

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Joan Sangster, One Hundred Years of Struggle: The History of Women and the Vote in Canada

Stephanie Mitchell

Volume 83, printemps 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1061045ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.1353/ltt.2019.0013>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Mitchell, S. (2019). Compte rendu de [Joan Sangster, One Hundred Years of Struggle: The History of Women and the Vote in Canada]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 83, 263–265. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ltt.2019.0013>

however, to raise the continued importance of critical engagement rather than simply celebration, of shortcomings alongside strengths. Critical engagement is vital to the further development of the exciting and wide-open fields of transnational and global labour history.

NEVILLE KIRK

Manchester Metropolitan University

Joan Sangster, *One Hundred Years of Struggle: The History of Women and the Vote in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 2018)

JOAN SANGSTER'S *One Hundred Years of Struggle* is a remarkable inaugural volume on the centenary of the federal extension of the suffrage to white women in Canada. It is an overview of the rich diversity of suffrage histories that led to the final extension of universal suffrage in 1960. Subsequent volumes will treat the topics introduced here in greater depth, but this work will doubtless become a standard text for students of Canadian women's history. At under 300 pages, its length is manageable. It is accurate and historiographically mature, but still readable. The publisher agreed to include numerous images and primary texts, all of which will facilitate classroom integration. Most importantly, Sangster has remembered the primary task of the historian, which is to tell good stories. Every chapter employs biography to tell personal stories of individual suffragists, most of whom have escaped the traditional narratives around Canadian women's history. Because of its decentralized complexity in both space and time, the story of Canadian women's suffrage is especially difficult to tell. I can't imagine anyone having done it better.

The introduction invites us to imagine suffrage as a series of concentric circles. Those in the innermost circle

were focused almost exclusively on the vote, extending their activism beyond the vote only to pursue other, related objectives like expanding women's roles in society. Beyond the first circle lies a group of activists whose objectives were broader. Whereas the first group pursued the women's vote as end unto itself – political equality as a goal with inherent justice and consequent worth – the second group may be thought of as women who viewed suffrage as a means to an end. The justice of women's equality with men, for this group, was tied up with achieving a more just society generally. The third circle looked broader still, its members organizing occasionally around suffrage, but more often around religion or social clubs. All looked to leverage women's talents to improve society. Some envisioned structural transformation that would strike at the root of injustice; others accepted the basic ordering of their society but worked to make less radical improvements.

Subsequent chapters address issues that divided women, like property, race, imperialism, and war. A loose chronology is maintained, making the dense, disparate, non-linear history easier to follow. Suffrage intersected frequently, if not universally, with other struggles. Land, labour, class, religion, language, or race play parts in every story. Party politics favoured women's enfranchisement in some circumstances and hindered it in others. Ideology inconsistently supported or opposed suffrage depending on the political moment. Assumptions around progress, the superiority of white culture and Christianity vis-à-vis Indigenous, Asian, or Afro-Canadian groups, even after assimilation, permeated white discourses about suffrage extensions.

Two chapters help readers imagine the competing worldviews that emerged around the suffrage debate between those who participated in the creation of

what Sangster calls “feminist countercultures” and the “antis” who opposed them. She helpfully categorizes all arguments employed by antis into five themes on gender relations: “innate sex differences and separate spheres; maternity, domesticity and the family; the protection of traditions and order...; war and military might; and culture and religion.” (118) She also reminds us that there was always more at stake than gender. Race and class hierarchies intersected with gender and reinforced one another, both rhetorically and politically. Feminists pushed back with mock parliaments, women’s journals, women’s columns, novels, cartoons, films, and marches. Together, they created an ethos of resistance whose importance Sangster highlights. They allowed feminists to *feel* a certain way, a part of something shared among many across many parts of the world, something meaningful and greater than themselves.

An entire chapter is devoted to complicating the popular narrative that has associated women’s participation in war with their success in achieving the suffrage. “Myths tied to patriotic versions of history,” Sangster points out, “are difficult to disrupt.” (175) Such mythologies, however, unravel under scrutiny. Inconsistencies between, for example, the presumption that women are naturally more inclined to peace than men and the presumption that women automatically supported the war effort on the home front, emerge. In reality, war divided women as much as it divided any other group.

Sangster acknowledges special sympathy for a diverse group she calls the “forgotten foremothers” (57) of modern feminism: labour and socialist activists. She takes the time to delineate among utopian (mostly Finnish) socialists, Christian/ethical socialists, and scientific/materialist socialists (à la Marx and Engels), not all of whom advocated

women’s suffrage. Some denounced suffragism as bourgeois, while others said it was socialist. Yet even those who agitated for the vote often, like May Darwin, exist “on the fringes of suffrage histories, in part because of her multiple loyalties to class, gender, and socialism.” (73) Other factors similarly have excluded labour-oriented women’s activists from the historical record, including the straightforward limitation of how much effort these women could expend on producing paper trails of their activity. More affluent feminists had access to a host of advantages including “education, access to news coverage, social and professional networks, and knowledge of institutional power, not to mention their class-based confidence.” (93) They also had the luxury of replacing their domestic labour with the paid labour of other women, giving them far more of that most critical resource: time.

Sangster is especially gifted at breaking the paralysis that so often afflicts feminist writers who must face the critiques levied at early authors who tended to simplify narratives – lionizing some groups while ignoring others, forcing a teleology onto a far more crooked reality, or accepting uncritically hypotheses that fail to pass empirical tests, like the role of war in advancing women’s rights. To be sure, those critiques are generally correct and necessary. It is far easier, however, to tear something down than it is to build it up again. If Canada is to break through its traditional exclusion from global and transnational feminist history, we must do more than criticize oversimplified stories: we must find ways to tell stories that can hold the complexity of the history without losing the compelling quality of narrative itself. This book is an exciting first step in a series that promises to do just that.

STEPHANIE MITCHELL
Carthage College