Sarah Glassford and Amy Shaw, eds., Making the Best of It: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland During the Second World War (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 2020)

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See table of contents

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when it comes to race and the disproportionate of women of colour in Canadian prisons. Furthermore, it would have been interesting to write the biography of an Indigenous woman to address the ongoing situation of Indigenous women’s high incarceration rate in Canadian federal and provincial prisons. Seeing the development of the penitentiary as an instrument not only of industrial capitalism but also of settler colonialism would have allowed McCoy to grasp the “true nature of the beast” and even provide a better light on cases of immigrant women such as the ones he presents. Unruly women are and have been unfit to the settler project throughout the Americas, and many stories remain to be written on their resistance, including in carceral settings.

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Sarah Glassford and Amy Shaw, eds., Making the Best of It: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland During the Second World War (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 2020)

This collection of twelve original essays reprises Glassford and Shaw’s earlier collection, A Sisterhood of Sorrowing and Service: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland During the First World War (Vancouver: UBC Press 2012). Framed by a strong introduction and conclusion as well as four section introductions, the editors provide contextual information tying the wars together and a critical approach to the much-debated older fascination with the degree to which war liberated women. While gender is central to the experiences of women and girls, it is not the only or defining identity since various communities structured these experiences, as well as the opportunities that arose and the narratives created. Scholars need to ask ‘which women’ thus bringing into play age, class, religion, ethnicity, race and language among other factors.

Four essays on women, children and war comprise the first section. Childhood memories of the war are explored through the history of emotions by Barbara Lorenzkowski. Drawing on oral histories of sixteen women who grew up in Halifax and Saint John, she analyses children’s “place-based emotional practices and experiences,” (36) mindful of the effect of memory on her interviewees. Within families, neighborhoods and cities girls learned about war partly through emotions. Friendships formed and some lasted a lifetime. Young women met servicemen who often became part of the family as well as dance partners in chaperoned social settings, thus complicating the notion of servicemen’s predatory behavior. Friendship was also key for British children evacuated to Canada, the subject of Claire Halstead’s chapter which eschews oral history, preferring evidence from letters and memoirs written during the war. Canadian girls and women contributed to the war effort by welcoming “war guests” into their homes either through a private scheme or through the British government’s Children’s Overseas Reception Board. Parents used the terminology of friendship referring to Canada as a sister country bound by Commonwealth ties.

Lisa Moore’s chapter examining three elite private schools for young women in Montreal fills a gap in our knowledge about adolescent experiences of the war in that province. There are few surprises here: English-speaking Protestant girls embraced the war effort while Francophone girls in a teacher training school and attending a mixed (French and English language) boarding school...
did not, thus reflecting the French-
English divide over participation in the
war. Early childhood education and
childcare during the war are the subjects
of Lisa Pasolli’s contribution. She exam-
ines the federal Wartime Day Nurseries
Act which provided some women work-
ers with childcare from 1942–46 and led
to important developments in kindergar-
ten and pre-school education. Usually
framed as a temporary measure to get
women into the labour force, Pasolli con-
vincingly argues that “this remarkable
policy experiment simply reinforced the
disconnect between women’s and child-
ren’s rights in the Canadian state.” (85)

Part two features three chapters on the
home front. Jennifer Shaw’s chapter uses
oral history to explore the activities of
Jewish women who undertook war work
particularly under the umbrella of the
Canadian Jewish Congress. Life on the
home front was shaped not only by gen-
der but also by faith and culture which
sometimes resulted in tensions between
patriotic and cultural expectations. The
other two chapters, both by male authors,
delve into the role of consumer culture in
wartime. Graham Broad’s chapter ex-
plores the popular image of rationing,
scrap metal collecting and victory gar-
dens, arguing that consumer restraint
occurred only later in the war. As more
people joined the paid labour force, con-
sumer spending and savings increased
over the course of the conflict. As noted
by Broad and Joseph Tohill, middle-class
Mrs. Consumer played a key role in shop-
ping to win the war and later in taking a
limited role in advising on, and policing,
economic activities including rationing
and pricing under the auspices of the
Consumer Branch of the War Time
Prices and Trade Board. Led by Byrne
Hope Sanders and women of privilege,
the Consumer Branch worked to block
the demands of organized labour and
radical consumer groups and resisted in-
creased roles for women and consumers in
policy making, according to Tohill.

Part three features women’s war work
in the Mennonite Central Committee
and the Canadian Red Cross Corps
(CRCC); both provided rare overseas op-
portunities for civilian women to en-
gage in humanitarian aid. Marlene Epp’s
chapter suggests that Mennonite women
developed an active resistance to war by
providing material and moral relief to
those suffering from violence, including
those who staffed hospitals and evacu-
ation centres abroad during and after
the war. Sarah Glassford’s chapter, like
Lorenzkowsi’s, adopts a history of emo-
tions framework to emphasize the im-
portance of kinship, friendship and
nationality in understanding how women
copied with war and assisted men to cope
as well. Both Epp and Glassford use dia-
ries and letters to examine how these
organizations contributed to psychologi-
al as well as physical resilience in their
overseas operations. In the case of the
CRCC, women filled a volunteer labour
shortage in the UK acting as transport
drivers, office staff and food administra-
tors as well as nurses from 1942 to 1947.
While acknowledging the friendship
bonds women formed with servicemen,
Glassford also tackles the less positive as-
psects of harassment, sexual assault and a
dramatic rise in extramarital sex, though
unfortunately no direct statistical evi-
dence is cited.

The final section, Part four, tackles sub-
jects that have received previous scholar-
ly attention: nursing, women’s entry into
non-traditional work and into the armed
forces. Heidi Coombs’ chapter focuses on
nursing in Labrador, the only piece in the
Collection highlighting Newfoundland
and Labrador. Very little has been written
on Labrador during World War II, so this
is a welcome addition. Medical care fell

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under the auspices of the International Grenfell Association (IGA, originally the Grenfell Mission which started in 1892). War made it difficult for the IGA to retain or recruit staff and obtain supplies. As Coombs shows, the deaths and retirements of physicians transformed the roles of 52 nurses who had to assume the doctors’ duties of diagnosing and treating all the patients, thus making the nurse “the backbone of this Mission.” (214)

Sarah Hogenbirk’s chapter looks at ordinary servicewomen’s deaths and the need for a more inclusive remembrance. Defense officials appear to have been hesitant to recognize and report women’s deaths; at least in this group of 91 who were mostly cooks and clerks. By choosing to eliminate professionals such as nurses and doctors, the author’s conclusions remain limited.

One of the most interesting chapters in this volume digs into the messages and imagery aimed at women who worked in industry. Sarah Van Vugt dissects the iconic images of the woman war worker whose uniform, safety equipment and hair covering threatened to transform the female body and undermine her femininity. Using newsletters from three Southern Ontario war plants, the author demonstrates how management encouraged women workers to participate in beauty culture sessions and fashion shows. Tensions arose over hair coverings as women sought to exert some control over their appearance in spite of safety concerns. While managers wanted to attract women to factory work, they also regarded women as distracting to men thus creating ‘gendered risks’ on the factory floor. (252)

Shaw and Glassford’s collection demonstrates the importance of listening to women’s voices and asking new questions. This volume helps us move away from the old debate of whether (and how) women are liberated (or not) by the exigencies of conflict and suggests that their experiences were multi-faceted. Making the Best of It is a welcome addition to “Studies in Canadian Military History.”

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Julie Guard, Radical Housewives: Price Wars & Food Politics in Mid-Twentieth Century Canada (Toronto: UTP 2019)

In Radical Housewives, Julie Guard has written not just the definitive history of Housewives Consumer Association, but of mid-century Left consumer activism in Canada more broadly. The Housewives, for those unfamiliar, started as a grassroots movement of mostly social democratic and communist women pushing for greater state control over the price and distribution of food and other necessities during the late 1930s. While their campaigns in Toronto, in particular, met with some success during these early years, they emerged as a truly national organization during the war and early postwar years as their message of greater state control over the economy found broader popular appeal across the political spectrum. At the peak of their influence in the early postwar years they claimed tens of thousands of members and dozens of branches across the country.

Guard’s study focuses, particularly, on the rise and fall of maternalism as a viable political strategy for the Left during the 1930s and 1940s. It was a strategy, she argues, that shielded the Housewives from accusations of communist infiltration during its formative years but proved to be part of its undoing during the rabid anticommunism of the Cold War. It is also a strategy, she argues, that saw the Housewives go effectively ignored by generations of left and labour historians.