

Elizabeth Jane Errington, *Wives and Mothers, School Mistresses and Scullery Maids: Working Women in Upper Canada 1790–1840*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995. Pp. 375. Can\$55.00 cloth, Can\$22.95 paper.

In her impressive and highly readable examination of women's work in Upper Canada between 1790 and 1840, Jane Errington imagines a chance meeting during the late 1830s in York by hotel keeper Jane Jordan, stay maker Jane McBradney, schoolmistress Mrs. Cockburn, and society matron Helen Macaulay. She speculates that Helen Macaulay would surely have known of Mrs. Cockburn's school, possibly that she and her husband had attended social events at Mrs. Jordan's hotel, and that Helen Macaulay, Jane Jordan, and Mrs. Cockburn may well have depended on Miss McBradney's products to be properly attired. All of these women were workers in Upper Canada, providing essential labour to their households and to the wider community. This identifiable community, determined by gender and the work its members performed, was at the same time ethnically, linguistically, socially, and economically diverse, and also united through shared fundamental experiences as workers. These experiences, argues Errington, were rooted in legal and political subordination to men, and in training as daughters, wives, mothers, and housekeepers, and, depending on their station in life, as "helps," society matrons, teachers, or wage-earners.

In her fascinating account of the household economy, Errington notes that even in the earliest years, Upper Canadian households were never isolated, closed units with women working alone. Households frequently absorbed members of the extended family, including single and widowed women, and unrelated individuals of diverse social and economic classes. This "women's community" thus comprised female relatives, friends, neighbours, and often employees, all of whom provided emotional, physical, intellectual, and economic support. She further argues that the ongoing and at times intensely personal relationships that developed among working women "reinforced the bonds of the greater women's community" (p. 235).

One major contribution of Errington's book is to consider women's domestic and waged work within wider contexts and historical debates. Among these are questions about the social or economic value of that work to Upper Canadian society. Errington explicitly takes issue with long-held historical prejudices that women's work was fundamentally a function of biological destiny and therefore not really "work" at all, limited to the individual household and requiring no particular skill. She posits that a narrow and traditional definition of "work," which credits only waged labour of well-defined, formal tasks,

devalues the real work that women, and especially those in colonial contexts, undertook and contributed to society.

A second question taken up throughout the volume is whether women's work can reasonably be considered a site for, and an enhancing feature of, "women's culture." Errington disagrees that a true culture emerged in this period because of the divisive or at least distinguishing impact of class, economic and social position, location of homes, and time of arrival in the colony. Thus, in her view, no true collective women's identity centred on work developed before 1840.

The author explores the question of whether women's collective work experience between 1790 and 1840 contributed to or challenged the "bonds of womanhood." This credo resulted in a "cult of true womanhood," which called on women to be submissive, gentle, self-effacing, innocent, pure, and intensely spiritual, all within the privacy of the home. Errington's position is that although the rhetoric of "true womanhood" was indeed prescriptive, it did not reflect the reality of most colonial women's lives in Upper Canada. The record of women's work offered demonstrates that colonial women through necessity often engaged in work outside their homes, in tasks that demanded skill and a strong stomach, and that they did so with verve and authority. That women were regarded as the home's moral compass is not disputed, however; thus women undoubtedly did approach their demanding tasks influenced by prescriptive notions of women's special virtues of gentleness and spirituality in all they undertook.

The book examines the intersections of women's domestic and waged work. Errington convincingly makes the point that where historians have bothered to notice women's waged labour at all, women's attendant domestic responsibilities frequently have been ignored, thus obscuring many of the conflicting duties and requirements for respectability, as well as the stark labour overload typically endured by women—then and now. As an example, take the chapter she devotes to women as teachers: "Ladies' Academies and 'Seminaries of Respectability': Training 'Good' Women in Upper Canada."

Errington deftly situates her analysis of women teachers and teaching work within the considerable literature generated over the past decade, particularly that of Prentice and Houston, Gidney and Millar, and Theobald (but not, surprisingly, Curtis or Selles). She shows that before 1820, women of reduced means created small "dame" schools, catering to boys and girls from the immediate neighbourhood. Although these women were typically called "schoolmistresses," Errington notes that classes were informal, the curriculum limited to the rudiments of literacy, and the teachers untrained. In this, as in later instances of teaching, the demands of the household economy dictated the degree or period of teaching, with women moving in and out of waged teach-

ing as required. With the advent of family-run girls' schools after 1812, where married couples established enterprises, women often took on academic and "ornamental" teaching, as well as all "domestic arrangements." This involved ensuring discipline and family-oriented worship, acting as a mother-substitute (no mean feat in itself), cooking the meals, cleaning the house, and laundry or arranging for domestic help to do this work under her supervision. After 1820, the market for girls' schools on a variety of models became increasingly competitive. A growing number of single and widowed women who were career teachers, "professionals," opened schools for young women. They made, argues Errington, a significant impact on the development of women's education in Upper Canada. Through their instruction in the fine arts, they created many of the competencies and symbols through which middle-class girls could negotiate class mobility. And although women teachers in these academies actively promoted the skills and attitudes of "true womanhood," by the example of their involvement in the public world of commerce, they also implicitly challenged "the accepted rubric about a woman's relationship to paid labour" (p. 232).

In identifying the nature and value of women's work, Errington has made effective use of a wide range of source material. In addition to extensive analysis of newspaper reportage, including the stylized obituaries of the era and advice literature, and a wide range of secondary literature which she reinterprets, she has reconstructed the histories of a number of Upper Canadian families around the trials and triumphs of their womenfolk. This she has accomplished through a close reading of journals, diaries, and letters, not all of which were kept by the women themselves. The resulting family stories, with their rich cast of characters, serve as reference points throughout the book as households experience the birth and death of children, difficulties with hiring and keeping "helps," educating the young, and dealing with the aged. There is, for example, the image of Mary O'Brien dealing gently with her maid, Elineor, who had been startled to discover that a departed hired hand had published matrimonial banns with her without asking her permission. Mary reports that the girl "has no kind of love for him tho' she likes him well enough to marry him" (p. 32). Or again, the two months of household chaos during which Mrs. Johnson and her children are ill with measles. A neighbour woman intercedes to manage the household and take the one healthy child home with her, when she also takes ill. More intrepid neighbour women are imported, some of whom also become measles patients in the Johnson household. These are women who know how to salvage even apparently hopeless situations, who are skilled at making "something out of nothing," and who are notably modest about their achievements. Above all, they are women of action, seemingly little interested in spiritual reflection. Or was spirituality so commonplace as to deserve no

treatment in their journals? The biographical accounts are so well-rounded, interesting in their own right, and believable that the reader is led to an acceptance of the complexity of these women's work, the many frustrations created by limited resources and rising expectations, and the undeniable social and economic value of this waged and unpaid labour.

The author has taken care in providing a fairly representative range of women for this analysis. Although the women are all Caucasian and mostly literate and articulate, they come from rural districts and small and larger towns across the colony, from families living close to destitution and those of the comfortable elite. Very importantly, in their ranks are women of all ages, with single women figuring importantly along with wives and mothers. A study like Jane Errington's is long overdue. Hers is a welcome corrective to the many dismissive assumptions about the nature and value of women's domestic and waged labour.

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Clinton B. Allison, *Present and Past: Essays for Teachers in the History of Education*. New York: Peter Lang, 1995. Pp. 209. US\$29.95 paper.

Clinton Allison has undertaken a long overdue project: the creation of a volume about the history of education aimed at the practising teacher. His aim, as he states in the introduction, is not to provide a comprehensive history of schooling in America, but rather, "to provide historical perspectives on some important contemporary issues." Thus, as the title itself suggests, this is a collection of essays on history that is driven collectively and individually by challenges of the present.

The essay topics draw readers into debates over many of the "hot-button issues" facing teachers today. Three chapters are about the history of the teaching profession (or semi-profession), one about school governance, and one each about race, poverty, and gender issues. The first and framing essay raises the most important question of all, in Allison's words, "What Are Public Schools For Anyway?"

Throughout, Allison's language is breezy and conversational. His narrative moves well from anecdote to theory and back, and Allison resists (almost always) the temptation to sermonize that arises whenever one tries to distill complex arguments into simple, matter-of-fact statements. The result is a volume that is accessible, informative, and certain to give teachers a better sense of the institutional world and collective memories they have inherited.