

*Labouring the Canadian Millennium:
Writings on
Work and Workers, History and Historiography*

Bryan D. Palmer, editor

St. John's: Canadian Committee on Labour History,
Memorial University, 2000. 483 pp. Illus. \$20 paper.

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LABOURING THE CANADIAN *Millennium* is a collection of commissioned essays for a special issue of *Labour/Le Travail* in celebration of the new millennium. As the subtitle hints, the contents are "purposively eclectic" (7), to use editor Bryan Palmer's phrase, but overall the results are successful. The collection is both engaging and useful, and its diversity is one of its strengths.

For those attracted to literature surveys, they will find much to feast on here. Desmond Morton has updated his periodic reflections on the state of Canadian labour history, although he seems both bemused and amused that he was asked to participate. As Morton notes, he and Palmer have had many disagreements about labour history over the last twenty years. His piece is followed by Anthony Giles's discussion of the evolution of industrial relations (IR) as a discipline. He emphasizes that IR must move away from a "managerial version of employment relations" and towards one that offers a broader "understanding of the social relations within which work and production are organized, modified, and transformed" (67).

The two strongest surveys, though, are Joan Sangster's on feminism and working-class history and Cynthia Comacchio's on family history. Taken

together these essays offer both a description and commentary on the evolution of Canadian (and beyond) social history since the 1960s. Sangster's piece is the more pessimistic one. She concludes that, if feminist working-class history does not receive "political renewal," then it may "languish, and all that we will be left with [will be] the complex accommodations of our negotiated postmodern, 'postfeminist' age" (165).

The need for political renewal is also at the heart of Murray Smith's critique of the New Canadian Political Economy, which he dismisses as ineffective nationalism and reformism. His fundamental conclusion may not be popular these days, but it is bluntly clear: "the road forward for Canadian labour can only be through a renewed commitment to *class struggle*" (368). Even those who do not agree with him will likely be persuaded by his analysis of the decline in the standard of living for working people over the last three decades.

More equivocal is Ian Mackay's assessment of what he regards as the four formations of Canadian socialism that have emerged over the last 100 years. On the one hand, he concludes that "nothing has worked." The "'revolution' hoped for by Communists and CCFers did not happen." Yet he also

argues that "everything worked" because a "socialist good sense" ... did attain and still retains a fair measure of popular acceptance in Canada" (125).

Be warned: Mackay's essay is dense, but readers will receive two rewards after making the intellectual slog. The first is David Frank's lively discussion of Canadian workers in films. His conclusion is hardly startling: "visual history will benefit from greater collaboration between historians and film-makers" (437). His selection of films, however, is wide-ranging, and he teases out the working-class experience in unexpected places. For example, in *My American Cousin*, a film that is focused upon a girl's crush on her foreign cousin, he looks at the "itinerant pickers" (434) in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley. The second reward, and the only essay

centred on British Columbia, is Becki Ross's study of burlesque and striptease in Vancouver from 1945 to 1980. As she notes, her SSHRC-funded study generated much criticism in the mainstream press and on radio talk shows, being generally considered a waste of taxpayers' money. Yet Ross convincingly argues that striptease can and should be seen as a form of labour. Moreover, she shows how striptease both reflects and reinforces discourses of prostitution, race, and sexuality.

Collections of articles are prone to being uneven, and this one is no exception. Yet rather than conclude on a negative note, let me emphasize that the good essays far outweigh the few weak ones. This collection is worth buying, and, at twenty dollars, readers will get, ahem, a good return on their investment.

*School Leadership:
Essays on the British Columbia Experience, 1872-1995*

Thomas Fleming, editor

Mill Bay, BC: Bendall Books, 2001. 427 pp. Illus. \$34 paper.

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FROM FIGURES OF prominence to hassled administrators, from people of moral force to persons uncertain of the merit of their work, this book opens with the fallen image of our school leaders. *School Leadership* contains fourteen well articulated chapters (eight of which were published previously by the editor as author) and is divided into two parts, according to a military metaphor. Part 1

is the perspective from "headquarters," the central view from Victoria; Part 2 is the perspective "from the field," the realities of principals and others who faced the challenges of providing schooling in a frontier society. Clearly, school leadership is seen as distributed among community leaders, politicians, teachers, parents, and others. The contributions of superintendents, principals, and women are featured,