

# H-Net Reviews

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**Constance Bowman, Clara Marie Allen.** *Slacks and Calluses: Our Summer in a Bomber Factory*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999. xvi + 181 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56098-368-2.

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“Anybody can build bombers—if we could” (p. 1). With that humble and playful beginning, two high-school teachers, Constance Bowman and Clara Marie Allen, tell their story of the summer of 1943, which they spent working in a bomber factory. Reprinted in 1999, *Slacks and Calluses* carries the mark of the era in which it was written. The voices of the women are clear and yet cautious regarding their observations of working conditions in the factory, and their narrative is intermixed with illustrations that track their transformation from proper ladies, in heels and hats, to seasoned workers adorned with slacks and calluses.

In the 1999 printing, Sandra M. Gilbert, author of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, introduces Bowman and Allen’s narrative of labor and transformation. Gilbert declares the chapter on the theory and practice of wearing slacks to be a “small gem of social history,” noting that their observations about the construction of gender in the 1940s reveal “gender ambiguities that contemporary feminists will understand well” (p. xi). The gift of this text is that both women record their observations on work dynamics and patriotism, as expressed through labor. Their gendered interactions, performed with a wide-eyed freshness, allow present-day readers to contribute their own historical vantage point and analytical tools. Students will recognize, for example, the social construction of gender in Bowman and Allen’s observations, even though the text was written prior to the development of many of the theoretical frameworks for understanding gender established by feminist and other scholars. As such, *Slacks and Calluses* is a first-hand historical account that could be read, analyzed and unwoven by students in a variety of courses including American Studies; History; Labor and Organizational Studies; and, Sociology

and Women’s Studies as well as in English courses focusing on personal narrative or life history. The text is short, easily digestible, and could be productively paired with historical and theoretical analysis of work, gender, nation-formation and personal narrative.

Taking place in 1943, Bowman and Allen’s tale marks the entry of women into industries previously closed to female labor. Like many women at the time, Allen and Bowman took a break from their work in traditional female fields, such as including teaching, nursing and domestic labor, to expand their horizons and help the war effort. As readers, we are given a front row seat to the negotiations of male managers and laborers with the stream of women who arrive to keep the bomber factory in motion. Even more interesting is the effect on the women’s self-image as they move from a timid, self-ridiculing attitude toward their ability to do factory work to a sense of accomplishment, ownership and mastery by the time they leave the factory to return to their role as teachers in the fall of 1943. In this way, *Slacks and Calluses* also speaks to the role of work in shaping identities, and particularly, in shoring up gender roles. In her introduction, Gilbert notes that “personal histories help expand our sense of the public history in which all are caught up” (p. xiii). *Slacks and Calluses* relates the daily duties, shifting norms and the work of staging war which marked the summer of 1943 through the eyes of two brave, funny and, in some ways, ordinary American women. As such, Bowman and Allen’s narrative invites us all to take a step back and note our own role as historical actors, paying attention to the value of storytelling, the consequences of work to individual identities, and how the historical contours of the times in which we live shape not only our choices, but the language and ideas available with which

to relate our personal history.

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