

Lacelle, Claudette. *Urban Domestic Servants in 19th-century Canada*. Translated from the Original French. Hull: Environment Canada - Parks, 1987. Pp. 254. 32 illustrations, maps, plans. \$15.50

Marilyn J. Barber

Volume 17, numéro 1, june 1988

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017709ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017709ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Barber, M. J. (1988). Compte rendu de [Lacelle, Claudette. *Urban Domestic Servants in 19th-century Canada*. Translated from the Original French. Hull: Environment Canada - Parks, 1987. Pp. 254. 32 illustrations, maps, plans. \$15.50]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 17(1), 53-54.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1017709ar>

certain "responsible popular elements", it did not achieve any enduring consensus or stability. The general uncertainty of the economic situation and an overcrowded labour market led increasingly to demands by the city's workers for special privileges and guaranteed employment that clashed with elite principles of free trade and eroded confidence in reform possibilities. LoRomer argues convincingly that the Revolution of 1848 marked a decisive turning point for Livorno's merchant community. The trauma of popular revolt combined with the economic dislocations of the revolutionary period to destroy both its optimism and its commitment to reform. Significantly, the author concludes that the experience of Livorno in 1848 reflected in microcosm, not only the defeat of radical democratic forces, but also the collapse of locally based liberal reform programs. Indeed, it led to a fundamental realignment of power among Italian moderates as movements based on autonomous economic and social reform gave way to more centralized, disciplined and authoritarian initiatives by the Piedmontese state.

LoRomer's study is not devoid of problems. His evaluation of the Livorno merchant community's achievements is ambiguous, if not contradictory. While at one point he praises its imaginative and energetic efforts at reform (p.253), two pages later he writes that the reformers' efforts were "highly tentative, excessively paternalistic, and on occasion even hypocritical." Perhaps part of the difficulty arises from the author's uncritical reliance on Gramscian categories of bourgeois comportment, which are highly abstract and schematic. In addition, the book would have benefited from some exploration of the informal mechanisms of power exercised by the merchant community, such as marriage alliances and cousinhoods. Finally, the book needs more fully developed comparisons between Livorno's experience and other Italian cities. These problems,

however, do not seriously detract from what is otherwise an excellent monographic study.

Anthony L. Cardoza  
Loyola University, Chicago

**Lacelle, Claudette. *Urban Domestic Servants in 19th-Century Canada*. Translated from the Original French. Hull: Environment Canada - Parks, 1987. Pp. 254. 32 illustrations, maps, plans. \$15.50**

Claudette Lacelle investigated domestic service in 19th century Canadian cities to aid the government in the restoration and interpretation of historic houses. Her study is greatly needed. Visitors to historic houses all too frequently find that servant's quarters have been ignored or used for storage and offices. Concentrating on life "upstairs" and failing to portray the conditions for servants conveys only a partial and distorted view of the household. While Lacelle's guide is intended to aid in the comprehensive preservation of our material heritage, her research offers important new information for historians interested in 19th century urban social history.

To illustrate the continuity and change in domestic service during the 19th century, Lacelle examines two specific periods, 1816-20 and 1871-75, primarily because of the availability of statistical sources. The early period includes Curé Signay's 1818 Quebec City census, which gives information on the members of each Catholic household. The later period includes the 1871 census, the first sufficiently uniform across Canada to make possible comparison between different cities and regions. Within each period, Lacelle concentrates on particular cities: Quebec City and Montreal for 1816-20, and Toronto, Quebec City, Halifax and the wealthy district of Montreal for 1871-75. She selects the cities with the largest population in each period and concentrates on wealthy districts that contain a majority of houses to be restored.

Her choice for the early period is also restricted because only the Archives Nationales du Québec possesses sufficient documentation for a study of domestic service. As Lacelle notes, an advantage of the forced concentration on Quebec City and Montreal is the possibility of comparing anglophone and francophone patterns of service. Unfortunately, such a comparison is not developed, possibly because she detects few differences. In order to develop the demographic analysis of urban domestic service, Lacelle chooses to open two windows on the 19th century rather than undertake a general survey. The approach, however, has inherent limitations. Although she can show changes between the early and late periods, her evidence does not enable her to explain when or how changes occurred. Domestic service in Ontario and the Maritimes during a critical period in their growth remains unexamined.

Because the work is to aid interpreters of historic houses, Lacelle concentrates her research on explaining the "everyday" life of servants. She does not attempt to set domestic service within the broader economic and social context of work of women's roles. Instead, she investigates relationships within the households where live-in servants were employed. In each period, she profiles the people involved, both servants and masters, and examines the hiring process and servant's duties. Then, using European and American literature, as well as Canadian evidence, she assesses the advantages and disadvantages of service and interprets the behavior of masters and servants.

Lacelle finds that between 1820 and 1870 the character of servants changed more than the households employing them. She attacks the stereotype that most people in the 19th century had domestic staff, showing a minority of households - 20 percent in 1818 and 10 to 15 percent in 1871 - as including live-in servants. In both periods, approximately

two-thirds of these households employed only one servant, and most employers came from the commercial and professional classes. By contrast, the sex, age, and ethnicity of servants did change from one period to the other. While half of the servants in Quebec City in 1818 were male, by the 1870s, 90 percent were female. There were more servants under the age of 16 in the early period, when service might be construed as a form of apprenticeship as well as a means of support. Increased immigration and mobility also affected domestic service. The majority of servants in the early period were born in the city where they were employed, but, by 1871, the majority were immigrants or migrants from rural areas. As in the United States, Irish women were over-represented in domestic service in all cities, including Quebec City, where they constituted a third of those employed.

Although Lacelle argues that domestic service in both periods was based on a contractual rather than paternal relationship, she portrays the conditions of service as being more onerous in the latter part of the century. She shows the existence of a more formal separation between master and servant in the 1870s, as demonstrated by the adoption of uniforms rather than the ordinary clothes worn in the earlier period. The incorporation of back stairs in house design also created a clear line of demarcation. In addition, servants had to work longer hours, as "polite society" chose to dine later in the evening. Lacelle accepts the thesis that technological change did not lessen work because it was accompanied by a demand for high standards of performance. Somewhat surprisingly, however, is the little attention she gives to the impact of technology on conditions of work.

The greatest strength of this study is its meticulous and innovative use of a wide range of documents to recreate the lives of servants, who left no written record. Census records are the most important source but they are reinforced by many other types of

documentation. House plans reveal the cramped rooms beside kitchens that were provided to servants as bedrooms, and the narrow stairs, introduced after 1850, that served to separate them from the rest of the household. Household inventories complement the plans by showing the spartan nature of their bedroom furnishings, sharply contrasting with opulence found in the rest of the house. Wills detail the bequests sometimes left to the few fortunate servants, as well as the lack of such consideration in the majority of cases. Court records indicate that servants, like other young people, committed crimes, but, despite the difficult conditions of life, only a small proportion appear to have turned to theft, drunkenness or prostitution. Evidence given at trials also gives some sense of how servants spent their leisure time in the early part of the century. These records compensate for the lack of literature, household manuals, memoirs and diaries dealing with servants in Canada. Even though problems created by the absence of records is a frequent refrain throughout the book, Lacelle has succeeded in recreating the everyday life of urban domestics during the 19th century.

Marilyn J. Barber  
Department of History  
Carleton University

**Peiss, Kathy. *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986. Pp. xi, 244. Illustrations.**

In 1983, rock star Cyndi Lauper popularized the lyrics "when the working day is done, oh! girls just want to have fun." Kathy Peiss, in her groundbreaking and highly entertaining study of working women and leisure in turn-of-the-century New York, convincingly argues that the preoccupation with leisure by young women has both a long history and serious implications for historians. Peiss's

examination of the culture of young, working women, which includes "the customs, values, public styles and ritualized interactions expressed in leisure time", is set in the larger context of redefinition, reorganization and commercialization of leisure that took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In keeping with much of the recent literature in the relatively new field of "leisure history", Peiss rejects the "trickle-down" theory of cultural change, which assumes that new social forms were pioneered by bohemian intellectuals, then transferred to a wider middle-class audience and finally to the working classes. Models of cultural hegemony and social control employed by historians in the 1960s and 1970s, she notes, tended to reinforce the view that the working classes, controlled and manipulated by social reformers and entrepreneurial promoters of new cheap amusements, were passive recipients of cultural messages. Recent interpretations have shown a greater sensitivity to cultural change as a complex and dynamic two-way process in which, Peiss argues, "hegemonic intentions are accommodated, resisted, and reshaped in a variety of ways." The singular contribution of *Cheap Amusements* to this growing literature is its convincing demonstration that the new leisure culture was clearly delineated along gender as well as class lines; and that working women were not mere bystanders observing the process of cultural change, but active participants in the creation of a new heterosocial and sexually expressive working-class youth culture that was ultimately popularized for a broader audience. The experience of a relatively small population of young, white working-class women in Manhattan - identified by some historians as the foundry of the new mass culture - thus has ramifications beyond the boundaries of New York City.

In the first three chapters Peiss examines the relationship of working women's leisure to the larger pattern of working-class social life. In the "homosocial world" of working-class