

## REVIEWS

### WOMEN, WORK AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT IN AUSTRALIA AND AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND

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It is the editorial claim of *Women, Work and the Labour Movement in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand* to not only include women in the traditionally male discipline of labour history, but indeed, to change the agenda of that discipline itself. It is a claim well substantiated by the twelve articles of this special edition of the *Labour History* journal. In an issue which updates feminist scholarship on women's work, historians explore the experiences of Australian and New Zealand women both within the labour market and the domestic economy. In enlightening reassessments of conventional sources for examining employment, and in challenging new studies using hitherto largely untapped oral and visual resources, the history of work in Australia and Aotearoa is enriched by a feminine dynamic.

Labour history, dependent as it has been upon the records of employers, trade unions, legislative measures and arbitration courts, has tended to be frustrating in revealing only fleeting glimpses of women workers, who were often poorly unionised, poorly regulated and poorly paid. At best, the history of women in the workplace has been as a corollary to that of their male counterparts. More often, however, women have been subsumed within 'workers', and their differing experiences from men, and among themselves, have been overlooked by a discipline in which the operation of class in the market place has been of paramount significance.

It is these issues that *Women, Work and the Labour Movement* seeks to address. The twelve articles focus variously upon the interaction of gender, class and race in order to reconstruct Australian and New Zealand women's experiences of work as both productive and reproductive labourers, paid and unpaid.

The journal is divided thematically into six sections. The first of these considers oral and visual testimony as a key to understanding the lives of women which might otherwise be lost. Jackie Huggins and Diane Kirkby demonstrate in their essays the value and the problems of non-literary sources for reconstructing women's past. In an exploratory essay using photographic evidence Kirkby considers the gendered and sexualised construction of the "disreputable" occupation of barmaid in Australia from the late 1800s to the middle of this century. From visual representations of barmaids and the bars in which they worked, she argues that the women employed in Australia's pubs in this period were not necessarily "saucy serving wenches", but that they were branded such by dint of their close association with men's immoral habits. It is an argument which depends upon the assumption that the images selected to represent barmaids and their workplaces are indeed representative of the industry and occupation at this time.

The use of only four photographs is perhaps reflective of editorial constraints upon the length of the essay, as well as the relative dearth of extant prints of bars and barmaids. It

also raises questions, however, as to the use of photographs as evidence upon which to base a general thesis. Kirkby herself is aware of the potential for mediation and artifice by both photographers and subjects in the creation of photographic images, and tries to allow for it. Ultimately, however, the subjectivity of the industry and the time period undermine her argument. Kirkby's interpretations of the images seem reasonable, but whether it is possible to draw from them alone general historical realities covering over seventy five years is questionable.

The same can be said of oral testimony, of course, which is also both subjective and particular in the history it conveys. Unlike Kirkby's essay, however, Jackie Huggins' interview with Agnes Williams about her experiences as an Aboriginal domestic servant realises the potential of non-literary sources to render visible women who would otherwise be overlooked. The transcript of the interview is a powerful, albeit disappointingly brief, testimony to the work experience of Williams, and Huggins does not impose any historical interpretation upon it. By accepting the limitations of oral history, Huggins realises its potential. Williams speaks for herself; it is her voice, not Huggins' which the reader hears.

As a woman, and, moreover, an Aborigine, Agnes Williams is a worker traditional labour history might easily have overlooked. That her story now has been told attests to the real worth of oral history as a key to the past of those whose lives would otherwise go unrecorded. Unfortunately, however, Huggins' transcript is the one article in the issue to consider the impact of race upon the women's experience of work. Indeed, Aborigine and Maori women are both only marginal to the book's focus. In the same way that working women often have been subsumed within the classist model of labour history, Aborigine and Maori women are implicitly accommodated within gendered discourses, but their cultural identities as workers are not examined in any depth. John Leckie, in his case study the 1988 Vestey meatworks dispute in New Zealand, does hint at the importance of cultural identity as a determinant of women's experience. He offers no subsequent analysis of the inter-play of race with gender and class, however, and the reader can only speculate as to the influence of culture upon the actions of the wives of breadwinners involved in the dispute.

The lack of any intensive cultural interpretations of women's employment in *Women, Work and the Labour Movement* is no doubt indicative of the extent to which traditional labour histories based upon literary sources have obscured racial identity. They have tended to obscure the gendered differentiation of experiences of work, too. Luckily, however, it is often possible to counter this tendency by reconsidering primary material with respect to sex and gender. In *Women, Work and the Labour Movement*, for example, Stephen Robertson and Melanie Nolan look at the records of New Zealand Arbitration Courts, and those of Victorian organisations respectively, and posit fresh perspectives upon the relative strengths of sex and class in the workplace. Robertson, in his overview of the first years of the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration system in Aotearoa, concludes that while many women gained from the levelling effect of uniform awards, such gains were incidental in a system concerned first and foremost with mediating the interests of male workers and their employers, and preserving the status quo in and out of the workplace. The strength of prescriptive gender roles meant that work performed by women was always women's work, nevertheless industrial relations for men and women were largely dictated by class values. The sex of workers, he argues, was only an issue when it did not obstruct the operation of class in the workplace. Similarly, Nolan, in an intensive, and sometimes difficult survey of the first equal pay campaign in Victoria, posits class interests as the key to understanding the position of women and women's work at this time. Employers, union officials and workers were motivated by the theoretically sexually neutral consideration of class. Because women were

numerically weak, poorly unionised and underskilled, however, they had little power within the system, and the operation of class often was prejudicial to their interests as women workers. Whether the labour relations system responded to the imperative of sex or class, the outcome for women might be disadvantageous all the same.

Other essays in *Women, Work and the Labour Movement* in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand consider variously sexualised consumerism and the way in which women's work both in and out of the home is permeated by the prescriptive ideologies of gender; women and industrial militancy and the need for broader definitions of militant action to accommodate women's experiences of work; and women and caring, and how the ideology of the feminine has influenced women's labour, both paid and unpaid. All are well-written and insightful, and read together they suggest how women's experiences of work differ not only from men's but from each other's, varying with the period, the occupation and the status of the work.

The history which is thus represented in this special issue of the *Labour History* journal is, however, more of Australia than of Aotearoa. As a forum for feminist scholars from both sides of the Tasman, it is unfortunate that the content of *Women, Work and the Labour Movement* does not reflect the stated focus upon both Australia and Aotearoa. Only two of the twelve essays comment exclusively on women's labour history in New Zealand, with a third article looking at women and work in both countries. Furthermore, the focus of the essays documenting 'Australian' women's experiences of work is overwhelmingly concentrated upon Queensland and Victoria. It is as well, then, for the reader to keep in mind the geographical specificity of the book.

Nevertheless, together the twelve essays suggest the complex nature of women at work. Women identified themselves and were identified by others as constructs of their class and race as well as of their sex, and it is the interplay of these identities which determined women's experience of labour, whether productive or reproductive, paid or unpaid. The value of these articles is in the tension between the unity of focus and the differences of experience.

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#### **MULTINATIONAL BANKS AND THEIR SOCIAL AND LABOUR PRACTICES**

International Labour Office, Geneva, 1991, xii & 160pp 27.50 Swiss francs

This book is the outcome of an ILO research programme on multinational banks (MNBs). It is a comprehensive and authoritative survey of quantitative and qualitative employment trends, training, terms and conditions and industrial relations, including a short discussion of the nature of multinational banking and its evolution.

The bulk of the report is descriptive rather than analytical, but does draw some theoretical parallels between the employment trajectory of MNBs and industrial multinationals. It records the dramatic expansion of international banking in the 1960s and 1970s and links this to the growth of the euro-currency market, the increasingly multinational character of industrial and commercial enterprises and the international recycling of oil funds. In the 1980s this growth has been checked by the twin developments of major multinationals undertaking their own banking activities in house and the development of 'securitisation'

whereby multinationals sell debt directly to each other rather than using banks as intermediaries. A countervailing trend has been that of the deregulation of financial services in the EEC and elsewhere, which has both increased international competition and led to a diversification in the range of services marketed by banks. These developments have been associated with substantial organisational change in MNBs (including both in-house change and merger and acquisition) and continuing comprehensive technological innovation embracing both the automation of existing processes and generation of new products and product delivery systems (including the domestic servicing of global markets via electronic transmission) made possible by the new technology itself.

The employment impacts of these changes have been diverse but a number of common themes emerge. The rapid employment growth of the years of expansion in the 60s and 70s has been replaced by stable or falling employment as technology based increases in labour productivity have roughly paralleled increases in the volume of business. Important exceptions here are the increasingly dominant Japanese MNBs with exceptionally low and falling ratios of employment to assets - an area which would repay further study since it is not clear whether this is simply a matter of the character of the business these MNBs undertake or their ability to achieve qualitatively higher levels of labour productivity.

A second theme is the qualitative change in bank employment. One dimension of this is a change in the mix of skills used away from routine clerical tasks which have been increasingly automated, towards both a broader range of more specialist and higher level skills embracing finance, marketing and technology and a smaller core of more routinised deskilled mass processing tasks. This has led in turn into the transformation of the banking career from a generalist progression through a range of disciplines almost always with a single employer to a much more occupationally rather than organisationally based labour market divided into specialised expertise areas. This has a wide range of implications for industrial relations and the labour market. Previously banks worldwide based their personnel policies on a mixture of paternalism, job security and career progression. This is being replaced with greater competition in the labour market, with remuneration packages aimed at external recruitment but much less emphasis on job security than in the past.

A third theme is the extremely rigid and unequal sexual division of labour in MNBs which resembles that in domestic retail banking. Women have routine clerical jobs for relatively short periods of time, possibly returning to part-time posts after breaks in employment for childbirth and childcare. Men have careers which may start in routine clerical posts, but take them via geographical and occupational mobility to dominate all the senior organisation positions. The adoption of equal opportunities policies by many banks has so far brought only marginal changes.

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