

Sarah Glassford and Amy Shaw, eds.

Making the Best of It: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland During the Second World War

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020. 293 pp.

Sarah Glassford and Amy Shaw's *Making the Best of It* follows the success of their previous edition *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service* (2012). Both are part of the Studies in Military History Series, a joint enterprise by UBC Press and the Canadian War Museum. Where *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Service* focused on women and girls in Canada and Newfoundland in the First World War, *Making the Best of It* addresses a diversity of women's and girls' lives in the Second World War. It is an engaging and finely edited volume on women's and girls' experiences at home and overseas, in paid and volunteer labour, on the streets and in stores, and in homes and at work. The editors are particularly sensitive to the various marks of identity that fracture the categories of "girl" and "woman," with particularly strong attention paid to age, ethnicity, and religion, as well as nods to addressing race, specifically Whiteness in some of the essays. Overall, this is a well-crafted collection that speaks to the past, present, and future of the historiography on women and the Second World War.

This collection builds on the work of Ruth Roach Pierson, Pamela Wakewich and Helen Smith, and Carolyn Gossage, which is readily engaged in this new volume, with contributors adding complexity to the existing women's history of the period. Since its publication in 1986, Ruth Roach Pierson's *They're Still Women After All: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* has rightly dominated conversations on the subject, as well as serving as a model for Canadian women's history more generally. *Making the Best of It* directly addresses Pierson's work and its formidable legacy—at least in women's history—that the World War II was not the liberating moment for Canadian women as it was sometimes popularly understood. While the question of liberation and—liberation for whom—hovers in the historiography, the editors have chosen not to pursue it as a central organizing theme. Thus, some of the essays in here lightly address it, while most seek to add diversity to the established stories of women in the Second World War, further refining and complicating our understanding of the war on girls and women's lives across Canada, in Newfoundland, and overseas. As the title of the collection reveals, even adding girls into the conversation feels fresh and important in this regard. Barbara Lorenzkowski's essay on the wars impact in the "small spaces of [girls'] childhood" (53) and Claire Halstead's chapter on British evacuees and friendship add interesting new dimensions to girls' histories.

Making the Best of It is divided into four sections that collectively include twelve chapters bound by an introduction, conclusion, and section overviews written by the editors. A curated bibliography caps off the book. The first section on "Women, Children, and War" covers a range of issues, from girls' emotional communities in two Atlantic communities to the experiences of British evacuees in Canada to the policy elements of childcare to schoolgirls' conflicted identities in Montreal as they

fell along linguistic and religious lines. The second section on “Women and the War at Home” explores the experiences of Canadian Jewish women alongside two essays on women’s perceived roles in relation to consumerism. The third section, “Women and Overseas Humanitarian Work,” includes two chapters on Mennonite women’s relief work and how women coped in the Red Cross Corps overseas. Finally, part four, “Women in Wartime Nursing, Paid War Work, and the Armed Forces” includes essays on female nurses in remote stations in Northern Labrador, women who died in military service, and an analysis of women’s bodies in industrial work at home.

Some of the most evocative essays look to work on emotions, bodies, and ethnicity. Barbara Lorenzkowski’s exemplary essay uses Barbara Rosenwein’s concept of “emotional communities” to analyze the responses of girls in two Atlantic Canadian communities and how emotions, geography, and age shaped girls’ subjectivities. The importance of linguistic, ethnic, and religious differences is carefully teased out in Lisa Moore’s essay on schoolgirls in Montreal. Moore’s essay is sensitive to the differences between the messages girls were expected to absorb and their actual uptake by girls themselves. Marlene Epp’s essay on Mennonite women in humanitarian work during and after the war in England and Europe adds a new dimension to Canadian women’s pacifist efforts. Sarah Van Vugt’s excellent contribution on beauty and the body reveals how central beauty was to women war workers and their reception both at work and in the wider public. Van Vugt’s well-rounded discussion is sensitive to the real and imagined problems of this focus, as well as the various factors from job type to family status to age, race, and class that shaped the “complex figure” of the woman war worker (241). Yet, as she argues, “women were regularly reminded that being beautiful was itself an act of patriotism” (240). If there were personal penalties, they did little to modify the message.

No collection can possibly cover every area and the editors have done an excellent job here of curating a superb selection of essays. If one could wish for such things, I would wish for more research specifically on Black and Indigenous women’s experiences, with the same attention to class, gender, age, and other categories of intersectional analysis. Histories of women with disabilities—and certainly this must be part of the story of war—would be welcome as well, as would further attention to the history of sexuality.

Finally, current issues of labour precarity directly impact the historiography and, in turn, the stories that form the essential components of popular national narratives. The biographies of contributors, by my reading, include only five with traditional, tenure-line positions, with two other authors currently completing PhDs. Given that most of the contributors in this collection are precariously employed, in temporary positions, or working in other fields, I am concerned that this important research may not be able to flourish. As the rich contributions of this book reveal, if that comes to pass all of us teaching Canadian history and Canadian girls’ and women’s history will be the worse for it.

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