

## *Purchasing Power: Women and the Rise of Canadian Consumer Culture* by Donica Belisle

Megan Blair

Volume 112, numéro 2, fall 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072243ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072243ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Blair, M. (2020). Compte rendu de [*Purchasing Power: Women and the Rise of Canadian Consumer Culture* by Donica Belisle]. *Ontario History*, 112(2), 260–262. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072243ar>

phone hostility to 'British' ideas of liberty. As Anderson's carefully marshalled examples make clear, these ideas were pervasive in the first third of the twentieth century. After the war the nature of Canadian anti-Catholicism shifted again, although once more Quebec, or rather Protestant perceptions of Quebec, remained central. Anxieties about relative population growth (both organic and imported) and disgust at what was seen as Catholic moral meddling became conflated with the incipient fascism some detected in the social and economic policies of Maurice Duplessis. The result was that Catholic Quebec came to be seen by many in English Canada as an ally of all that was dark and undemocratic in inter-war Europe. The Second World War did little to alleviate these fears: disgust at resistance to conscription was widespread and often associated with Catholicism as such, and many detected the shadow of Vichy in explicitly Catholic-nationalist groups such as the Order of Jacques Cartier. These fears continued into the Cold War: Catholicism in general and its Canadian variant in particular was simply another totalitarian-

ism opposed to the personal, political, and economic freedoms embraced by English Canada. The result, Anderson argues, was a Canadian civic nationalism that had neither room nor patience for what it perceived as Catholic obscurantism. *Not Quite Us* is very good in tracing and describing the protean but enduring character of Canadian anti-Catholicism, and if its focus on every manifestation of English Canadian anti-Catholic expression can at times seem relentless, the detail is rich, deep, and ultimately convincing. In the end the reader is forced to agree with Anderson's conclusion that English Canadian anti-Catholicism has been integral to the Canadian project. 'It has,' he writes, 'constantly shifted in composition, reflecting the symbiotic relationship anti-Catholicism has shared with a central question in Canadian history: who is an ideal Canadian and how can this ideal be cultivated and protected?' (242) This richly researched book is an important contribution to that debate.

Colin Barr  
University of Aberdeen

## *Purchasing Power*

### *Women and the Rise of Canadian Consumer Culture*

By Donica Belisle

Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 304 pages. \$85 cloth, \$29.95 paper, \$29.95 eBook. ISBN 9781442631137. (utorontopress.com).

*Purchasing Power* reveals that Canadians' consumer habits of a century ago were ultimately connected to power. Canadians used the consumer realm to empower themselves, and disempower others based on class, race, and ethnicity—a sentiment that continues today

as consumerism in Canada, and globally, continues to rise at an unsustainable level that accentuates inequalities. Belisle's book effectively illustrates the source and history of Canadians' consumer habits, which fuel today's consumer culture. Since the late nineteenth century, Canadian women's

consumer activity has been used to “survive, construct identities, seek pleasure, demonstrate citizenship, and communicate status” (6). By examining Canadian women’s consumer involvement between 1890 and 1930, Belisle displays women’s roles as political and economic actors. *Purchasing Power* argues that the federal government viewed women as consumer citizens, and women themselves engaged in consumerism for survival, artistic expression, and as a means of activism (180).

Belisle tracks women’s involvement in consumption through analyses of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union’s consumer advocacy, women’s consumption during wartime, the training of young consumers in home economics programs, rural women’s consumer habits, fashion, and co-operative consumption movements. These subjects iterate several recurring themes of women’s consumption, two of which include consumption and the construction of citizenship, and women’s position as a consumer within gendered divisions of labour.

Women’s position as consumers during the First World War resulted in the production of a “nationalist, feminized consumer citizenship” (70). Persuaded by the government to adhere to strict consumer guidelines, Canadian women used their role as food producers, shoppers, and budgeters to support the government and war effort by consuming responsibly. This helped to secure women’s position as a consumer as politically and economically significant. The relationship between women’s consumption and citizenship is further displayed in Belisle’s examination of home economics classes in the early twentieth century. Young women were trained to be modern, professional consumers through classes on budgeting, shopping, and decorating (73-74). Classes emphasized Euro-

# PURCHASING POWER

Women and the Rise of Canadian Consumer Culture



DONICA BELISLE

Canadian standards that presented white, upper class womanhood as the ideal, modern consumer who would contribute to the well being of the nation, thus limiting the consumer value of racialized and working-class women (96).

The power that women held as consumers in the gendered division of labour is seen in the WCTU’s promotion of temperance-based consumption. Belisle illustrates how the WCTU valued consumer habits that were “mother centred and domestic oriented” (19). The WCTU argued that women should spend money on goods that would benefit their families and demonstrate respectability to others, and ultimately take money away from sinful goods such as alcohol (35). Belisle argues that the WCTU was a “maternalistic consumer movement” that advocated for women being independent, empowered consumer agents (42).

Women often questioned the capitalist, profit-based economy and advocated for consumption that promoted the interests of families and communities. Belisle's examination of cooperative movements clearly indicates women's active participation in the consumer market, as women organized to promote "new forms of consumer citizenship that prioritized affordability and community support" (150). Similarly, rural women were actively involved in the consumer market in ways that fit their needs. Women participated in the sharing of knowledge and resources among their community, and organizations such as the Women's Institute acted as an "informal consumer agency" to promote enjoyable and affordable rural consumption (103). Rural women, similar to those in cooperative movements, favoured consumer habits that benefited their community and saw consumerism as a political issue.

Belisle's use of archives of the club women's movement, home economics movement, and cooperative movement presents a noticeably white, middle-class perspective, which she acknowledges throughout her study. Belisle recognizes that the opinions of those in leadership positions in organizations such as the Wom-

en's Institute and the WCTU represent privileged, white voices (127). The lack of diverse voices found throughout *Purchasing Power* indicates the relationship between consumption and white, middle-class, Euro-Canadian citizenship. As Belisle explains in her conclusion, "[women's] class and racial privilege encouraged many to use consumer display as a venue by which to judge who—and who did not—meet the criteria for membership in the modern Canadian polity." This poses the question of when, or if, this relationship between privilege and consumerism shifted in Canada to allow more diverse actors to hold power in the consumer market.

Overall, *Purchasing Power* is a fascinating study that combines historiographies of consumer culture, political economy, and Canadian identity. While tracing the history of women's involvement in consumption, it reveals the century long relationship between civic and consumer roles. Belisle's study is an excellent addition to Canadian consumer history that will appeal to gender, social, economic, and political historians and students alike.

Megan Blair  
University of British Columbia

## *This Land*

### *The Story of Two Hundred Acres in Kent County, Ontario*

By Kae Elgie

Waterloo, Ontario: The Fountain Street Press, 2019. 492 pages. \$45.00. cloth ISBN: 978-0-9812776-3-9 ([www.fountainstreetpress.ca](http://www.fountainstreetpress.ca))

**T**his book is a treasure trove of meticulous microhistorical scholarship centred on the history of a family farm in southwestern Ontario.

A social activist and retired librar-

ian, Kae Elgie set out to write a family history, beginning with her great-great-grandfather, George Elgie, who purchased the farm in 1870—but a box of 85 mostly handwritten deeds found in the farmhouse