

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Lara Campbell, *Respectable Citizens: Gender, Family and Unemployment in Ontario's Great Depression*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009, 304 pp. \$29.95 paper (978-0-8020-9669-2), \$65.00 hardcover (978-0-8020-9974-7)

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial collapse, there has been a surge of interest in the Great Depression, with several economic history books vaulting to the top of bestseller lists. While Lara Campbell likely never anticipated such keen interest in her chosen subject, her book is certainly a welcome addition, appearing when public and scholarly interest in the events of the Great Depression is at an all time high. Campbell's account is highly engaging and readable, offering new insights into the gendered dynamics of economic crisis as it played out in the lives of women and men living in Ontario in the 1930s. Focusing on the economic hardship faced by families, and the role of individual protest and collective action in redefining welfare and citizenship, *Respectable Citizens* offers a vivid, perceptive analysis of a unique period in Canadian history — one that affected at least 30% of the population directly through unemployment, and one that has been rarely studied through a gendered lens.

Campbell draws on a rich archive of resources including government documents, court records, newspaper stories, memoirs, recipes, novels, plays, oral histories, and interviews with women and men living in northern and rural Ontario in the 1930s. Her introductory chapter considers the strengths and weaknesses of these sources, while also setting out the focus and parameters of her study, and situating it within a broad scholarly and public context. Campbell's overview of scholarship on the Great Depression, as well as labour, women's and welfare state history, is particularly well done, highlighting important unanswered questions, and showing the value of the gendered, agency-focused approach she uses so effectively in her work.

In the five core chapters that follow, Campbell touches on a myriad of issues and themes. Contributing to scholarship on women's work, Chapter 1 shows the key role played by women in ensuring economic survival through domestic work (e.g., budgeting, growing and preparing food), informal labour, and paid employment. New insights also emerge on single motherhood, prostitution, and family desertion. She shows how social expectations around mothering and female "respectability"

constrained women's efforts to provide for their families — criticized as mothers when they could not care for their children, they were accused of “stealing” jobs from men when they attempted to secure paid work. Digging into less explored terrain, Chapter 2 examines men's experiences as they faced unprecedented unemployment and economic hardship. Here Campbell captures both the material challenges of men's search for work — often in far flung locations, away from family — and the psychological toll on their sense of masculinity for failing to meet social expectations around “breadwinning.” According to Campbell, the combined force of meagre economic choices, and the humiliation of government relief, led men to increasingly voice discontent, creating growing demands for social entitlement and a belief that the state bore responsibility for ensuring economic opportunities. Further unravelling the economic hardships faced by families, Chapter 3 probes the contributions made by children through formal and informal labour (e.g., picking berries, domestic work), as well as black market activities (e.g., stealing coal, petty theft). Children's economic contributions far outweighed the value of their schooling, and families drew on children's labour, typically along well worn gendered lines. Exploring the effect of economic crises on marriage and family formation for the next generation, Campbell also makes clear that age did not limit children's obligations, as social norms and laws often required adult children to assist their parents in times of economic distress.

In the final two core chapters of her study, Campbell explores the transformative aspects of the Great Depression in policy, state provision, and protest. Chapter 4 investigates the challenges faced by women and men in maintaining “home” as a material and symbolic space, showing that by threatening their status as “respectable citizens” the prospect of eviction and foreclosure served to unite the unemployed, and heightened demands on the state. While discontent was certainly absorbed within households — through conflict and domestic violence — it was also directed towards government through eviction protests, mass meetings and growing political mobilization. Building on these themes, Chapter 5 explores the myriad forms in which individual and collective protest was unleashed and how gender, class, and ethnicity in particular shaped dissent. Entrenched gender norms led men to demand support for their “breadwinner” role, while women's “militant maternity” led them to centre on more traditional concerns such as food prices and children's welfare. Ethnicity and class also shaped protest in critical ways, with Anglo-Celtic heritage forming a basis for successful “claims making” that often left other immigrants excluded from relief.

Wide ranging and well researched, *Respectable Citizens* provides a fascinating and nuanced analysis that vividly conveys the difficult challenges faced by ordinary women and men. It reveals the complex ways in which gender, ethnicity, and class shaped both their struggles, and the future of the Canadian welfare state. Anyone researching and teaching on issues related to women's history, labour history, ethnicity, policy, and social movements will find much of interest in this book. Students — both graduate and senior undergraduate — will also find it a thought-provoking read, offering rich glimpses of the past as well as striking parallels to the present day.

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