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**Alexandra Palmer, ed.** *Fashion: A Canadian Perspective.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. 382 pp. $37.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8020-8590-0; $79.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-8809-3.

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## Three Centuries of Northern North American Fashion

Surveying the sparse field of Canadian fashion history, Alexandra Palmer, Costume Curator at the Royal Ontario Museum, invited a select group of curators, journalists, and academics to contribute to a volume to chart new paths in the histories of Canadian fashion production, distribution, and consumption. The result of their efforts is a tightly edited and richly illustrated collection of articles on topics ranging from Victorian dress reform to the launch of *FashionTelevision*.

Making accessible previously unpublished case studies, *Fashion* is a welcome addition to Canadian historiography. Following Palmer's introduction are fifteen articles divided into four sections: "Fashion and Identity," "Fashion, Trade, and Consumption," "Fashion and Transition," and "Fashion and Journalism." Together the pieces span the years 1700 to 2000. Since they are not presented in chronological order historians may find the book's format frustrating. While it is possible to pick out evidence from different articles that illustrates change over time, long-term trends like changes in the structure of the fashion industry would have been better highlighted by chronological organization.

Why do we need a Canadian fashion history? According to Palmer, scholars need to boost the efforts of Canadian fashion designers, to explore the Canadian fashion identity, and to help costume curators with their endeavors. *Fashion*'s articles follow these objectives closely. Two review the histories of particular fashion enterprises (Gibb and Company, the Jean Harris Salon). Three explore the tastes and activities of certain fashion consumers (elite residents of Montreal and Ottawa). Three investigate changes in fashion production (Atlantic Canadian garment factories, Ontario millinery). Four look at fashion in the media (*Chatelaine*, the Toronto dailies, *FashionTelevision*, Eaton's advertising in the *Montreal Gazette*). One examines fashion creators' attempt to create a collective organization (the Association of Canadian Couturiers), one discusses the development of an upscale shopping district (St Catherine Street in Montreal), and one evaluates arguments made by feminist dress reformers.

Four of *Fashion*'s articles are particularly noteworthy. In a study of the blanket coat, Eileen Stack reveals how this garment became a symbol of English Canadian iden-

tity. First worn by seventeenth-century French sailors, blanket coats became staple items within the northern North American fur trade. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Montreal's English-speaking bourgeoisie wore blanket coats for outdoor winter activities. In the late nineteenth century Lady Aberdeen and her husband, the Governor General, wore blanket coats to promote English Canadian nationalism. Representing Canada's French and fur trading past, and symbolic of northern outdoor ruggedness, by the early twentieth century blanket coats had become English Canadian icons.

Looking at upper-class men's dress in Montreal between 1700 and 1867, Jan Noel shows how elite male attire reflected changing ideals of masculinity. Before the Conquest, Montreal's male elite wore wigs, stockings, feathers, vividly colored vests (which served as corsets), high-heeled shoes, and garments of sumptuous fabrics. Such attire matched their personalities: they were proud of their aristocratic heritages and they valued elegance, leisure, artistry, and luxury. Yet by Confederation elite men's dress had become rational, trim, and stark. Affluent male capitalists valued economy and efficiency and eschewed leisure and luxury. Believing finery to be feminine, they displayed masculinity and authority through black attire shorn of color and trimming.

In her investigation of the decline of the millinery trade in southern Ontario, Christina Bates offers a rare look at how factory production caused female craftspeople to go out of business. In the late nineteenth century, hat styles reached extravagant proportions and millinery became an accomplished art. Millinery shops owned by skilled milliners became luxurious female spaces where women could socialize and order custom-made products. Yet by the early 1900s, department stores were boasting millinery departments that sold hats for lower prices; they also started mass producing low priced hats. By the end of the Great War, businesswomen's control over millinery had dissolved. Between 1911 and 1921 the number of millinery establishments in Toronto dropped from 1,215 to 441.

Because most case studies in Canadian retail history focus on the evolution of a specific firm, Elizabeth Sifton's discussion of the development of Montreal's "Fashion Mile" is important. In the early nineteenth century, Montreal's shops were located along the waterfront, but by the 1860s they had moved to rue Notre Dame. By the 1880s this district had become crowded and Montreal's largest department store, Morgan's, relocated to the southern base of Mount Royal, an English-speaking bourgeois residential area. By the early 1900s Montreal's other premiere stores also moved upmarket, and by the 1930s the St Catherine shopping strip was well established.

*Fashion* raises questions about nation, region, and consumption. In her introduction, Palmer relates that the father of an Italian Canadian participant in an Italian beauty contest once contacted her to ask for advice on what his daughter should wear to represent Canada. Realizing that it was no longer acceptable to wear native garments, and not wanting his daughter to wear a revised version of a Mountie uniform, he was unable to identify a specifically Canadian fashion identity. Upon reflection Palmer was also unable to do so; this convinced her that historians need to explore issues of nationality and fashion in Canada.

Given Canadians' general lack of knowledge about Canadian fashion design, it seems plausible that scholars should identify a collective fashion character. Yet one wonders if this is possible, or even desirable. Because one of Canada's defining characteristics is diversity, does it make sense to pin down a Canadian fashion identity? As Stack demonstrates, understandings of Canadian identity often result from notions rooted in race, ethnicity, region, and class. The blanket coat seems authentically Canadian, but since it was made so by elite English-speaking urban central Canadians, it does not reflect all Canadians' experiences. Since the process of identifying national icons is fraught with assertions of power and privilege, it is likely that the process of identifying Canadian forms of dress will also be so.

Eleven of *Fashion*'s fifteen articles focus on Montreal and Toronto. Three look at Saint John, Halifax, and Ottawa, and one looks at *Chatelaine*, which was based in Toronto. This reflects the centrality of Montreal and Toronto to the Canadian fashion industry as well as reminds readers that fashion creation, distribution, and consumption are often metropolitan endeavors. Nonetheless it is also true that residents of rural and non-central regions followed fashion, designed their own fashions, and developed their own understandings of fashion. Although some writings on non-central Canadian fashions exist,[1] *Fashion*'s geographical scope indicates that more research in this area is required.

Many of *Fashion*'s contributions demonstrate that elites constructed status and identity by wearing exclusive apparel. Less obvious, however, are motivations behind petit bourgeois and working-class fashion consumption. Bates', Gail Cariou's, Peter J. Larocque's,

and M. Elaine MacKay's articles demonstrate that the mass market transformed Canada's fashion industry. Not only did it cause small firms to go out of business, it made available vast assortments of fashionable merchandise to people with middle and lower incomes. These groups' purchasing power, in fact, sustained many mass merchandisers. This finding begs the question: What prompted people with average incomes to purchase mass-produced fashions? Further research will hopefully provide better understandings of this matter.

Historians might take issue with a few of *Fashion*'s findings. Larocque suggests that unlike textile workers, "women producing clothing for the garment industry have received less attention from Canadian historians" (p. 139). Though it focuses on central Canada, it is nonetheless true that historical research in this area exists.[2] In her discussion of the restrictive fashions for women that characterized the Victorian era, Barbara E. Kelcey contends that "women's slavish concerns about fashion, modesty, and appearances were an effective barrier to any true [feminist] emancipation." Yet as American historian Nan Enstad demonstrates, motivations for fashion display are complex. While related to patriarchy they are also tied to class, status, artistry, and self-expression.[3] Had Kelcey expanded her analysis of consumer motivation she might have reached different conclusions about late-nineteenth-century fashion trends.

Canadian fashion history is a tiny field and *Fashion*'s authors are to be commended for broadening its scope. Contributions by Sifton, Bates, and Stack are particularly strong and would make good readings for undergraduate courses. A compelling example of the insights fashion history can provide, *Fashion: A Canadian Perspective* is sure to inspire further research into this area.

Notes

[1]. Carla Wheaton, " '–As Modern As Some of the Fine New Department Stores–Can Make It': A Social History of the Large Water Street Stores, St. John's, Newfoundland, 1892-1949" (PhD diss, Memorial University, 2001); Catherine C. Cole, "Comparative Analysis of the Toronto and Winnipeg Editions of the Eaton's Mail-Order Catalogue," 1995 (Canadian Museum of Civilisation, Library, Archives and Documentation, History Records, Box 1-164); Robert D. Watt, ed., *The Shopping Guide of the West: Woodward's Catalogues, 1898-1953* (Vancouver: J. J. Douglas Limited, 1977).

[2]. Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Ruth Frager, "Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Eaton Strikes of 1912 and 1934," in *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History*, eds. Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), pp. 189-228; Mercedes Steedman, *Angels of the Workplace: Women and the Construction of Gender Relations in the Canadian Clothing Industry, 1890-1940* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1997).

[3]. Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

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