughters regularly assisted their elderly parents, occasionally this relationship was reversed. In at least three Richmond Heights households during the 1920s, mothers financially or materially assisted their married daughters and grandchildren (pp. 63–64). Also, while the discussion of private pensions illuminates much about the material conditions of the elderly and how they survived, Morton neglects to situate this discussion in the context of contemporary debates surrounding the passage of the federal Old Age Pension Act of 1927.

The most enduring images of the 1920s, as Morton shows in chapter 7, are the images of young women as flappers, business girls, or boyish athletes. The single women of Richmond Heights preferred clerical and retail jobs over employment at Moir's chocolate factory. The prestige of white-collar work attracted young women to employment in offices and stores. "Mass culture and new forms of female workplace culture", Morton argues, "combined to strengthen a universal classless ideal that was appropriate for all women" (p. 150). Some of the richest material in this chapter is the already published analysis of the workplace culture of single working women by the 1920s as organized around heterosexual romance. Morton's discussion of how employers incorporated wedding showers into their social programmes points to the importance of the incorporation of gender into historical studies of welfare capitalism.

The records of the Halifax Housing Commission are a boon for historians of the working class, who are more often than not frustrated in their attempts to study the "totality" of the experiences of working-class men and women. The focus in this slim volume on a single homogeneous suburb of Halifax, comprised largely of skilled male workers of Anglo-Celtic backgrounds and their families, can also be criticized, however. Morton's arguments about the diversity of gender would be bolstered by some comparison to the gender ideals of working-class men and women in the neighbouring black community or other areas of Halifax where unskilled workers took up residence during the 1920s.

*Ideal Surroundings* is the first volume in the new University of Toronto Press Studies in Gender and History Series. Unfortunately, the conceptual problems in Morton's study detract from the important objective of this series, to incorporate gender into the writing of Canadian social history.

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