

*Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral,
and the Economic in the Postwar Years*

Joy Parr

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. 368 pp. Illus. \$21.95 paper.

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J OY PARR INTRODUCES her book by referring to it as "a series of relatively distinct, chronologically ordered essays which explore modern material culture." This is a warning to the reader that this is an eclectic and somewhat difficult book grouped around the theme of domestic goods after the war. The simple notion of domestic goods, everyday appliances, and furniture contains within it a complex interplay of themes: between modernist design and pragmatism, consumer choice and government policy, gender differences and the implications for these goods, Canadian sensibilities and international currents of taste and production – to name just a few.

If the range of subjects is complex, so too is the era Parr chose for her study. The years after 1945 saw several forces converge upon the poor consumer. First, the consumer was out of practice and desperate to spend. Years of depression and war had meant that first there was no money and then no goods. Second, the very market in which the consumer had to act was disrupted. The war had led government and consumer alike to set aside the normal market forces in favour of a command economy directed at the war effort. The transition from this world to a more normal economic structure was difficult and uncertain, albeit eventually successful. As this

was occurring domestic goods became fraught with even more symbolism and importance than usual. The emphasis on family, which has been termed "the cult of domesticity," had a major impact on both the economics and meaning of domestic goods for the decade or so after the war's end. Third, long-run economic prosperity meant that the context within which the consumer made decisions was continually changing. What was a luxury in 1945 was seen to be a necessity in 1960. What was extravagance one year might be routine a few years later.

Given these complexities, it is perhaps not surprising to say that the book's strength is in its parts rather than in some seamless thesis or conclusion. Individual discussions are fascinating. Parr is the first historian to really look at the modernist movement as it applied to post-war Canadian goods. The debate between aesthetic purity and pragmatic design tells us much about high culture and mass market. Likewise, The evolution of maple furniture (a wood that many have bought but few really love) gives us a microcosm of the line between tradition and modernism within a Canadian context. She also raises a number of issues about consumer habits and marketers plans. Housewives did not always behave as marketers wanted or predicted.

For all these strengths the absence of a conclusive argument is unsettling, at least to someone trying to assess the book in a few hundred words. There are two themes that come close to serving as an overarching thesis. One is a challenge to the notion that domestic goods will automatically reflect consumer tastes. Given the implications of everything from post-war economic regulation to the gaps between producer assumptions about women and women's actual needs, Parr argues, the assumption of consumer sovereignty is facile. This is hard to argue with at one level. The immediate post-war years were certainly not examples of the marketplace in full and unfettered operation. Even by the 1950s, as post-war regulations eased, domestic goods tended to be oligopolistic rather than shining examples of Adam Smith's competitive market.

Yet there is another, albeit implicit, argument that appears and reappears and that seems somewhat contradictory. In the introduction Parr raises a comparison between Canada and Sweden ("another small northern nation") and wonders why our approach to domestic goods took a different road. Throughout the work she returns to this theme and muses as to why Canadians did not choose high-quality well engineered products over mass produced goods being sold on the basis of novelty and change – what she terms the Volvo versus Ford debate. In the end, she implies a certain disjunction between the goods and the consumer.

In the end, though, the answer is simply that the consumer did not want to pay for the refrigerator equivalent of a Volvo. Nor, it might be argued, was this an irrational decision. In a world where the standard of living was

going up year after year it made some economic sense to buy what you could afford now and await the great North American promise that, in a few years, you would be able to "trade-up." This would imply that the consumer was actually doing what s/he wanted. This is reinforced by the discussion around automatic dryers as well as the more general conclusion that Canadian domestic consumption was "characteristically subdued"; that is, relative to what was going on south of the border. By the later 1950s automatic dryers were being pushed in Canada with some force. Yet Parr argues that consumers were attached to their clotheslines. Even a decade later a large majority of Canadian homes did not have dryers. In this resistance she spots a noticeable difference to the American pattern and thus gives us an example of the somewhat more conservative approach to consumption in Canada – a theme that echoes throughout other studies. The author uses this argument to differentiate Canadians from Americans. Yet this, too, reinforces the notion of consumer sovereignty. The companies used all the same advertising techniques and pricing efforts. Until the Canadian consumer was ready, however, push led to resistance. In other words, manipulation can only take a company so far – something Ford would learn with the Edsel. In the broad sense the general consumer is sovereign even if individual consumers are not.

The implication, then, is that Canadian consumers ended up with American goods because, whatever differences existed in timing, Canada was North American in its attitudes towards consumption. This had been the case long before the 1950s when Canadians used balloon construction to give cheap and rapidly built houses

to a growing population. Canadians chose suburbs over European cities and single detached houses over apartments. Domestic goods were based on

the same principles, and one wouldn't expect anything else. Canadians, both men and women, preferred Fords to Volvos, and that is what they got.

The Sommers Scandal: The Felling of Trees and Tree Lords

Betty O'Keefe and Ian Macdonald

Surrey: Heritage House, 1999. 192 pp. Illus. \$16.95 paper.

BY DAVID MITCHELL

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BRITISH COLUMBIA'S POLITICS have often seemed synonymous with scandal. Not only have the colourful cast of characters who have played prominent roles in provincial politics seemed unusually prone to quarrels, mishaps, and conflicts of interest, but the local press has demonstrated a penchant for exaggeration and hyperbole. Of course, not every indiscretion or misdemeanor committed by an elected representative constitutes an actual scandal. However, in recent years, an increasingly aggressive news media have tended to describe such recurring behaviour as "scandalous."

Nevertheless, British Columbia does have the misfortune of being the home of a few bona fide political scandals that have significantly shaped the tone and rhetoric of public discourse in the province. Perhaps the most significant such event occurred almost half a century ago and is known as the Sommers Affair. Robert Sommers was minister of lands and forests in the Social Credit government of W.A.C. Bennett. In 1958, after a lengthy and sensational trial, he was found guilty of conspiracy and accepting bribes,

becoming the first minister of the Crown in the history of the British Commonwealth to serve a prison term.

Surprisingly, *The Sommers Scandal: The Felling of Trees and Tree Lords* is the first book-length account of this important incident in British Columbia's history. And for this, the authors, Betty O'Keefe and Ian Macdonald, deserve thanks. They provide a useful chronology of the events leading up to the charges against Sommers and place the entire affair within the context of British Columbia's forest policy. Above all, it is a good, suspenseful story. Among the book's strengths is the recounting of the drama of the trial leading to the conviction that would eventually send Sommers to jail. Written in a lively style and based upon newspaper reports and interviews with key participants after the fact, there is no better available summary of the proceedings of this important legal case.

The authors have synthesized an impressive volume of research; however, the lack of documentation poses a problem. Written for a popular audience, the book fails to provide